

R-SPEC Officer's reports for 2020 (for February 2, 2021 Annual Meeting)

Report from the Office of the President

To say that 2020 was a challenging year would be an understatement. But compared to many other arts organizations, R-SPEC performed reasonably well over the past year given the circumstances.

After a solid start with our first (and last) in-person meetings at Barnes & Noble, the pandemic forced us to pivot and host our meetings online via Zoom starting in May—and we plan to continue doing so for the immediate future. While we miss the in-person interaction, there have been some benefits: Zoom has made it easier to do presentations where a projector and screen would have been necessary, and we have had remote attendance from people as far away as France, which could not have happened otherwise. A big thanks goes to Technology Officer Eric Scoles for setting up and managing this capability which has helped us all stay connected.

The pandemic also postponed Flower City Comic Con, but if all goes well, we should be attending in September 2021, as well as Astronomicon in late October 2021. A short-term plus: not attending events has kept our expenses down.

By far our biggest accomplishment for 2020 was developing and launching our first-ever speculative fiction contest, "From the Lockdown". The window for submitting entries has been open for a few weeks now, and we are excited at this new venture that supports and promotes Rochester-area speculative fiction writers in these difficult times.

Our monthly meeting programs for 2020 covered a wide range of speculative topics as well as provided insightful workshops on the craft of writing fantasy, science fiction, and horror. We look forward to another engaging calendar for 2021.

Respectfully submitted by Ted Wenskus, R-SPEC President, Editor-in-Chief, and Board member.

Report from the Office of the Vice President

This year has certainly had its sets of challenges, with the switch from live in-person meetings to online. Most of my contribution this year has been in helping to post meeting information, take part in some of the online panel discussions, and assisting in the creation of the "From the Lockdown" short story contest.

Respectfully submitted by Hugh Sullivan, R-SPEC Vice President and Board member.

Report from the Office of the Secretary

Meetings and Minutes for 2020:

The R-SPEC board held six meetings in 2020:

- The annual meeting on 4 February 2020 at Barnes & Noble, where the officer's reports for 2019 were read, and the slate of candidates for board members was presented and voted on. This meeting was open to the public. Voting was open to all dues-paying R-SPEC members present. The proposed slate of board candidates was unanimously accepted.
- The board-members-only meeting on 1 March 2020 at Panera Bread 12 Corners, where the newly elected board members formally decided which board member would fill which office and conducted other R-SPEC business, such as topics for our monthly meetings in 2020, whether we would have a monitor and slide show at Flower City Comic Con, and whether we would participate in panel discussions at the upcoming Astronomicon in 2021.
- The board-members-only meeting on 6 September 2020 (online via Zoom, due to the pandemic), where miscellaneous business was discussed. The idea of having a short story contest with cash prizes was put forth by Ted.
- The board-members-only meeting on 20 September 2020 (online via Zoom), where the board hashed out the basic ideas, timetable and rules for the short story contest.
- The board-members-only meeting on 4 October 2020 (online via Zoom), where the board refined the ideas for the short story contest, worked out the details for blind judging, and settled on the name "From the Lockdown".
- The board-members-only meeting on 18 October 2020 (online via Zoom), where the board discussed various details about managing memberships online, and finalized the contest rules and timetable for "From the Lockdown".

Membership and Attendance for 2020:

Per the attendance records submitted to the Secretary by the Program Officer, Alan Vincent Michaels, our attendance numbers at our monthly meetings for 2020 were:

- **11** meetings
- **98** total attendees (21 fewer than 2019, 37 fewer than 2018)
- **24** unique attendees (1 fewer than 2019, 11 fewer than 2018)
- **19** non-board members who attended at least one meeting
- **11** attendees who were at two or more meetings, **5** of whom were board members
- **6** non-board members who were at two or more meetings
- **13** non-board members who attended only a single meeting
- **8** dues-paying members in 2020.

The January through March meetings were at our regular venue, the Community Room at the Pittsford Barnes & Noble. Our April meeting was canceled due to the pandemic. In May, we resumed monthly meetings via Zoom. Contrary to our long-established custom, we held two meetings in October, none in November, and one in December, ending the year with our usual total of 11.

Respectfully submitted by Lynn Spitz, R-SPEC Secretary and Board Member.

Report from the Office of the Treasurer

At the beginning of February 2020, the R-SPEC treasury stood at \$867.27. As of January 26, 2021, the treasury now stands at \$1030.48. Deposits of some recent member dues may be pending by the time this report is presented.

Expenses were lower this year compared to previous years:

- Hosting and domain renewal costs were lower overall:
 - R-Spec.org hosting fees: \$143.40 (\$35.85 x 4)
 - Domain registration: \$18.17 for Disturbing Frequencies
 - R-SPEC paid \$105.85 extra in 2019 to lock in our domain registration rate for r-spec.org for the next 5 years, per Board approval. Consequently, we will not be seeing a new domain registration charge for our main website for the next 4 years.
- **Total withdrawals: \$161.57**

Income generated this year consisted of member dues, sales of ebooks, and Amazon Smile distributions:

- Membership: \$163.02
- Amazon Smile: \$52.53 (last year: \$62.49)
- Ebook sales: \$9.23 (last year: \$8.14)
- Re-deposited Flower City Comic Con float for cash box: \$100.00
- **Total deposits: \$324.78**

Taxes for 2020 were filed and accepted on Jan. 9, 2021.

Looking ahead through 2021, we will hopefully be able to attend the 2021 Flower City Comic Con, which will allow us the opportunity to recoup the \$105.00 table fee paid in December 2019.

Respectfully submitted by Ted Wenskus, R-SPEC Treasurer and Board member.

Report from the R-SPEC Technology Officer

Technical operations in 2020 were largely routine, including software maintenance on R-Spec.org and DisturbingFrequencies.com, and adjustments to email forwarders. A potential issue was identified which could cause the R-SPEC.org website to go offline after automated account configuration updates performed by our hosting provider. (DisturbingFrequencies.com would not be affected.) At this time, it appears likely R-SPEC.org will not be affected; however, steps required to remediate and restore service have been identified.

Hosting renewal payments continued to process normally. Content updates were about evenly distributed between the Vice President (Hugh Sullivan), Program Director (Alan Michaels), and Technology Officer (Eric Scoles). Some adjustments were made to other content to keep it current.

Changes were made in November/December to support the “From the Lockdown” short-fiction contest. Those include:

- New web pages announcing the contest and documenting contest rules. (Content created collaboratively by the Board of Directors based on a draft by the President.)
- New email box and associated email forwarders to facilitate anonymous contest submissions and archiving contest-related communications.
- A new webform to receive submissions and route them to our submission anonymizer (R-SPEC member Celia Reaves). (Google Forms was investigated as an alternative, to remove dependency on Drupal 6; however, Google Forms was found to be unable to support restricting file submissions by type.)
- Excel spreadsheets shared via Google Docs to document story submissions & their rankings (created by Vice President [Hugh Sullivan] in collaboration with Celia Reeves—see Vice President's report).

Planned migration of the website from Drupal 6 to WordPress remains on hold, though now due to a need to support the current submission form for the “From the Lockdown” contest. However, at this time, I hope to begin presenting alternative information architecture & layouts in Q2 2021, with an eye toward re-launching the website by end of Q4 2021.

Due to pandemic precautions, R-SPEC has shifted to online meetings throughout most of 2020, and continuing for the foreseeable future. The Technology Officer was able to facilitate this through use of his personal Zoom account; should use of that account no longer be possible, R-SPEC can investigate other means of meeting online.

Our migration to Zoom-based meetings afforded the ability to record meetings and make them available online, preferably through a third-party service to avoid extra cost associated with streaming bandwidth. (The Board has agreed tentatively that ‘reading meetings’ will not be recorded, to ensure that contributors feel comfortable reading their work.) At present, meetings have been recorded less often than advertised, and none have been made available, but I anticipate being able to make regular topical meetings available by end of Q1.

Respectfully submitted by Eric Scoles, R-SPEC Technology Officer and Board member.

Report from the Marketing Officer

The 2020 year presented unique challenges for our organization, which were addressed and managed in a manner consistent with our goals of providing continual support to Rochester-area readers, writers, and aficionados of speculative fiction.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a cessation of in-person meetings at our Pittsford Barnes & Noble location, and the implementation of Zoom virtual meetings starting with the May 2020 session. At the time of this report, due to the effects of the pandemic, we do not anticipate returning to in-person meetings until the third quarter of 2021 at the earliest.

Most marketing activities in 2020 focused on additional reach-out on our social media platforms, an increase in targeted emails, and the creation of the “From the Lockdown” short story writing contest that will run in early 2021.

R-SPEC Live Events

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no R-SPEC live events were held in 2020.

R-SPEC helped promote Rochester-area speculative fiction writers, such as Dana Paxson, on social media. Mr. Paxson’s table reading of “Checking In at the Hilbert Hotel” – a debut virtual reading of his “mathematical playlet” was held over Facebook/Zoom on December 30, 2020. It featured a cast of local actors.

The fifth Flower City Comic Con was postponed until September 25-26, 2021. R-SPEC will be involved in discussion panels and have a marketing table presence at the convention. The Astronomicon 13 convention, to be held October 29-31, 2021, will be another opportunity for R-SPEC outreach and presence building.

R-SPEC Branding

Branding updates from 2019 were carried over to the 2020 versions of R-SPEC Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn social media accounts with minor changes. Additional design and functional changes anticipated for the R-SPEC website in 2020, were put on hold until 2021.

Facebook

Total likes on the **R-SPEC Facebook** page grew from 160 (February 1, 2020) to 165 (January 31, 2021), with 170 followers.

As is the norm for Facebook, posts that had the highest reach, such as meeting notes, tended to be those shared most often onto personal pages.

Total likes on the **Disturbing Frequencies** podcast page grew from 33 (February 2020) to 37 (January 31, 2021), with 39 followers.

Twitter

Our presence on Twitter changed as follows:

- **R-SPEC (@r_rspec)**: from 37 followers (February 2020) to 35 followers (January 31, 2021)
- **Disturbing Frequencies (@disturbingfreqs)**: from 23 followers (February 2020) to 22 followers (January 31, 2021)

LinkedIn

In 2020, R-SPEC maintained its presence on the LinkedIn platform. Having access to this platform helps increase awareness of the R-SPEC organization to other media and literary organizations locally and across the country.

Respectfully submitted by Alan Vincent Michaels, R-SPEC Program & Marketing Officer and Board Member

Report from the Program Officer

During 2020, the R-SPEC program meetings were open to the public. The January through March meetings were held in the Community Room at Barnes & Noble, Pittsford, New York, on the first Tuesday of each month.

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the April meeting was cancelled, and virtual meetings were held over Zoom starting in May.

After approval by the R-SPEC Board, the final 2020 meeting calendar included the Annual Board Meeting (February), five topics focused on writing and story development ("2020 Writing Series"), four Reading Meetings, an October #2 "Our Vampires, Ourselves: Vampire Tales & the Times They Reflect" presentation, and a December meeting, "What Did You Write for NaNoWriMo 2020?"

The December meeting replaced the canceled April 2020 meeting, enabling us to maintain a total of 11 meetings for the year.

The new 2020 approach for meetings was determined by the Board and the Program Officer, with a focus on full-team panel-style discussions with Alan Vincent Michaels acting as the moderator and a panelist.

The Program Officer managed and materially supported the meetings with program descriptions, flyers/posters, and collaterals. Hugh Sullivan/Eric Scoles and Ted Wenskus published the descriptions and flyers on www.r-spec.org and Facebook, respectively. The Marketing Officer published meeting information on Twitter and LinkedIn.

2020 Attendance

Meeting attendance in 2020 totaled 98 participants, which represented an 18% decline from the 2019 attendance total of 119 participants. The decline may be partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic effect and the need to hold meetings virtually, which superseded our typical, in-person meetings at the Pittsford Barnes & Noble.

The highest attendance (13 total participants) was recorded for the second October 2020 meeting.

Individual Meeting Presenters

- February: *R-SPEC Annual Board Meeting*, moderated by Ted Wenskus
- October #2: *Our Vampires, Ourselves: Vampire Tales & the Times They Reflect*, presented by Ted Wenskus
- The Program Officer moderated the January, May, July, and September *Reading Meetings* and the December meeting, "What Did You Write for NaNoWriMo 2020?"

R-SPEC Team Meetings

R-SPEC team panelists included Alan Vincent Michaels (moderator), Eric Scoles, Lynn Spitz, Hugh Sullivan, and Ted Wenskus for these meetings:

- February: *2020 Writing Series #1: Hooking that Plot!*
- March: *2020 Writing Series #2: Breaking the Formula and Subverting the Trope*
- June: *2020 Writing Series #3: Plot and Story Structures*
- August: *2020 Writing Series #4: World Building*
- October #1: *2020 Writing Series #5: Shared Worlds and Borrowed Landscapes*

Special Guest Panelists

Author Nick DiChario was the guest panelist for the *2020 Writing Series #5: Shared Worlds and Borrowed Landscapes* meeting (October #1). His efforts in creating and publishing new versions of Italian folktales helped provide attendees with a different perspective on speculative fiction writing.

Submitted respectfully by Alan Vincent Michaels, R-SPEC Program & Marketing Officer and Board Member