

FOSTERING INDIVIDUALITY IN WRITING

Write What You Love to Read

Mixing pop-culture fandom with literary workshops.

BY KRISTY STEVENSON



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Did you know that many pop-culture conventions such as Comic-Con, Dragon Con, GalaxyCon, and Gen Con offer writing tracks? And not just for comic book fans—many have expanded into multi-genre experiences that prominently feature literary tracks alongside their traditional programming. With book discussions, author panels, writing workshops, and other special events, fan conventions boast high attendance numbers and are ideal for genre writers to engage with storytelling across a variety of media including author programming and creative industry panels. Consider exploring unconventional, niche events like these to improve your craft!

Literary tracks—and writers in general—are very fan-friendly. From universal writing advice to specific genre or format-focused sessions, con workshops offer unique opportunities for beginning and established writers to connect with other enthusiasts, learn from experts, and explore how pop culture influences storytelling. They often focus on specific genres or writing techniques related to popular media like video games, comic books, graphic novels, television shows, or movie franchises. So, what are literary workshops really like? Read on to glean insight from authors and presenters who can help you get the most out of the con experience.

Kevin J. Anderson

Published more than 190 books, 58 of which have been national or international bestsellers. He's written numerous novels in the Star Wars universe including the Jedi Academy trilogy and the Young Jedi Knights series.

"I have done many smaller science-fiction conventions, which always have a writing track, and I've founded and run my own Superstars Writing Seminar—but the pop-culture cons, like big comic cons, are a wonderful hybrid with fans from *all* over the map," says Anderson. Always ready to pay it forward, he's participated in their writers' panels, workshops, and seminars.

PRO ADVICE: "Let's face it, many readers also want to be writers," he says. "They read voraciously, and they have stories to tell, themselves." And by attending cons, you have a chance to hear successful writers you admire teach the tools of the trade. When a presenter does a good job teaching, students will then want to read their books; it's a trade-off. A vital part of a writer's work is connecting with core fans—the ones who buy books, subscribe to newsletters, sign up for Patreons, and even

support your next Kickstarter campaign. Anderson once did 16 cons in a year's time, being seen by close to three million people. "I love meeting the fans directly and helping them find their dreams," he says.

Clay & Susan Griffith

A married couple who've written together for nearly two decades. Credits include novels such as the Vampire Empire series and the Crown & Key trilogy.

They started attending conventions and workshops both as fans and hopeful professionals. "We went to comic book conventions and pop-culture events like Dragon Con because we consumed the material—comics, books, movies, TV—and wanted to meet the people who made the stuff we loved. But we also wanted to be writers and work in genre creation, so we went in hopes of finding out how they did what they do, and to figure out how we could do it, too."

Before the internet and social media, the only way to meet and engage with pros, fellow hopefuls, and fans was to meet them, and that meant conventions or workshops. "It helped a lot to meet editors, agents, writers, and artists in person and get to know them," they say. "Not to pitch, but to learn and become colleagues, and maybe friends." After years of enjoying cons as paying customers, the Griffiths published a few things and were able to attend those same events as professionals. "Reaching just one passionate reader can multiply a hundredfold if they do a review online, post on socials, or just tell their friends." Professional writers being present and sharing enthusiasm for the craft shows readers that effort and love have been woven into a product they are about to invest in. "Readers are everything to us and to every author; they support us, and conferences give us the opportunity to thank them."

Cons also provide readers the chance to interact with authors on a level that is far more personal than a Zoom call, social media post, or newsletter can offer. It's a moment where the reader is seen and heard by the writers of their favorite stories. "We can sign our name and make them feel a part of the process by creating a memory together."

PRO ADVICE: Go to panels and ask questions. Prowl the dealer's rooms and talk to pros there. Or just be surrounded by other people who value the same things you do to remind yourself that you're not alone in what you love, and all the effort you're putting into your work is for a reason. Chances are if you experiment with various events, you'll find favorites that you can return to.

John Jackson Miller

A New York Times–bestselling author, including several *Star Wars* novels. His bestseller, *Star Wars: Kenobi*, won the 2014 Scribe Award for Best Original Tie-In Novel—Speculative Fiction.

“Conventions offer a less expensive way to do the seminar experience,” says Miller, an alum of the Gen Con Writers Symposium. If you’re at the early stages of your career and want to get the basics of how the industry works, you can attend panels and likely a paid seminar track (Michael Stackpole’s 21 Days to a Novel, for example) that piggybacks off of a larger event/convention.

PRO ADVICE: Miller’s encouragement to aspiring writers: “Write anything you can possibly write as long as it is read.” He recommends working as a newspaper or magazine journalist, writing movie reviews, or even fan fiction to get established.

Ursula Vernon/T. Kingfisher

Vernon is a writer, artist, and illustrator who has won numerous awards for her work. Under the name T. Kingfisher, she is also the author of books for older audiences. She writes short fiction under both names.

Vernon began doing commissions and selling prints of her art at cons for years before her writing career started in earnest. “I know lots of readers say they enjoy panel discussions and hearing the authors talk and just getting a feel for the voice behind the writing,” she says. “In a good panel, they’ll get the chance to ask questions, too, about bits of writing craft that are plaguing them, or about how a pro’s work schedule looks and so forth, or even more specific questions about elements in a particular book.” Participants can often get books signed and have the chance to converse with their favorite author.

“I go to a fair number of conventions a year, and I always love the chance to meet the fans and run into other authors and see how they’re doing,” says Vernon. The joke is that many of them have lifelong friendships conducted five minutes at a time when they see each other at cons.

PRO ADVICE: In addition to what writers can reap from events, Vernon suggests that new writers do a few cons, themselves—particularly with more seasoned authors—thereby picking up a lot about how to speak to an audience. Workshops are a great way to learn about the craft of writing, and even transform into a polished presenter, yourself.

Alyssa Wong

They write fiction, comics (including the GLAAD Award-winning series *Star Wars: Doctor Aphra* Vol. 2), and games. Their stories have won the Nebula, World Fantasy, *Alfie*, and Locus Awards.

Wong’s introduction to Comic-Con began with the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop and the opportunity to learn from world-renowned authors. “It was the most magical experience!” They later went to various different fan conventions to continue following Clarion teachers.

Writing workshops, including ones at cons, can help people learn to stretch their muscles and move outside of their comfort zones. “I like to teach short fiction workshops because I think that we get a lot of practice beginning stories, but we don’t get very much practice ending them,” says Wong. “And I think short fiction is really good for that. I love short fiction because you have to be able to craft something that is so contained and intense in as small a space as possible—and still stick the ending. With short fiction, you can really tell, so there’s no room for error. I love that challenge.” They also love attending panels and learning new things.

PRO ADVICE: Wong says it’s pretty common for writers not to be sure if they’re ready for something—or not believe in their work in the beginning. “A lot of writers suffer from imposter syndrome; I definitely had that,” they said. “Writing can be a really lonely business, so getting to meet people who have actually read my stuff is amazing because, in some ways, it makes it feel real.”

If you started writing comics during the pandemic, for example, attending cons allows you to mingle with like-minded writers and see the impact of storytelling. “You realize how much courage it takes to approach someone and say, ‘I love your work.’ I remember what it was like to meet my favorite author, and I think about that every time I meet a fan.”

How to Find Con Writing Tracks

- Create an online search for potential event options in your area.
- Explore their programming grids for terms like *author, craft, literary, publishing, screenwriting, storytelling, world-building, or writing*.
- Review guest lists; if many authors or editors are attending, there will likely be writing panels.

CONS WITH STRONG WRITING COMPONENTS

BALTICON's central theme is writing, literature, and authors—celebrating science fiction and fantasy with more than 300 hours of diverse programming. Balticon.org

The Carolinas' longest running sci-fi and fantasy convention, **CONCAROLINAS** is where artists, authors, gamers, and geeks gather, enjoying hundreds of hours of programming over a three-day weekend. Includes writing and content creation tracks. ConCarolinas.org

DRAGON CON is regarded as offering one of the most robust and structured writing tracks of any fan convention, treating writing as a core part of fandom culture. Covers craft, world-building, editing, querying, indie publishing, marketing, and genre-specific writing. DragonCon.org/things-to-do/tracks

The **EMERALD CITY COMIC CON** Writers Block brings the world of literature to participants and is a haven for avid readers, writers, and book lovers alike. EmeraldCityComicCon.com/en-us/exhibitors-and-artists.html

GALAXYCON's "festival of fandom" offers curated fan panels, sessions, craft and industry discussions with a strong emphasis on comics, sci-fi/fantasy, and pop-culture storytelling. Learn more in Q&As and workshops across nine U.S. cities. GalaxyCon.com/pages/live-events

The **GEN CON** Writers Symposium includes panels, seminars, and workshops hosted by authors, publishers, and agents with topics focused on the craft and business of writing, plus best-in-class fiction writing events. GenCon.com/gen-con-indy/writers

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, a nonprofit serving writers of science fiction, fantasy,

and related genres across multiple mediums, hosts the annual **NEBULA CONFERENCE**. Nebulas.sfw.org/nebula-conference

NEW YORK COMIC CON offers curated professional programming for industry professionals across comics, entertainment, retail, and literary spaces to include workshops and panels, portfolio reviews, private signings, and more. NewYorkComicCon.com/en-us/things-to-do.html

Maintaining a primarily literary focus, **NORWESCON** promotes science fiction, fantasy, horror, related fictional genres, and science through the written word, art, and educational programs. Norwescon.org

RAVENCON, a vibrant science fiction/fantasy/horror convention, provides a dynamic forum to engage and explore literature, art, gaming, podcasting, costuming, science, and music. RavenCon.com

SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON features panels with writers, industry discussions, and craft-focused sessions—especially in comics, animation, and screenwriting—including SAM: Storytelling Across Media, a single day symposium for aspiring writers, artists, and professionals. Comic-Con.org/cc

The **WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION** is an annual gathering of authors, artists, editors, agents, publishers, and fans of the fantasy and horror literary genres from all across the globe. WorldFantasy.org

WORLDCON (home of the Hugo Awards) is the annual convention of the World Science Fiction Society, an unincorporated literary organization. This event has been held continuously since 1946. Worldcon.org

- Search for workshops. Some cons offer paid intensives separate from the main schedule.
- Check fan-run tracks as cons sometimes offer volunteer-run sessions dedicated to writing.
- Read through individual websites carefully to learn more about costs and registration. Seating may be limited and on a first-come, first-served basis.

IF YOU GO: I recommend planning ahead, downloading event apps, attending panels, taking good notes, participating in Q&As, connecting with others, and

following panelists through their social channels and newsletters to continue learning even after the event has ended. **WD**

Kristy Stevenson (KristyStevenson.com) is an independent contributing author, editor, and storyteller. She's penned two different WD columns, and partners with editors, independents, and corporate clientele to deliver compelling content and detailed project management. Copywriter and proofreader by day, freelance gigger by night—Kristy draws inspiration from travel and scrapbooking when not on deadline.