
Review by, John J. Lewis

CONTROVERSIAL and misunderstood, furries are fans of anthropomorphic animals, developed from cartoons, science fiction, film, and comic-strip media, who take on “fursonas,” or imaginary likenesses that pertain to their own interests and personalities. While many state that it is the art that makes the fandom what it is, the ability to be something other than human and find a welcoming space truly drives the fandom up to the present day. Fans take on the forms of lions, dragons, classic cartoon canines, or even balloons and plush toys as alter-identities on- and off-line. Such characters and personas create new directions in queer and animal studies and in the continued development of science-fiction and fantasy literature. A much larger and more important aspect to furries, however, are the annual public conventions that occur across the United States and abroad, in which these very same interests come together into weekend-long events and gatherings.

Fred Patten’s book *Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015* (2017) examines the continuous development of furry conventions and the figures who have made these events such a success. Organized in an alphabetical list, the text gives an account of important incidents, events, persons, and/or moments that have been influential to the fandom at large. It lists convention details including years, attendee numbers, guests, changes in venue, and special happenings, such as when chlorine gas was unleashed on fans at one convention, causing a hotel’s evacuation into the cold Chicago winter (at the Midwest FurFest 2014, 175). Fans as well as researchers may find Patten’s book useful, particularly for the historical timeline of where old conferences have ended and new ones have begun.

Done particularly well, Patten’s introduction to *Furry Fandom Conventions* works through years of history to create a narrative for the fandom’s lengthy progression. Starting from the first furry convention, *Confurence 0*, Patten deconstructs what separates conventions from more affordable and less regulated “furmeets,” where fans gather at small locations away from the larger space of a hotel (5). These small gatherings are, in actuality, where furry fandom began, and Patten shows his readers what led simple meetings towards the larger events seen today. He further describes in detail how furry built itself off the platform of science fiction and animation into a separate and thriving entity. From mimicking the narratives of the time to creating one’s own “fursona,” furries built themselves from literature they found relevant to their interests, Patten states.

Most influential, however, was the development of the internet scene in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Online, the fandom shared artwork and literature, and scheduled gatherings that could not have happened without this form of communication (FurryMUCK being one source Patten mentions). Prior to this simplicity, gatherings were restricted to word of mouth and the eventual meetings done at other events (9). Drawing on extensive experience as a participant-observer, Patten supports these findings further with primary sources on furries from The Eaton Collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy at UC Riverside. The rest of the text’s collection of statistics and facts functions as a reference for those interested in the history of conventions or in exploring furry representation within the public space. This wealth of knowledge sheds light on what makes the
community thrive, particularly the intersectionality of furry and queer identities. Patten’s history might be used to extend research on furry communities as queer spaces that offer utopic visions of a welcoming animal world.

While Patten’s work will prove invaluable for the future of fan conventions and furries, it limits the discussion of furries as one of the largest communities accepting of LGBTQ* groups and allies. Furry conventions hold panels on everything from BDSM safety and costuming methods to illustration and creativity all in one location, where individuals arrive as equals within a shared space and learn both with and from each other. As soon as one dons on a fursuit, fursona, or even a convention badge, the boundaries of communication fall, gay/straight categories become unimportant, and instead human becomes fox, dragon, cyborg, and more. For that reason, the convention space creates an ontological entry point for utopic visions based on a science-fictional form of biology: rather than focus on racial or ethnic differences in order to create Western-based hierarchies, furries look toward community with hundreds of thousands of animal species as welcomed agents of their own individual identities.

Instead of providing such information, Patten’s history gives what foreword writer Kathleen C. Gerbasi claims is “an invaluable resource for anyone just plain interested in following the rise of the furry convention” (1). Gerbasi also states that Patten’s review proves invaluable for scholars in anthropology, sociology, ethnography, and more as a detailed record of a fan community’s evolution.

What holds one back from entering the furry convention? Not much, it seems. Ever since the fandom’s beginnings in which room signs attracted curious convention attendees, a community of “others” has welcomed each other and explored who or what to become (“Furry Party Room 2119” Flier found at Special Collections & University Archives, UCR Library, University of California, Riverside). Due to the significant amounts of data such narratives demand, Patten’s work begs scholars to pursue further research. Furry fandom is too complex to catalogue the diverse range of what occurs at a single convention. For instance, future scholarship might extend Patten’s study to the dances and dance competitions, costume performances, panels, concerts, art shows, screenings, photo shoots, parades, readings, gaming events, signings, discussions, and parties that can all occur on a single day, and often do.

_Furry Fandom Conventions, 1989-2015_ then ends where new research must begin. Patten reviews the past and recent present of furry convention history, creating new opportunities for those furry and non-furry alike to understand what the future of the community may be. The simple format, easy to read language, and historical artwork and detailed references provide ample information and media to begin analysis (“Introduction” 5). Texts such as Mel Chen’s _Animacies_ and Sharon E. Roberts’s “The Anthrozoomorphic Identity: Furry Fandom Members’ Connections to Non-Human Animals” would prove valuable in future research surrounding _Furry Fandom Conventions_, as they take up in more depth what makes a furry furry. Where Patten’s text proves ambiguous is where others may choose to unpack, but those looking to plan their own convention and learn from Patten’s wealth of knowledge will find this text something worth howling over, pun intended.