Interview with Professor Gerry Canavan of Marquette University

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Professor Gerry Canavan of Marquette University explores the development, theory, and practice of international science fiction education, as well as the dialogue between Chinese science fiction education and international experience. Grounded in the preface he wrote for the volume Teaching Science Fiction, Canavan discusses the institutional history of science fiction in the university, the "social justice" turn in science fiction education, the role of science fiction in STEM fields, and the dilemmas facing science fiction teachers today. Offering a trans-Pacific vantage point, the interview provides practical insights for educators as science fiction education rapidly takes root in China.

Keywords

Science Fiction Education; Teaching Science Fiction; Internationalization; STEM; Social Justice; China

1. PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEE

Gerry Canavan is Professor and Chair of the English Department at Marquette University, a leading scholar in science fiction studies and science fiction education, and author of Octavia E. Butler (2016). He is also co-editor of Extrapolation, Science Fiction Film and Television, The Cambridge History of Science Fiction, and Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction. For years, Canavan has stood at the center of international science fiction scholarship and teaching, with research spanning the literary history of science fiction, science fiction and social justice, and the place of science fiction in STEM curricula—giving him a close-up view of how science fiction education has been institutionalized in the United States and around the world.

2. PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWER

Count E (pen name of Luo Lin) is a writer of science popularization and science fiction, currently a graduate student in science and technology education, and a university instructor who teaches science fiction within general education courses.

3. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

As science fiction education moves outward from the university classroom into primary and secondary schools, a shared question remains open across national contexts: what should it teach, how should it teach, and how should it position itself within a global conversation? This interview speaks with Gerry Canavan, Professor and Chair of the English Department at Marquette University, a scholar of science fiction studies and science fiction education. Beyond his monographs and edited volumes at the heart of the field, Canavan has lived the realities of teaching science fiction in settings as different as a six-person graduate seminar and a 225-student sophomore lecture course. Grounded in the preface he wrote for Teaching Science Fiction, this interview looks through the eyes of a scholar deeply embedded in the classroom, re-examining the theoretical lineages and practical dilemmas of international science fiction education and offering a trans-Pacific vantage point for readers as science fiction education rapidly takes root in China. Ranging across the development and theory of international science fiction education, the dialogue between Chinese and international experiences, and the concrete dilemmas science fiction teaching faces, this exchange aims to offer Chinese practitioners a usable window onto international perspectives and practical insight.

4. INTERVIEW

4.1 Icebreaker

Count E: In the preface "On Dwelling on Science Fiction in Your Teaching," you begin with an image that circulated on social media in late 2022, said to be an appendix from a 1980s Moral Majority handbook advising students "not to engage in discussions of the values found in science fiction, and not to trust a teacher whose 'teaching' dwells on science fiction." As someone who has taught science fiction for many years, what did it

feel like to see one's own classroom named in this way? How did such external controversy shape your understanding of the value of teaching science fiction?

GC: I found it funny, unsettling, and a little flattering! The idea that the study of science fiction is inherently dangerous probably seems suspect, as does the idea that it is inherently politically revolutionary or always personally transformative—but, at the same time, it's not hard to see how the sorts of complex situations, ethical debates, and attempts to honor competing cultural perspectives that science fiction stories tend to inculcate might feel threatening to a group that believes it already has the one true answer to everything. Part of the premise of the book is that part of what is so pedagogically useful about science fiction in the classroom is precisely the way that it can help students explore new answers to old questions (as well as identify entirely new questions that have never been asked before).

Count E: You write that science fiction entered the university as early as 1953, when Sam Moskowitz taught the first known college-level SF course at the City College of New York, with Isaac Asimov among the guest lecturers; this was followed by Mark R. Hillegas at Colgate University in 1965 and James Gunn at the University of Kansas in 1969, leading eventually to the founding of the Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction in the 1980s. In your view, over these seventy-odd years, what has been the single most decisive turning point in the development of Sci-Fi Education?

GC: If I had to pick one moment, it would probably be the publication of Darko Suvin's Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, which provided a launchpad for research in science fiction that legitimated scholars spending time in this genre as opposed to studying topics that had more social and disciplinary prestige (like, say, Shakespeare or James Joyce). Mark Bould has called this moment "the Suvin event" and suggested that science fiction studies is still surfing its wake all these years later. Along those same lines, the theoretical framework that Suvin offered as a strategy to both justify and promote SF studies seems to me to be the thing that those who study other genres—including speculative genres like fantasy and horror but also more realistic genres like the detective novel or the romance novel—have still not yet found a way to articulate to the same extent.

4.2 Theory and Practice of Science Fiction Education

Count E: Ritch Calvin observes that among all genre forms, science fiction "made the earliest and most consistent inroads towards academic respectability," and you often describe the situation of science fiction studies through the language of "margin and center." Does this condition—perpetually at the margin yet continually moving toward the center—help or hinder Sci-Fi Education itself?

GC: The answer is probably both. From the perspective of a junior scholar beginning their career and thinking about their future employment, specializing in science fiction can

still feel like a risk: there aren't very many jobs in the US academy with science fiction in the job description, much less in the job title, and an interest in SF often has to be smuggled in as a "bonus" once you've established your credentials in another area. There's still a sense that studying SF is less serious than studying other sorts of texts, or that it's easier in some way. At the same time, it's a place where a lot of cutting-edge work can be done, and where literature can most clearly engage some of the most important questions of our time (including around the environment and around AI)—and it remains an area of high student interest inside the academy and high popular interest outside it, maybe precisely because it still feels like the sort of thing a professor wouldn't normally talk about. Most scholars in the field that I know have really embraced the opportunities for free inquiry, and to be a kind of philosophical gadfly, that our supposed marginality allows for.

Count E: You note in the preface that today's science fiction takes up racism and anti-racism, gender, the environment, and the AI revolution, and that The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms proposes using science-fictional thinking to "build just, inclusive futures." Does this mean international Sci-Fi Education is undergoing a "social justice" turn? What does such a turn imply for classroom teaching?

GC: I think much of the study of global literature has been in the midst of that sort of social justice turn, and science fiction studies has been a leader. On balance, it's been a positive move, as it has made both the genre and the study of it more capacious and more diverse, and brought in new voices that were previously excluded. (It can also have the opposite effect at times, sadly: it has only been quite recently that the field has given proper attention to more right-wing or political conservative science fictions, and is still seeking the right language to talk about them responsibly.) It can be something difficult to navigate in the classroom, if an instructor doesn't account for the full diversity of opinions found in any student body, or leans too heavily on a particular set of political assumptions in a way that distorts their interpretation and their teaching, or pushes certain students away rather than bringing them into the fold. All these things require a sort of epistemological humility that can be hard to cultivate, especially when the political disputes around justice seem very urgent, or the wider society seems to be moving in the opposite direction from social justice (as has been the case in the US since Trump's rise to prominence in the mid-2010s).

Count E: You point out that science fiction has become an indispensable part of the curriculum, appearing not only in literature and philosophy courses but also in STEM fields, where its "predictions and extrapolations" allows students to explore the social and ethical consequences of technological innovation through memorable case studies. In your view, what irreplaceable role can science fiction play within science and engineering education?

GC: I think the speculations of science fiction help students think through the implications of what they will someday be called upon to build. One good example of this can be seen in the AI revolution: basically all discussion around generative AI has been a

debate over different sorts of science fictions, and trying to figure out which one is the right one to try to bring into existence (often to the point of distorting how these programs actually work and what their real impacts on society are likely to be).

Count E: Your own classrooms span a remarkable range—from a graduate seminar of just six students to a sophomore general-education lecture of 225 or more. Facing such different learners, how do your goals and methods for teaching science fiction differ?

GC: In some cases, I'm trying to introduce ideas to someone who is just encountering them for the first time—and in other cases, I'm preparing someone who has been at this for years and who is looking to specialize in the sort of work I've been doing as a teacher-scholar. But across the range, the goals of education seem quite similar: we are trying to get a conversation started in terms that will extend well beyond the confines of that particular educational moment, the semester-long course. There's a way in which, no matter who I'm teaching, I'm trying to prepare my students for what they'll read long after the class is over, which is why it's such a pleasure when students come back years later and let me know what they've been reading and what they've been thinking about.

4.3.Global Trends in Science Fiction Education

Count E: Climate change, global pandemics, AI chatbots. In such an age, is Sci-Fi Education teaching students to "predict the future," or teaching them to "understand the present"? How are the two brought together?

GC: With many of the issues you're mentioning, the challenge is precisely that the space between "the present" and "the future" is collapsing: things are happening, or have already happened, with futurological implications we don't yet understand or have not given sufficient attention to preparing for. It's probably a case of what they call professional deformation bias—seeing everything through the lens of what is important for your job—but I'm often tempted to see all political disputes as a kind of science fiction, insofar as they're always disputes about the future that will emerge out of the choices we make today. One ambiguously positive effect of that temporal telescoping is that I think people think seriously about the future in a way they haven't always; we have started to learn, sometimes at great cost, that both the natural world and our own cultural institutions are much less stable than they may have seemed.

Count E: Does "Euro-American centrism" still exist in Sci-Fi education today? Can Sci-Fi Education in other regions—for example, China, Africa, or the Middle East—find its own place within world Sci-Fi Education?

GC: This has been a place where there has been much positive momentum over my career: science fiction as a popular genre, and science fiction studies as an academic pursuit, is more international than it has ever been (while of course there is still much work

to do). Translation remains a significant challenge, as do other mechanisms of international distribution and dissemination of texts; because of the importance of English in the global marketplace, access to translation remains perhaps the key chokepoint for what becomes part of the conversation, even in a world where many kinds of texts can be distributed at little or no cost via the Internet. But there's no question the market has changed significantly over the last few decades: transpacific cultural exchange, in particular, is a major cultural force in the US, and for very many young people in the United States (including my own children) the most cherished texts of their childhoods and young adulthood have been games, anime, and manga originating in China, Korea, and Japan.

Count E: I am studying science and technology education and will focus on primary and secondary science education, introducing science fiction into it. I would especially like to ask: can Sci-Fi Education become a lever for cultivating scientific literacy and creative capacity in K-12 schooling? Are there international precedents for collaborative Sci-Fi education linking universities and schools?

GC: I'm most familiar with K-12 education in the US context, where many teachers struggle with state-mandated curricula that allow for little opportunity for experimentation or deviation. But that can vary greatly from region to region and even from school to school, and I know many students come to my classes having studied science fiction in their K-12 education, sometimes as a sort of elective and other times as part of their required English classes (with uber-canonical texts like Frankenstein, 1984, The Martian Chronicles, and Kindred quite commonly taught). I know that I love making visits to local high schools to talk about my work.

Count E: Looking ahead over the next decade, what is your greatest hope for global Sci-Fi education? What worries you most?

GC: My greatest worry at this moment is about the effect generative AI and other algorithmic technologies are having on our practices of reading and writing, and on our cognition more generally; it seems to me that we are going to be adapting to this technological revolution for a long time and that it will require some serious reflection on what we think the purpose of education actually is, and what the right methods for education are in this strange new world. This ties into your last question, I think; one place that is very ripe for collaboration between K-12 education and higher education is the exploration of what pedagogy should look like in a post-AI world. We've been starting this conversation at my university, trying to make better partnerships with K-12 educators, and I know we're not alone.

4.4 Connecting Chinese Science Fiction Education to the World

Count E: Part Four of Teaching Science Fiction includes Angie Chau's chapter on Chinese science fiction. What was the consideration behind including Chinese science

fiction in a teaching-case collection addressed to English-language teachers? What do you hope English-speaking students and teachers will come to see through Chinese science fiction?

GC: China's major importance in the twenty-first century, which may well come to be seen as the Chinese century, calls on people in the US and the West to better engage with Chinese cultural productions, and that's as true of science fiction as it is of anything else. I think the interplay of genre tropes and assumptions as they cross international borders is fascinating, and being able to recognize that dance of similarity and difference as it does its work in different sorts of texts makes us better readers and more creative writers. The major barrier here, as noted above, is translation, though now that a clear market has been established for Chinese science fiction in the US, we are seeing works come over faster and more reliably than ever before.

Count E: As a Chinese author who also writes science fiction, I am very curious: which works of Chinese science fiction have you read that would be suited to the college classroom? What do you see as most distinctive about Chinese science fiction?

GC: The Chinese SF writer I've read most is Liu Cixin, who is probably the most prominent Chinese writer of science fiction in the US right now, in no small part through the popular translations of the Three-Body Problem trilogy by Ken Liu and Joel Martinsen (which I adored). I've also read a bit from Han Song, Hao Jingfang, Baoshu, and Chen Qiufan, among others. (Another place that is seeing prominence is Chinese science fiction films that are showing up in US movie theaters, the way The Wandering Earth broke through a few years ago, though I think we are still waiting for our true crossover moment there). When I work with Chinese science fiction, I think the most obvious difference between it and Western SF is the differently understood relationships between the individual and the community, as well as the level of optimism (if it can be called that) about the ability of social structures to collectively respond to major problems and solve them successfully. Liu Cixin drafts incredibly disturbing scenarios, but to a US reader, there is something almost impossibly utopian about his vision that we might collectively identify a serious problem and come together, as a globe, to try and solve it. US science fiction today offers very little of this sort of ambition, and mostly offers the repeated lesson that we're all completely on our own.

Count E: In the preface, Terry Harpold and Sonja Fritzsche discuss teaching science fiction in translational contexts, including teaching within area studies programs. For a non-English context such as China, is the "translation" of Sci-Fi Education more complicated? How can the "imaginations of others" be turned into questions that one's own students can meaningfully engage with?

GC: It is a challenge, as they argue! In many cases, young people who are entering college have had very little exposure to other cultures, with little or no fluency in any language other than English, and can also be coming in with only stereotypes and assumptions (many of them negative). But in the hands of a good teacher, translated texts

can open up the entire world for a student and help them to begin to understand what it would be like to live a different sort of life in a different sort of place; it just requires good preparation, patience, and being able to accept the invitation to empathize with people who are different from you.

Count E: Compared with Europe and the United States, Chinese Sci-Fi Education began later, yet in recent years it has rapidly entered primary, secondary, and university classrooms and attracted growing public attention. From your observation, in what ways can Chinese Sci-Fi education and international experiences learn from and complement each other?

GC: There's tremendous interest in China (and in Asia more generally) in the contemporary US academy, across fields, and I think the answer is the same in nearly every field, that more interactions will produce new opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and for cross-cultural exchange. The move from in-person to online conferences has been a great opportunity here, as has the willingness of US academic organizations to internationalize their conference sites; the Science Fiction Research Association, for instance, will be held in Seoul, Korea for the first time this June, which feels like a great development for the international study of science fiction. I hope the trend towards true internationalization of the academy continues.

4.5.Dilemmas of Teaching Science Fiction

Count E: Darko Suvin once argued that the vast majority of works marketed as science fiction (some 90 to 95 percent) are not worth studying or taking seriously. If that judgment holds, what are teachers to do in selecting texts—teach only the "worth studying" works, or also engage the "unserious" ones?

GC: I don't know that I personally can follow Suvin down that path! There's clearly science fiction works that are more innovative, ambitious, clever, and/or artistically complicated than others, but the insistence on a "special sliver" of especially important authors and works feels like a rhetorical move that was made to help legitimate the study of science fiction in the face of professional hostility that has outlived its usefulness (in no small part because the argument was, in essence, victorious, and science fiction is now an important part of the study of literature!). Some of the most interesting work that is being done right now is in the study of those works that Suvin might have designated "unserious"; my franchise studies book series at University of Minnesota Press, for instance, has published theoretically sophisticated books on mass-market texts like Star Trek and Dragonball Z that show why the work they are doing also matters and also needs to be studied. What matters is grabbing students' attention in a world that is filled with distractions that pull them away from their studies, and helping them to craft habits of reading and interpreting critically that will serve them long after the class is over; I think

any sort of text, whether "high" or "low" culture or "serious" or "unserious," has the potential to do that work in the classroom in the right hands and with the right approach.

Count E: You note in the preface that science fiction courses in American universities are often taught by postdoctoral fellows, visiting lecturers, and adjunct instructors, and rarely enter the core curriculum. How do you view the "placement" of science fiction courses within the curriculum? Can specialized programs—such as UC Riverside's graduate program in Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science, Florida Atlantic University's MA in science fiction and fantasy, or Georgia Tech's undergraduate certificate in science fiction studies—serve as replicable models?

GC: That's a big question, as the entire US academy seems besieged by a dual-headed crisis of purpose and finance at the moment! More and more teachers in the humanities seem called upon to justify the value of what we are doing at all (and not even those more prestigious subfields are safe; neither science fiction nor Shakespeare has obvious social utility from this perspective!). The question of what the model for humanities inquiry should be is very much a moving target right now. That said, my 250-person lecture is in the Core curriculum at my home university, and has been successful in that space. I hope I have enough humility to refrain from saying "all students should be required to take one of my courses in science fiction" but I do think exposure to the sorts of things science fiction is doing can be beneficial for all students, and hope to continue to have opportunities to think with them about what surprises the future will hold. In a way this brings us back to the questions about the center and the periphery with which we started; science fiction may never be at the center of either its own disciplinary home or the larger university, so I tend to focus instead on the good work it and I can do from the margins.

Count E: You write that we read science fiction "because we expect it to change how our students, and how we, think," and that "we read it because we think it will free us, at least a little bit." This is moving, yet it resists measurement in educational assessment. How do you judge whether a science fiction course has truly changed its students?

GC: This is such a great question! I'm thinking now of what a standardized assessment instrument to test whether science fiction has really pushed the boundaries of student understanding might look like. In my classes, I think I see this most in the work my students produce at the end of the course. Rather than tests or quizzes, or even regular essay assignments, my classes tend to culminate in the production of some large critical, creative, or curational project that calls on students to demonstrate what they have gotten out of the experience. I can see in those projects that the work we've done together has had an impact—and I hope they bring those benefits with them after the class is over. I worry that this approach comes close to being faith-based, rather than properly empirical or evidence-based—but perhaps all educators are believers in this sense. We are all casting our students toward futures we can't know, hoping that we've given them the things they'll need when they reach their destination.

4.6 Closing and Outlook

Count E: The preface sets a thought-provoking contrast: Nobel laureate in economics Joseph Stiglitz says "I never touch science fiction novels," holding that creating another world is an escape from reality, while Ray Bradbury says one motive for reading science fiction is "hating the way things are, wanting to make things different." How would you respond to Stiglitz on behalf of teachers who are still hesitating over whether to "read a little more science fiction"?

GC: The drama over whether literature (in general) or speculative literature (in particular) is fundamentally escapist is a very long one, with adherents on all sides of the argument. (Because I often teach the great English fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien, I think often, for instance, of what he said about the escapism of the fairy-story, that there could be nothing more natural or more understandable than for a man in prison to dream of being free.) To circle back to the first question, the Moral Majority found science fiction so dangerous because it encouraged people to see beyond the baseline ideological assumptions of their time; I tend to think that's a very important thing to encourage people to do, and if science fiction does that work in part by offering escapist fantasy, then maybe that's just the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. I'd love to have some time with Stiglitz or another similar skeptic to talk about an intellectual-paradigm-shattering work like The Dispossessed, The Ministry for the Future, or Parable of the Sower to see if, after reading them carefully and with purpose, he still thinks these texts have nothing to offer beyond mere escapism.

Count E: Finally, is there anything in particular you would like to say to Chinese readers, and to Chinese science fiction teachers and researchers?

GC: Only that it's so terrific to be in conversation, and I hope the incredibly productive interactions between your science fictions and ours only continue to grow from here. Thanks so much for this opportunity to chat.