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A Wiscon Reading Report: The Best in Upcoming Fantasy – 2017 Edition

Monday, July 3rd, 2017 | Posted by John O'Neill

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[Alecto! Alecto!](#)

[Headless Bride](#)

That wrapped up Friday. Saturday was a day of back-to-back readings, with a stellar participant list. Wiscon is a pretty large convention, with over a dozen simultaneous program tracks, and I spent the day running from one reading to another, hurriedly cross referencing the program book and the map to find out where the hell the Assembly and Conference 2 rooms were. And try as I might, I couldn't fit everything in — for example, I was forced to skip the **Broad Universe Rapid Fire Reading**, which in past years has been a highlight of the Wiscon reading program.

It was all worth it. I spent the day being introduced to — or getting reacquainted with — some of the most talented writers in the field.

Here's the rundown.



The Four Musketeers and their marvelous hats: Jeanine Marie Vaughn, Rande Dawn, S. Brackett Robertson, and CSE Cooney

The Four Musketeers

Sat, 10:00–11:15 am

The Four Musketeers come together to tell tales of trolls, pirates, fae warfare, haunted dolls, and shadowspirits.

C. S. E. Cooney, Rande Dawn, S. Brackett Robertson, Jeanine Marie Vaughn

This reading opened with the four participants showing off an impressive array of hats. While there were several highlights of ahead of me the rest of the day, this session turned out to be the most consistently excellent and surprising 90 minutes of the entire convention.

Jeanine Marie Vaughn proved an excellent choice to open. She read a chapter from **The Peculiar Predicament of Poppets**, her unpublished novel of the Great Chicago Fire — or, more accurately, her novel about the rash of mysterious and deadly fires that occurred on October 10, 1871, and struck multiple municipalities on the same day. The brief excerpt Jeanine read featured a terrifically exciting runaway wagon scene, and an exceptionally brave young girl whose attempt to rescue her mother and sister held the entire audience enthralled. I heard a lot of readings on Saturday, but there wasn't another one that had me on the edge of my seat the way Jeanine's did. I've heard bits and pieces of Jeanine's novel at other readings over the years, and I'm certain it won't be long before this one is snapped up by a savvy editor. It features great characters, a solid premise, steadily mounting dread, and supernaturally creepy dolls. This one is a winner.

Rande Dawn read from her unpublished story "Can't Find My Way Home," and to be perfectly honest, I wasn't expecting much. The quick synopsis she gave at the start — something about portals opening in the countryside, the fae intruding into our world, and the military dispatched to intercept them — didn't grab me, and I sorta expected to tune out after a few minutes. Didn't happen. In fact, Dawn had me intrigued after five minutes, and downright hooked after ten. Crisp, spot-on dialog, completely believable characters, fast action, and strong hints of sinister goings-on — Dawn's story had it all, and then some. If this one had been available in the dealer's room when the reading was over, I would've snapped it up immediately. It will appear in the upcoming anthology **Children of a Different Sky**, and I'm anxiously looking forward to reading the whole thing.

S. Brackett Robertson was another pleasant surprise. She read from an unpublished short story about a young student who gets lost on the way home, and finds a small bridge with a surprisingly talkative troll. Unable to pay for passage, the student must rely on wits. At school the next day, the student finds at least one other attendee at school has met up with the troll. Robertson's story was memorable for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most intriguing was her casual use of non-gendered pronouns for the narrator, which forced the audience to play close attention to other clues about his or her identity. "I do know the narrator's gender," Robertson told us after the reading, in response to direct questions. That's just one of the many things Robertson had me intensely curious about just a few pages. I approve.

CSE Cooney wrapped up the proceedings with an excerpt from her as-yet unpublished story "Though She Be But Little," which she called "the BIZARREST story I have ever WRITTEN, bar NONE." (In their acceptance letter, the editors of *Uncanny* conceded "This might be the weirdest story we've ever received.") It did not disappoint! The tale featured a plucky protagonist in a world that has... changed. There are talking animals, feral children, pirates, and a floating alligator. And that's not even the bizarre stuff.

I want to take a moment here to say that, when I bought two early stories from CSE Cooney for **Black Gate**, she was already one of the most talented young writers in the business. Her talent has grown in leaps and bounds since. Her World Fantasy Award-winning first collection **Bone Swans** helped put her on the

map, but she continues to innovate with each and every story. I want to describe “Though She Be But Little” to you, but encapsulating this amazing tale in a mere few sentences may be beyond my abilities. It is a miniature marvel of wonder and literary surprise, and it was easily the finest piece of fiction I had the honor to enjoy at Wiscon. It will be published in the next few months in [Uncanny](#) magazine. Miss it at your peril.



From Airships to Elder Gods: Maurice Broaddus, Anne M. Pillsworth, Ruthanna Emrys, and Samantha Lynn

From Airships to Elder Gods

Sat, 1:00–2:15 pm

*Tor.com authors and friends deconstruct steampunk, Lovecraftian monsters, and other richly deserving genre tropes. Ruthanna Emrys will read from her new novel **Winter Tide**. Maurice Broaddus will read from the recently released **Buffalo Soldier**. Anne M. Pillsworth will read from **Redemption's Heir**, her Neo-Lovecraftian YA series. Samantha Lynn, a **Long Hidden** contributor, will read from her suburban Chicago dystopia-in-progress.*

Maurice Broaddus, Anne M. Pillsworth, Ruthanna Emrys, and Samantha Lynn

With the exception of Amal El-Mohtar's Guest of Honor reading, this was the most well-attended session of the entire reading program. Not too surprising, as it had a stellar line-up of Tor authors reading from their latest releases. It also took place at Michelangelos, across the street from the convention hotel.

Maurice Broaddus opened with a chapter from his weird western **Buffalo Soldier**, which featured a Texas gunslinger, mag lev trains, robot wolves, and river mermen. All part of a gorgeously imaginative western setting that reminded me strongly of King's **The Gunslinger**, the opening book in **The Dark Tower** series. All the action took place against the backdrop of a wider struggle between the Albion Empire and imperial Jamaica, and the hints of the background story were tantalizing. I got my hands on a copy of **Buffalo Soldier** as soon as I could after the convention ended.

Next up was Anne M. Pillsworth, who read from her Lovecraftian YA novel **Fathomless**, the second novel in her **Redemption's Heir** series. The books are set in Arkham, and concern wizards and their friends who are trying to protect the world from Lovecraftian monsters. The colorful and enticing segment she read featured blood magic and the Dreamlands, and a young boy ensorcelled by a wizard. The series is edited by Carl Engle-Laird at Tor; we covered the first two books enthusiastically [here](#).

I'd heard a lot about Ruthanna Emrys's Lovecraftian tale **Winter Tide** before the convention started, and everything I heard made me curious. The U.S. government rounded up the people of Innsmouth in 1938 and interned them in the desert, far from their Deep One ancestors and the deep waters that sustained them. A decade later, in 1948, survivor Aphra Marsh is working for a bookseller trying to assemble an occult library. Aphra and her employer find a rare occult book at an estate sale of a dead Arkham professor — what looks like a Yith notebook, or a decent forgery. But Aphra will have to reveal her knowledge of magic to perform the rituals in the book... By the time Ruthanna had finished reading, **Winter Tide** had shot up near the top of the to-be-read pile. As a surprise for the audience, Ruthanna also read the prologue to the sequel to **Winter Tide**, coming out next year. Set in 1949, it features aliens and a shuggoth on a mining colony on a strange asteroid.

