

Continuum Writers

Contributed by Satima Flavell Neist
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Continuum 3 was an exciting convention in many ways, not least because it was chosen by Voyager, the speculative fiction arm of HarperCollins publishing, to host its tenth birthday celebrations. Most of Voyager's specific writers were there, and I was able to persuade five of them to chat to me about conventions and writing in general. Tell me a bit about your Convention experiences. What do you enjoy about cons? Have you been to many? Any funny experiences to share? JENNIFER FALLON: I find them a little scary actually. It's very intimidating to meet people who know more about your work than you do! Seriously, I find them intriguing because they are filled with people I would never meet in my everyday life, and they have such a passion for their favourite authors that it is humbling to meet fans and realise what an impact you have made on some people's lives. Also, they don't drink nearly as much as I was promised. Funny experiences? I missed my plane back to Alice Springs from Continuum, but that actually wasn't that funny in hindsight. At another convention, I was approached by someone who was convinced that my editors were cutting out all the hot sex scenes from my books, who asked me to write a gay porn short story. I still haven't figured out why I was singled out for that request. (Laughs) GLENDA LARKE: What do I enjoy about conventions? Undoubtedly, the people. Contact with like-minded weirdoes... er... writers and fans. Living in Malaysia, as I do, I have little contact with sf readers except via the internet, and I know no fellow writers here. The internet is great, but it's not the same as face to face confrontations… um… chats. Writing is such a lonely business. Seriously, a convention rejuvenates me as a writer and validates what I do. I learn so much by listening to what other writers say about their work and what readers say about what moves them. Or what puts them off. I find out there actually are people who love my writing; I find out that I have touched people's lives. A convention is a wonderful learning experience and I've never been to one yet that was long enough. At conventions I have chatted informally over a meal with writers like Charles de Lint, Tim Powers, Robin Hobb, Greg Benford, and a whole slew of talented Aussies. Where else can one sit at the feet of the masters and hear what it is that drives them? I have a kaffeeklatsch with Anne McAffrey at Worldcon. I'm going to have a long chat with Alma Alexander, whom I only know so far through the internet. And Karen Traviss too... I must admit that I think I live the perfect life at the moment. I write for weeks on end on my next novel, hardly talking to anyone, then I dive off into the rainforest or a deserted island or a peat swamp or a mountain valley, on project work with other environmentalists for a couple of weeks. Then I come back and write the report, give a seminar on the findings and hope that I have done something — however small — to save the world. Then I start on the book again. And you know what? People pay me for doing exactly what I would be doing for free anyway. What more could anyone ask?

Continuum, Conflux and 2 Swancons — that's the extent of my conventions, but I have Worldcon in Glasgow coming up next week. That will be a whole new experience, and I expect to be overwhelmed. For a start, the participants list reads like a who's who of science fiction and fantasy writers and editors over the past 50 years. FIONA McINTOSH: I enjoy the camaraderie most of all, i.e., being amongst people who all share the same joy in speculative fiction. I love the opportunity to meet readers so I'm always happy when someone stops me to talk or we're on a panel that really opens up some great dialogue to fascinating questions. And I always get a buzz from being amongst fellow authors — I always come away from a convention feeling energised and freshly motivated about the genre. There are a lot to choose from all of a sudden. I've been to several in Australia, and to Westercon in Los Angeles and World Fantasy Convention in Washington D.C. I'm about to head off to Glasgow for my first Worldcon — terrifying, and I may get to World Fantasy Con in Madison later this year. I will always aim to attend at least two in Australia and another one overseas each year, because there's a lot of intangible value in networking, being accessible and learning from others. I'm looking forward to South Australia's first sf and fantasy conference in absolute yonks. Conclave enjoys its inaugural gathering over the October 2005 long weekend and we're hoping this will be a regular event on the speculative fiction calendar. All welcome — help the wine state to get its first convention off the ground! Funny experiences? Only that I got the dress code hideously wrong in Los Angeles. I thought LA, Hollywood... California! Got to be a bit glamorous. But I was very soon heading back up in the lift to change. Another time I was so excited to see Stephen Donaldson strolling through the hotel foyer that I raced up to him, stopped him in his tracks and then became completely tongue-tied. KAREN MILLER: Well, as I think most people would agree, it's the social side of conventions that makes them fun. Having a chance to catch up with friends you usually only meet in cyberspace is fantastic. Of course, the downside of that is you're meeting so many all at once that you don't get nearly enough time with them. But given a choice between not meeting at all and only snatching quick conversations here and there, I know which I prefer. The other bonus, one which I hope to enjoy down the track, is the chance to thank in person the people who've parted with good money for your books and have enjoyed them and who take the time and trouble to tell you so.

I've been to a few media related conventions, but didn't really seriously start Aussie convention going till last year's Natcon in Canberra, which was a fabulous introduction to the world of conventions. Due to an unexpected hitch I wasn't able to attend Thylacon this year, but I have just returned from Continuum 3 in Melbourne, which was awesome for so many reasons. I'm still recovering! I hope to get to Conclave at the end of the year, then of course Conjure next year, and maybe Swancon too. It's all a bit bewildering! KIM WILKINS: I love the social aspect of it. The panels are great and everything, but the bar is the place to be. And not just because I'm a pisshead, but because that's where I meet with my friends, make new friends, share ideas, info, advice, jokes, whatever. I just have so much fun at cons. Some of the finest people I know are part of the specific community, and as they all live in far-flung locations, these cons are a brilliant chance to catch up. Have I been to many? No, not really. A Worldcon, a Swancon, last year's Natcon in

Canberra, and Continuum 3. I'm toastmistress at next year's Natcon (Conjure) in my hometown of Brisbane. Really looking forward to it. Funny experiences — does getting hammered and dancing to Xanadu count? Bringing my 2 year old to Continuum had its moments. The only way to keep him quiet at the Voyager party was to let him have a fistful of Voyager balloons. So he's carting these around with him, showing them to all his new friends. This is how I discovered that a leading light of Australian specific (who must remain nameless) has an intense balloon phobia! He's not frightened of much else, but front him with a balloon-wielding toddler and he turns to jelly. What kind of panels do you prefer to be on? JENNIFER FALLON: The non-literary ones or the ones with a definable purpose. Panels with titles like “The existentialist's view of post-modern speculative literature in the horror genre” are terrifying! And there is always someone in the audience, better read than the panellists, who starts questioning you on some obscure 1939 work you have never heard of, by some author who only published once in Outer Mongolia, wanting your opinion on this breakthrough work. I feel like I'm cheating the audience if I can't answer such questions intelligently. Much prefer the less ambiguous panels. FIONA McINTOSH: Well I really enjoyed being on the panel at Continuum, alongside Neil Gaiman, Jack Dann and Poppy Z Brite, to discuss moving out of genre. It gave a lot of food for thought — I learned plenty from listening to them and there was a hefty amount of audience participation. I enjoy panels that have very definite themes, that get opposing comments from panellists and hook the audience in, provoking lots of questions. If the panel topic is a bit flippant you don't know whether you're there to entertain and do tongue-in-cheek stuff or whether the audience wants you to take them more seriously and give them good value for their spend. I like to know right from the start what sort of atmosphere to create. I think also if you have quality writers, who already have a strong following, then anything about characters, world building, storylines, etc, are helpful to so many in the audience who are aspiring writers and want to learn from the successful authors. Whether I'm on this kind of panel or not I still learn from my fellow panellists. I remember at Westercon having a breakthrough moment listening to Robin Hobb talk about world building — she made such sense of a particular dilemma I was struggling with. And then, Donaldson — on one of his panels I felt like I was experiencing an epiphany listening to him talk about writing to no plan, as I do. His reassurance to writers who take this approach — as he does — made me stand very tall, so I think that level of writer being available to talk about writing itself is incredibly valuable to an audience, and I would always enjoy that sort of challenge as a panellist as much as being a listener. KAREN MILLER: I enjoy the panels that give me a chance to share some of my experiences. I've had a fairly topsy-turvy life, in many ways, and my road to being published has been anything but smooth. So if I can share any of that with folk who are on the same journey, and perhaps save them from making the mistakes I made, then I didn't make them in vain. KIM WILKINS: I like to be on panels where I feel I know a lot about the topic, because otherwise I get all intimidated and say nothing. Mind you, I felt quite expert about the fairy tale panel at Continuum, but having to sit there with Neil Gaiman and Robin Hobb was pretty intimidating. I recall it all as a hot-faced blur, and remember only making some wisecrack about Neighbours. Go me. What about the Next Book, and further work on the drawing board? JENNIFER FALLON: I am currently 95,000 words into a new 4 book series: Tide Lords. It has been sold to HarperCollins Australia and to Tor in the US, and is due out in 2007. The series is about a group of immortals who are sick of living and who are trying to find a way to end their existence. It is also tied in with the tarot and is set on a world where the magic is tidal, so our heroes spend quite a bit of time quite powerless and the rest of the time fighting amongst themselves with the ability to destroy the world. I am having great fun with it and expect to hand in the first book to HC and Tor in January next year. GLENDA LARKE: My next book comes out around April 2006 in Australia. It's called Heart of the Mirage and it's the first in another trilogy, The Mirage Makers. (Do I hear a chorus of groans? Sorry folk, the editors tell us they must have trilogies because that's what sells. But take heart, for all that, there is one large story — I always give each book an ending. Yes — even the middle book has a beginning, a middle and an end! The "middle book syndrome" is not something I suffer from, thank goodness.) The Mirage Makers had a number of inspirations. The setting came from my time exploring the Roman ruins of the Mediterranean and Britain and Austria. I have a love of ruins and ancient history. I started writing Heart of the Mirage when we lived in Tunisia and I could look out of my study window and see the remains of Roman Carthage. The inspiration for my main character came from a vastly different source. As a mother of young children in the 1970s and 1980s, I was immeasurably distressed by the haunting stories we were beginning to hear about the desaparecidos (the disappeared ones) of Argentina and the stolen generation of Australian Aborigines. These tragedies occurred on different sides of the world, but they tore my heart. In Argentina, pregnant women — whose crimes were never more than to have disagreed with the military junta (and sometimes not even that) — were kept in prison until they gave birth. Then they were killed, usually by being thrown out of a plane over the sea. They died knowing their babies were going to be brought up by those responsible for their own murder — surely one of the greatest griefs a mother can know. In Australia, children were forcibly separated from their families, removed from their culture, to be brought up — once again, by those responsible for the unspeakable policy. I had the heroine for my book: one of those children, a stolen child of a disappeared one. My way of saying I'm sorry and I will remember. The story line had yet another inspiration: an Italian Easter drama, with German sub-titles, that I saw when we were living in Vienna. Basically the storyline was: what did the Romans back in Rome do when they heard that a man apparently crucified in Jerusalem was seen alive again afterwards? Now that, I thought, sounds like the plot for a fantasy... I didn't follow the storyline of the TV drama too well because I don't speak Italian and I couldn't read the German fast enough, so my imagination went to work instead and I discovered the plotline for The Mirage Makers FIONA McINTOSH: Next book is Odalisque, book one of Percheron. This series has been sold to Australia/NZ, USA and UK and is due for release in Australia first at the end of October. It's my coming of age series, I think. Trinity got me started and The Quickening established me as an author with a future. This series must mature me as an author of this genre — display that I don't only have one groove, so to speak, and can mix up my settings, improve my writing style and still deliver an exciting adventure with the usual qualities that readers would expect from one of my books. I tend to deliver

brutal, action-packed stories with lots of characters. I don't want to change from that formula but I do want to stretch myself by not sticking to the comfort zone of a make believe medieval Europe (as in first two series) and I want to mix up the pace a little. I want to get that notion still harder to use magic as more of a backdrop to the tale rather than the most important element, and have characters surviving by their wits rather than enchanted powers. My stories will always be character driven and Percheron drives that even harder.

KAREN MILLER: Well, the next book is a sequel to the first book! It's called Kingmaker, Kingbreaker Book 2: Innocence Lost, and it follows directly on from the events chronicled in The Innocent Mage. It comes out in January 2006. I'm just putting the finishing touches to it now. As for further works, well, I currently don't have anything else contracted with Voyager since my first fantasy outing was the duology. I do have some ideas for a follow up story to Innocence Lost, but whether or not that happens depends on how well these 2 books perform. I'm currently redrafting what I hope will become the first in a fantasy series, involving continuing characters in self-contained adventures, plus I have a couple of trilogies ready to be outlined. Basically, I have many, many story ideas burbling away on the back burner... but as yet no definite homes for any of them. As a new author I have to prove myself before a publisher will continue to take risks on me, something I completely understand and agree with. As I mentioned, the road to publication has been long and full of twists and mis-steps. Anyone who's interested in the story can get the full saga on my website, www.karenmiller.net. Certainly I wouldn't be in the incredible, fabulous and fortunate position of being this year's debut Voyager author without the faith, support and fantastic editorial advice of Stephanie Smith, and Linda Funnell. It's all very exciting. There's something surreal about holding the book you wrote in your hand, with a cover and everything that looks so beautiful! Suddenly it's something apart from you, when for so long it's only ever lived in your heart and imagination. Seeing it launched into the world — knowing that people are going to read it and talk about it and maybe even say unkind things about it — that's really quite daunting. But that's the reality of publishing, and I wouldn't have it any other way. No matter what happens in my career from this point, I'll never forget how lucky I am to have been given this fantastic opportunity.

KIM WILKINS: Rosa and the Veil of Gold blends history and mythology and a love story, and it's all based in Russia. I had a wonderful time writing it, and I think it will appeal to a really broad audience. As for future plans, I'm in the development stages of a novel based on a medieval French legend. It will probably be set across three different time periods and feature lots of adventures on the high seas.

SATIMA FLAVELL: It's obvious from the above that writers love cons as much as fans do. I am struck by the enthusiasm of these responses, and how love for the genre and the joy of writing shines through. May you all continue to give us wonderful reading for many years to come!

Jennifer Fallon is a best-selling Australian author. Her first series, The Demon Child Trilogy (Medalon, Treason Keep and Harshini) hit the bestseller list the first week it was released and was shortlisted for the 2000 Aurealis Awards. Her latest novel, released in July, Warlord, is the third book of the popular Hythurn Chronicles. More info on Jennifer and her work can be found here: <http://www.jenniferfallon.com/>

Glenda Larke is a West Australian writer and conservationist living in Malaysia. She has so far had four books published. The Tainted, the third book of The Isles of Glory trilogy, was a finalist in the Aurealis Awards in 2004. Her new book, The Heart of the Mirage, the first of The Mirage Makers trilogy, will be released in 2006. Her web site can be found at www.glendalarke.com

Fiona McIntosh is an English-born Australian author who is based in Adelaide. Her books include The Quickening Trilogy, The Trinity Trilogy and the forthcoming Percheron Trilogy, the first book of which, Odalisque, is due for release in December. Her website is here: <http://www.fionamcintosh.com/>

Karen Miller is the freshest face on Voyager covers. Her first book, The Innocent Mage, will be released in August. It is the first volume in her Kingmaker, Kingbreaker series. Her web address is www.karenmiller.net

Kim Wilkins, another English-born Aussie, is a multiple Aurealis Award winner, her most recent success being for Angel of Ruin in 2001. The third instalment of The Europa Suite, Rosa and the Veil of Gold, is scheduled for publication in September 2005. More on Kim and her work at <http://www.kimwilkins.com/>