

Busman's Holiday

Aspiring writer, **Tammy Moore**, tells us how she combined her holiday with her passion for Sci-fi writing and urges more writers to give conventions a go...



Last month I washed my hands in the same sink as Tamora Pierce. If you grew up loving the Song of the Lioness series as much as I did, then you'll understand why that's cool. I also bumped into L. Timmel Duchamp, author of *Alanya to Alanya*, in the corridor and watched Ellen Klages, author of *The Green, Glass Sea*, strip down to her tights and (long enough to satisfy modesty) t-shirt to encourage people to bid in the fund-raising auction. We were all at WISCON 32. The world's leading feminist oriented science-fiction and fantasy convention, run annually during America's four-day Memorial week in Madison, Wisconsin. Over the weekend publishers, editors, readers, scholars and artists gather from across the world to discuss feminism in SF and Fantasy, as well as other issues such as body image, gender and politics. The annual Tiptree Award, awarded to a science-fiction or fantasy author whose work explores the ideas of gender, is also celebrated at WISCON. It's all very worthy and extremely scholarly. Except when it's not - such as when the auctioneer gets high bids for a collection of Lassie videos and the promise that L. Timmel Duchamp will sign them (Her nickname is Timmy, you see) or a roomful of SF fans and readers spend ten minutes discussing whether the cross-dressing chihuahuas in our newly-created world were dressed as cat-overlords, wearing tutus or both. There's also the party floor where there are book launches, readings and fancy dress parties throughout the weekend. This was my first year at WISCON and I had an amazing time. No matter what your interests were there was a panel for you. I missed the start of the convention, the Gathering, where massages, face-painting and clothes-swaps were all taking place. However over the next few days I attended discussions and readings on heroines in Urban Fantasy, incorporating myths and fairytales into your work, world-building (the cross-dressing chihuahuas) and how to write convincing country characters - apparently a pile of composting corn can get hot enough to burn you. There was also a dealer's room with jewellery, t-shirts and hundreds of

books from both big-name publishers and small, independent presses. Published authors gathered in groups to discuss their writing and careers and there was a writers' workshop for those who were hoping to get published. Oh, and there was a farmers' market on Saturday morning. There were quite a few cheese stalls and, apparently, the way to tell good cheese curd is if it squeaks. It was also unbelievably cool to be sitting with people who refer to Samuel R. Delany as 'Chip' - like he's just a regular person or something.

Now, WISCON is aimed at a fairly specific audience. If you aren't interested in fantasy or feminism, preferably both, then it probably isn't worth your time going to Wisconsin to attend. It's quite a long plane-flight. There are lots of other conventions though, all over the world, that cater to all genres and interests.

Fantasycon in Nottingham, the 19th - 21st September 2008; The World Horror Convention in Winnipeg, April 30 - 3 May 2009; Theakston's Old Peculiar Crime Writing Festival in Harrogate, 17th -20th July 2008; Romance Writers of America Conference, Washington, 15th - 18th July 2009.

If you look, there is probably a convention out there for you, and if you're an aspiring writer then you should be looking. If nothing else conventions provide an amazing opportunity to immerse yourself in a creative atmosphere with like-minded people for a weekend. The chance to talk with other writers, about writing and submitting work to various venues, can help, encourage and inspire to a surprising degree. Conventions provide opportunities to network with successful writers, publishers and agents. An agent

won't sign you just because you had a nice chat over a pint, but it won't hurt to put in your letter 'I met you at the convention - and thought you might be interested in this.' The important thing is to remember that the agent/publisher/writer is there to enjoy themselves too, so be courteous: don't be pushy, talk about things other than your book and don't accost them in lifts or the hotel. I did hear that at one convention a writer followed a small press publisher into the men's room to talk to him. That publisher took it well, but most people aren't, as you can imagine, going to enjoy that. A

lot of conventions also have pitching sessions where writers get to present their manuscripts to either an agent or a publisher. Not only do you get to put your idea to a publisher/agent in person you get feedback from them on what works and what doesn't and what they'd have actually liked to see. Things that

can be incorporated into the next submission package you send out. If you are interested in going to a convention it's worth applying for an Arts Council Travel Grant. The amount you can get varies depending on where you're going and when you're travelling: to go to the West Coast USA you can get up to £600, to go to England you can get £150. It might not cover the entire cost of the convention but it can make it affordable. The application form for the Travel Grant is also much simpler than a lot of people think. The major thing to bear in mind when making the application, in my experience, is to have a specific goal for attending - to pitch to a specific editor because you know they've bought books like yours before, for example - and explain how this will help you develop as a writer - networking with agents and publishers. Apply well in advance and don't commit yourself to travel, unless your attendance isn't dependent on the Travel Grant, until you hear back from the ACNI. That way if you get the grant you can go and if you don't you haven't lost anything.

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The Waters and the Wild...

For those who have ever wondered what lurks beyond your back door - wondered who, or indeed what may be only a whisper away - Bob Curran delivers the goods in story form. **Claire Savage** speaks with Northern Ireland's saviour of our dark and macabre tales...

Growing up in the remote Mourne mountains, Bob Curran experienced a culture steeped in superstition and tradition - a culture that he sees fading fast. 'For me growing up, the 'Other World' was always very close. Things are more Americanised now and people know less about their own culture', he says.

Curran's latest book - *Irish Tales from the Otherworld: Ghosts, Fairies & Evil Spirits* - delivers carefully collected folklore and supernatural tales in a style that

returned home a few years ago to discover that the host of old stories he had heard as a boy were quite literally dying out, as the older generation passed on. He decided to record as many as he could and so the idea for *Irish Tales* was born.

'I began to travel about and gradually stories emerged. People often brought me into their homes to tell them', he says, 'to me the book is a celebration of tradition that is vanishing like snow in a ditch'.



lures the reader from page to page. No stranger to the book's subject (Curran has published myriad mythically themed books), he draws on boyhood memories of dark stories told around night-time fires, as well as those gathered during his travels throughout the Irish countryside.

Brought up by his grandparents, Curran recalls his love of ghost stories being piqued by his grandfather's tale of a weeping woman trapped behind the walls of a countryside ruin - a story that terrified him as a child.

Working as a gravedigger and digging up ancient plots for new burials has also obviously had lingering effects on Curran.

'What frightened and influenced me and my love for the macabre was when I dug up a coffin and discovered part of the lining was torn inside. Fingertip marks were on the coffin lid...this person had been buried alive', he says.

Widely travelled, Curran

Consequently, Curran identified three things he wanted to achieve with the book. Namely, to record the stories before they disappeared; to celebrate them and thirdly to dissipate the stereotypes of 'Darby O'Gill' style stories. He is keen to point out that for him and indeed those he grew up with, fairies were to be feared and were not the innocent characters often portrayed in books and films...

Curran is set to publish new titles in America, Mexico, Brazil and Hungary soon. He works within the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland and is involved with local history projects as well as teaching at the University of Ulster in Coleraine. However, he does not rule out the possibility of a follow-up to 'Irish Tales' - already in top 50 best-selling list. 'I'm never done planning but I'm putting together a few other things. One of these involves taking a bit of a break!'