

# FANTASTIC MICROBES AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

## WHEN AND HOW SCIENTISTS BORROW FROM LITERATURE

I believe that the two-culture divide is a myth. In this paper I demonstrate how and why through examples that I have encountered as a historian of science where scientists have drawn from fantasy—in its broadest possible sense and both from literature and popular culture—for speculative, explanatory and heuristic devices in their 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,” the British. Using some classic fairy-tale tropes, with deliberate reference to Hans Christian Anderson, Andrewes sketched this humorous piece to make “fantastic” speculations about the nature of certain viral infections and 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. Both works have since featured prominently in historical papers that I have published in the past few years. Meanwhile 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 (of Guys and Dolls fame) to deliver a tongue-in-cheek commentary on new findings about bacteria and sex.

## ABOUT THE SPEAKER



### DR. NEERAJA SANKARAN

After having her Ph.D. in the history of medicine at Yale University, Dr Sankaran published extensively on the history of biomedicine, including immunology and virus research. Her writings came out through several major journals, such as the Journal of the History of Biology, Notes and Records, and Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences.

## DETAILS

**Date:** 17 August 2018 (Fri)

**Time:** 2:00 - 3:30 pm  
Refreshments available

**Venue:** The Hive TR+52  
(LHS-02-06)

**Contact:** Graham Matthews  
[gmatthews@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:gmatthews@ntu.edu.sg)

Ivy Yeh  
[hyyeh@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:hyyeh@ntu.edu.sg)

**Register:**



[https://wis.ntu.edu.sg/  
pls/webexe/REGISTER\\_  
NTU.REGISTER?EVENT\\_  
ID=OA18080209010478](https://wis.ntu.edu.sg/pls/webexe/REGISTER_NTU.REGISTER?EVENT_ID=OA18080209010478)