

## The 21st century SF/F professional at Conventions

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By Lynne M. Thomas

I became a professional at SF/F conventions through a retro route; I started as a fan. For years, my husband and I attended conventions (mostly media), went to panels, attended parties, collected autographs, and made friends with fans, conrunners, and pros. (Part of our honeymoon was at a Xena convention.) I was a part of a community, one that gave me a found-family and acceptance for my daughter with severe disabilities. I wrote about this, especially my marvelous experiences at the Chicago TARDIS Doctor Who convention, in my essay for *Chicks Dig Time Lords*.

Based on my fannish experiences at media conventions, I began attending general SF/F conventions, specifically to speak with authors as part of my SF/F librarian-archivist mission. I realized that many contemporary writers were not being archived at other institutions. When you ask people for their literary papers, it's an easier, more effective conversation to have in person.

Authors attend conventions specifically to talk face-to-face to their readers, potential readers, and other professionals; it's the perfect opportunity to chat, as they have already committed their time and energy to being publicly available. Over time, I talked to authors... and editors, fans, convention runners, and dealers. They welcomed me with open arms as a professional librarian and as a fan, and when I began editing, the community's response was even warmer, if that's possible.

I've transitioned into a more traditional SF/F professional role through my editorial work on *The Geek Girl Chronicles* and this magazine. While wearing all of these hats, I've volunteered as a panelist and was even a Guest of Honor at CONvergence in 2011.

I am deeply grateful to have made some wonderful friends here.

I'm here as an active member of this community, to connect with other people, including fans of my work, readers, and colleagues. I volunteer for panels at conventions to give back to this amazing community that has given me so much, both personally and professionally.

Nonetheless, when I attend an SF/F convention, I'm working. I'm representing some aspect of my professional life: my library and/or university, *The Geek Girls Chronicles* books, Apex Magazine, or the SF Squeecast. Often, all of the above.

So that's why seeing friction between the conrunning community and some of the attending professionals bothers me so much. I realize that many of the pros didn't follow the same path as me or the pros of previous generations. They didn't first come as fans. Many are there because others told them that this was a good way to sell their books or network (there's an entire other-essay about that subject).

I'd like to see some of that friction dissipate. I believe that the best way to accomplish this is by starting a strong dialogue between the pros and conrunners. My friend Steven H Silver penned an essay in this issue that covers things from the viewpoint of a programming head. I want to give the other side of the story. Many of these lessons I learned as a fan, and they then evolved as my roles changed.

I think it's important to remember that we (both fan convention runners and SF/F professionals) are nearly all volunteers at any given convention.

We should attend conventions because we love this community, and we want to add something to it. If you don't enjoy participating in this specific community, it's okay to not attend. The Internet has given us numerous avenues to interact and network without attending SF/F conventions.

The folk running conventions are almost always unpaid volunteers. They give up nights, weekends, time and energy, to put together a fun event that is open to the public. When I attend the conventions that they run, I do the same: I volunteer to appear as an SF/F professional and participate in panels. I was able to become part of this community because people were warm and welcoming. It's an important contribution to the convention culture for me to turn around and exhibit the same behavior when I meet new people.

This is a symbiotic relationship between two groups of volunteers. We need each other to make a great convention. And that is the goal, right?

Here's what I expect as a professional, who often volunteers to do panels, reading, signings, and workshops at conventions. (I understand that mistakes will be made by both sides. The important thing is that we all attempt to achieve these ideals.)

1. Common courtesy should be the rule. Just as the attendance of authors first drew me to attend conventions, conventions use my name (among the other professionals in attendance) to draw attendees to the convention. If you don't know my work, that's fine. It never hurts to be courteous anyway; you can always Google me later.
2. Communicate, communicate, communicate. If something about my schedule, attending professional status, or the availability of my work in the dealers' room changes, please tell me.
3. Recognize that doing panels is work. It takes preparation, thought, energy, and expertise to do panels well. If being really entertaining in front of an audience was easy, everyone would do it. That goes double for moderating panels (which I do quite often).
4. Recognize that I, too, am paying to be at this convention. Unless I'm one of the Guests of Honor, I'm spending money to be here: on travel, lodging, food, and registration if I'm not eligible to have it reimbursed or comped. Writers and editors are often freelancers. When I'm attending conventions, here's what I'm not doing: billable writing or editing to earn money. Nor am I doing any of the following: relaxing, spending time with my family, or performing upkeep on my house and yard. Travel, logistics, and being away from home take their toll.

5. My convention experience matters, too. Make me feel welcome. Just go back to number 1, and, if you have the resources and inclination, add some fun and silliness, or genuine warmth. I talk up the conventions that I love the most, both online and off, to anyone who will listen. That means more attendees, both fan and professional.

6. Make me feel safe when I'm there. Have a public, visible code of conduct in place that ensures that everyone follows the rules of common courtesy in addition to local laws. Take reports seriously. Enforce your code of conduct as written. Amidst the fun of Klingon Karaoke or BarCon, the rules and laws that apply in the "real world" still apply at conventions. As they should; many of us (including me) are still at work.

Here's what conventions can expect of me when I'm in attendance and participating in panels:

1. Common courtesy in all dealings with me.
2. Clear communication. If there is a problem, I will do my best to communicate it directly, clearly, politely, and succinctly to someone who can do something about it. While I may check with friends or colleagues to see if their experience matches mine, I will do so privately, and maintain communication with the convention.
3. I happily provide bios or fill out programming questionnaires, indicating the areas in which I'd be a useful panelist. I expect that effort to not go to waste. I will decline any panel assignments where I didn't express interest in the panel, or I don't have enough expertise or interest in the panel topic to warrant taking up a slot that others could better fill.
4. Preparation and punctuality. I will do my best to meet programming deadlines before the convention wherever feasible. If I miss deadlines, I don't expect to be placed on panels (although if it works out anyhow, that's great). At the convention, I will be on time and prepared for my panels. My panel commentary will be germane to the topic at hand, and, hopefully, entertaining as well.

Conventions are a great opportunity to connect in person and to celebrate our community. We work, we network, we play, we greet old friends and new.

And isn't that the point?