

[\(online\) Public Lecture, 27 May 2020: Neeraja Sankaran: "Fantastic Microbes and Where to Find Them"](#)

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On 27 May 2020 at 5pm, Dr Neeraja Sankaran (Visiting Fellow, University of Leeds) will deliver the C. Michael Mellor Public Lecture at the University of Leeds Centre for History and Philosophy of Science, on the timely topic: "Fantastic Microbes and Where to Find Them — How and When Scientists Engage with Literature."

Register for free: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/leeds-hps-public-lecture-fantastic-microbes-and-where-to-find-them-tickets-105220744078>. **Joining details will be emailed to all participants by 23 May 2020.**

Dr Sankaran writes: "In this lecture, I offer examples that I have encountered as a historian of science, in which scientists have drawn from fantasy—in its broadest possible sense and both from literature and popular culture—for a variety of purposes in their scientific work.

"In 1935 the British virologist Christopher H. Andrewes included, in a private letter to his friend, the American researcher Peyton Rous, a short story titled 'A Christmas fairy story for oncologists.' Using some classic fairy-tale tropes, with deliberate reference to Hans Christian Anderson, Andrewes sketched their place in nature, which were corroborated a few years later.

"Some years later, the Belgian-American physicist and microscopist Ladislaus Marton delivered a public lecture titled "Alice in Electronland" in which he adapted Lewis Carroll's beloved classic to describe previously unimaginable applications of the then new electron microscope in biology.

"Although he never published his satirical fairytale, Andrewes did in fact, publish a different humorous piece, 'Is Sex Infectious?' a couple of decades later (1953). In this essay he adopted the language and style of Broadway author Damon Runyon (later of Guys and Dolls fame) to deliver a tongue-in-cheek commentary on new findings about bacteria and sex. The same scientific discovery that inspired Andrewes, also prompted another scientist, Leeds-based biochemist Donald Nicholson, to try his hand at poetry.

"Taken together, these works show that far from providing the odd and occasional outlet, such exercises actually play a valuable role in how scientists learn, think about problems, remember, build knowledge, and disseminate information among themselves and to broader audiences."