

Lunacon 97

A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper
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[This report has taken longer than usual, mostly because of a sudden influx at work, but also because we recently got Turner Classic Movies added to our cable and I've become a bit of a couch potato--if watching old classic silent films can be considered potatohood.]

Lunacon 97 was held March 7-9, 1997, in Rye Brook, New York. We attended only on Saturday.

It started out badly, partly due to the fact that I decided to use the "easier" directions, taking I-95 most of the way. I knew this was the New Jersey Turnpike, but didn't realize it then crossed the George Washington Bridge and became the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Luckily at that hour it was still pretty clear, but coming back we took the Tappan Zee Bridge instead.

The other problem was that the directions in the progress report were bad. They said to get off at a particular exit and take a right at the second light, but didn't say which way to go at the end of the exit ramp. Naturally we guessed wrong, but eventually realized it and turned around (at least we were on the right road).

Then of course came the problem of finding registration (not very labeled), and then the Green Room (even the hotel staff didn't seem to know where that suite was). We finally found our way there and picked up our badges and pocket programs (which had arrived Friday night). The Program Books didn't arrive until Saturday afternoon.

The Green Room had a few difficulties. There was no clock (well, okay, hardly anyone has a clock in the Green Room these days). A more serious problem was that the head of programming was an observant Jew, so couldn't do any work (writing, using the phone, etc.) on Saturday. But since the people working in the Green Room were also Jewish (though not as observant), she couldn't ask *them* to do any of these things. The result was some problems in resolving difficulties and conflicts. (There's an old Jewish tradition of a "shabbos goy": a non-Jew who does work on the Sabbath such as lighting a fire. Perhaps Lunacon should consider this post--complete with ribbon--although I realize that opinions vary on whether one can actually explicitly ask even a non-Jew to do some work.)

However, Lunacon did have one of the best attended Shabbos services I have seen, complete with mehitzah (dividing curtain between the men's side and the woman's side).

There were three Dealers Rooms, with a reasonable selection of book dealers. I find myself buying fewer books at conventions these days, though, as the house fills up.

Detective Science Fiction and Fantasy

Saturday, 11:00 AM

Lucienne Diver, John J. Pierce, Roberta Rogow, [someone] Sarrantonio, Alan Zimmerman

Another problem became obvious at the first panel. There were no name cards for the panelists, nor were there microphones. The rooms were large enough and the walls thin enough that it was hard to hear the panelists. (It's true that microphones might have made the "bleed-through" problem worse.)

Because I hadn't noticed the lack of name cards, I didn't write down the names as people introduced themselves. I think I managed to get everyone straight though.

Earlier, books were not as well labeled or compartmentalized. The main reason books are now is so that the stores know where to shelve them.

One sub-genre of detective fiction is the quasi-alternate-history, with historical or fictional figures solving mysteries. Another is the sort of straight historical detective story (such as the Marcus Didio Falco series). Then there is "trenchcape, hard-boiled detective stories in a fantasy setting (e.g., Mike Hammer with his best friend an elf). And there is the straight police procedural in the future. The last often includes the idea that in the future law enforcement is different (e.g., ROBOCOP, TIME TRACKS). Someone mentioned that the series STARCOPS was interesting for its police procedural aspect more than its science fiction. It was pointed out that one way to make a science fiction mystery interesting is to use the idea that a crime here may not be a crime everywhere.

There was a long list of detective science fiction and fantasy stories and other works: "Space Tracy," ALIEN NATION, THE X-FILES. Diver mentioned the many stories by Isaac Asimov, Alfred Bester's DEMOLISHED MAN, and the Glen Cook "Garrett Files" trenchcape books. Someone in the audience added Randall Garrett's "Lord D'Arcy" stories. Pierce mentioned Effinger's "Marid" series, and Zimmer added a series about "Hawk and Fisher," who are reform politicians in a fantasy series (I think). Rogow pointed out that the Hawk and Fisher books assume a semblance of democracy that a lot of fantasy doesn't.

Sarrantonio said that there are other related books, such as MOONBANE, which is a horror western, but not science fiction. She also mentioned a two-book series with a buffalo soldier who reads Sherlock Holmes (the second book may have been called KIT PEAK).

Zimmerman said there was a series by Man Myers (?) which starts with THE DUTCHMAN in Nieuw Amsterdam, and then each book takes place twenty years later with one of his descendants the main character. As he noted, when the author describes someone with large teeth, a pince-nez and an attitude, you're supposed to know who this is. (Given that I haven't the slightest idea, I think I'll skip them.) They're not science fiction, but Zimmerman said, "Historical mysteries have a flavor of SF; the cultures are alien." Diver thought it is hard to distinguish science fiction from detective science fiction because most science fiction has a mystery basis (who are the aliens?, what are they thinking?, etc.) Pierce pointed out that John W. Campbell had claimed you couldn't have a science fiction mystery, so Hal Clement wrote NEEDLE just to prove him wrong.

Zimmerman said science fiction mysteries are often accused of not playing fair with the reader by having some science fictional concept be the key, but that mystery writers had been doing that for years with secret panels (or untraceable poisons, Rogow added). Doyle did this, and I commented that it has become such a cliché that as soon as you hear that the house was built during the Protectorate, you *know* it has a "priest's hole." Diver said that Alfred Bester's DEMOLISHED MAN gives you the clue but distracts you with something else, and that this is easier in a movie than in a book.

An audience member said that about a quarter of John Dickson Carr's work was science fiction or fantasy. Someone else said that Dick Tracy was science fiction, but much of it isn't really any more (we have wrist radios).

Rogow said she wanted to talk about technology and forensics. For example, you can get to cellular level (DNA, etc.) to identify bodies rather than dental records (it was easier to have a corpse misidentified in the past than now, and will become even less likely in the future). Will we be able to fingerprint the DNA off an assault victim to identify the attacker? Zimmerman said that we have this now, but we still need to have the attacker's sample to compare it with, and the problem will always be what's not in the computer. Only recently that they've been able to computerize fingerprint matches. Diver felt that in the future you can postulate all this stuff is on file (at least for literary purposes). Zimmerman doubts we will have a centralized DNA record.

Diver added a few more books to the list: Mike Resnick's *STALKING THE UNICORN*, Douglas Adams *DIRK GENTLY AND THE HOLISTIC DETECTIVE AGENCY*, and Charles Sheffield's "Beowulf Shaeffer" stories. (For some reason I think she meant Larry Niven.) In films, Pierce suggested *CAST A DEADLY SPELL* and its sequel *WITCHHUNT*. Of the two the first is far superior, with a detective named Lovecraft in an alternate history in which Lovecraft's gods et al exist. The latter suffered because, as Pierce put it, they "cast [Dennis] Hopper as the detective when the detective is supposed to be the only sane person in this world."

As far as movies go, Rogow agreed with all the critics that *THE ORDURE REX* (Whoopi Goldberg and a genetically engineered intelligent dinosaur) was bad, or as she put it, "the worst science fiction detective in history."

Someone in the audience mentioned Larry Niven's "Gil Hamilton" series and particularly the organ-legging aspect, leading Rogow to note that there was an organ-legging plot on *LAW AND ORDER*. Diver observed that while the mainstream had picked up on organ-legging, the focus would probably now turn to cloning and concerns over that. Zimmerman agreed, saying that he had been called by *TIME* magazine, who wanted to know what science fiction books in the last five years had used cloning. (He provided them with at least a partial list.)

Diver asked about fantasy detectives, and Rogow said that several had been discussed already, such as Lord D'Arcy, and Hawk and Fisher. She also pointed out the anthology *SHERLOCK HOLMES IN SPACE AND TIME* (with both science fiction and fantasy), and mentioned she has two stories in Marvin Kaye's recent anthology, *THE GAME IS AFOOT*. Zimmerman said that his experience as a bookstore owner told him that Sherlock Holmes is the one area where mystery fans will read science fiction. (He said that he often sees people who are primarily science fiction readers buy mysteries, but rarely the other way around.)

There were several mentions of vampire and werewolf detectives, of which I can recommend Denise Vitola's werewolf cop in *QUANTUM MOON*. Zimmerman mentioned two books by S. Amber Swan, *FOREST IN THE NIGHT* and *SPECTRES IN THE DAWN*, in which genetically modified animals are called "moreaus", and genetically modified humans are called "franks."

An audience member said that many of Lois McMaster Bujold's "Miles Vorkosigan" books have mysteries (e.g., *CETAGANDA*). And Rogow noted that cyberpunk is rethinking what is and is not a crime. For example, there is the whole idea of the "health police."

[Unfortunately, I needed to leave early to prepare for my panel.]

How to Deal with Reader's Block

Saturday, 12:00 Noon

Mark Blackman, [someone] Houghton, Kessler, Evelyn Leeper, Ed Meskys

This panel was apparently Joe Mayhew's idea, but since there were no descriptions, we're not sure what he meant.

We started by asking Ed Meskys how he read books (being blind). He reads books both on Braille and hearing them on variable speed tape.

Blackman asked since several of us were reviewers, what we did if we had to read a dreadful book? Leeper said to tell people it was dreadful, but also that she will skim the second half of the book (or more) if it is dreadful. Blackman agreed that you didn't have to eat an entire egg to know it was bad.

Leeper said her reader's block came when the next book on her reading list was something she wasn't in the mood for then. The solution, of course, is to read something else. Someone else said they would have real reader's block if they had to read off a shelf.

Houghton asked about the authors we read that we cannot read, For her, Wolfe is one. Leeper said that for her, Stephen Donaldson was a popular author whom she just couldn't read. (On the other hand, she noted she liked 19th century novelists that most other people couldn't stand). Blackman noted that there is a genuine Regency revival now, but that in school you often had to plow through the reader's block (or read the Cliff's Notes, Leeper added).

Blackman said he had to read *THE PICKWICK PAPERS* but couldn't get past the author's title page. Meskys asked if it was funny, and Houghton replied that it is funny but doesn't have the tone, Leeper called it a dry humor. Houghton thought the funniest book is James Joyce's *ULYSSES*, which Leeper said she tried and could not read.

Meskys said he had problems more with particular types of scenes than whole books. He said, "I don't like open conflict, I like impersonal problems, not a villain trying to squish him," When he finds those scenes, he says, he grits his teeth and gets on with the book, In Braille he has read only one full-length novel, because he can read only about forty words per minute. The panel got a bit side-tracked in talking about how English Braille has different contractions from American Braille, though Meskys said they were not difficult to get used to. The talking book tapes are all done in one voice, with a little dramatization for some of the dialogue. Meskys said he listens to a lot at double recorded speed. (Blackman said he once listened to Orson Scott Card at high speed and now knows why Card named his character Alvin.)

Blackman asked what people did about trilogies. He gets the first, but sometimes waits to read it until the second one comes out. He claimed it was the same as publishing installments (though since those are monthly rather than annually, it doesn't drag out as long). Leeper said it depends on the author. For example, Orson Scott Card took so long between two "Alvin the Maker" books that she completely lost interest. Also, she will no longer review anything that is merely the beginning of a story; she waits until the whole thing is out. (Of course, often the first book can stand alone.) Frequently by the end, she is thinking, "Just let me get this thing over with."

Compounding this is that the publishing house does not always tell the reader the book is the first of a series. One publisher got upset when she implied all their books were in a series, but an examination of their upcoming books list indicated that it was true, at least for the next several months. Meskys noted there were also a lot of open-ended series, but that these usually stood alone better than the ones in a fixed-length series, which he notes was started by J. R. R. Tolkien. Someone mentioned Edgar Rice Burroughs's various series, including the fact that some of them ended in cliffhangers.

Houghton, attempting to get the panel back on track, said that her source of reader's block is that she

just stares because each book on her shelf cries equally loudly, She even tries lining them up by thickness and color.

Several panelists said they read more than one book at a time (well, not for a given instant of time). Blackman said he reads one at home, and one on the subway, but on the subway people say things like, "I don't understand; you are reading a book for pleasure?" Leeper said she too heard people say things like, "Why would anyone read Homer's ODYSSEY if not for school?" so she no longer assumes other people are readers.

Blackman said you know you're a bookaholic when, when winter comes, you hope to get the flu. Leeper said she knows the feeling, and also that she spends more time deciding what books to take on a trip than what clothes.

There was also a brief mention of books on-line, and using palmtop computers for reading. Someone asked what Heinlein people recommended, and one audience member said, "You read his juveniles," to which another responded, "And then you read his seniles."

Someone in the audience asked how do the panelists get rid of books. Leeper said you just have to get bigger and bigger houses. Blackman suggested storage rooms. Houghton voted for metal industrial shelving. Leeper mentioned her friend stores her books everywhere, including in the oven.

Religion in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Saturday, 1:00 PM

John R. Douglas, Daniel Hatch, A. Honigsberg, John Lee, Evelyn Leeper, Sharianne Lewitt, [someone] Linowitz

At the start of this panel, one of the panelists defined religion as "the corporate expression of faith." Someone else said that another distinguishing feature was a real sense of ritual.

There was a brief digression as someone mentioned the idea that the Messiah appear serially on all planets, always appearing in the form of the inhabitants. (This made me wonder as just what race he would appear on Earth today.) Someone described this journey as the "ultimate traveling salesman problem."

The panelists introduced themselves. Douglas said that he had lost his faith in his late teens, and science fiction is somewhat of a replacement. Honigsberg said a lot of her work has mystical overtones. Lewitt said her work does not deal so much with religion as with normative faith and society as a whole. Hatch claimed to write about evil Lutheran capitalists who were based on his in-laws, and also of the struggle of free will. Leeper said that her interest was as a reader: she finds that science fiction that deals with religion looks at what people really care about. In particular, she likes "Jewish science fiction," because Jews are more a separate culture than (say) Lutherans. (And of course the fact that she's Jewish probably has some effect as well.) Linowitz (who is also Jewish) described himself as "geek orthodox"; he deals in information technology.

Douglas said he was old enough to remember when a geek was someone who bit the heads off of chickens. This led to some speculation on whether this would be kosher (no, if the chickens were live; possibly, if the chickens were killed properly and then soaked and salted). Trying to tie this theme into science fiction (and fantasy), Leeper asked if there could be a golem chicken. Linowitz replied, "No, but there was a golem calf [at Sinai]."

Getting down to more serious issues, Douglas described science fiction as the "literature of transcendence." One of the earliest stories he remembers is "The Star" by Arthur C. Clarke, from which he realized that faith had a serious price on the cosmic scale. After this, he wanted to write

Jesuit science fiction. Leeper said if he enjoyed Jesuit science fiction, he really must read **THE SPARROW** by Mary Doria Russell (and of course, **A CASE OF CONSCIENCE** by James Blish, though that's pretty well-known). Someone in the audience recommended Michael Moorcock's **BEHOLD THE MAN**.

Douglas observed the panel was trying to set a theme but not succeeding so far. He asked if the panelists could talk about something that powerfully moved them. He added that there is the politics of religion, but he still wants a sense of wonder and dealing with root beliefs.

Honigsberg said she would start with one of hers, "Duet in Angles of Darkness," She said she was looking at the change of generations in the music, and the more she looked the more it looked like going to a temple. Douglas asked, "Do you see that as having a religious component?" and Honigsberg responded, "Yes," because religion is the group expression of faith.

Lewitt said that just about everything by Clifford D. Simak and Theodore Sturgeon would qualify.

[At this point there began to come lots of laughing from the media panel next door leading someone to observe that the majority of the population is not readers.]

Honigsberg said that what people think of as religion is often overtly ritualistic. Douglas added that people brought up Catholic are still tied in knots over religion, and that the reason that Catholics write about religion is that it is pounded into them.

Lewitt said that one of the most transcendent authors is Roger Zelazny, but returning to Simak, she particularly recommended **WHY CALL THEM BACK FROM HEAVEN?**, which explores our relationship with death and whether robots could have faith. It is about the relationship between us and the desire for immortality. She said that when you say "religion," to most people it is Catholicism, with a smattering of Judaism and a strange form of Muslims and Hindus. She said they she found Zelazny's **LORD OF LIGHT** very, very moving, and he plays havoc with the gods.

Hatch felt that the authentic religious experience is seeing things the way they really are, such as the traditional prophets, suddenly shattering all those illusions. His story is on an all-water planet and a person staying on an island until he dies; God must have had a reason for this suffering. He uses this as a way to sort out free will and determinism. (It appeared in **ANALOG** January 95.)

Leeper said that she didn't write so she couldn't plug her own stories. Instead, she recommended (again) **THE SPARROW** and **A CASE OF CONSCIENCE**. She observed that she was not as fascinated by a made-up religion as by the implications on extensions of current religions. For example, if we land on Mars what happens to Jewish laws that are very Earth-based (such as holidays based on an Earth year cycle)? This is the sort of thing who finds in the stories in Jack Dann's **WANDERING STARS** and **MORE WANDERING STARS**. It is all tied in with how one deals with changing environments. Her perception is that there is no well-defined real way to deal with new situations, and postulating possible approaches can teach us something about how religions really work. It appears to her, for example, that the Catholic Church's approach to a lot of new biologic technology is to say they don't deal with it, but Honigsberg said that that was not exactly true.

Honigsberg also asked whether food from the replicators in **STAR TREK** would be kosher. Would it depend on its appearance, or would a replicated ham sandwich be considered not really ham? (I would suspect the latter-- certainly there was no pig involved. In fact, all replicator food should logically be considered parve.) But if you felt that a replicated ham sandwich was not kosher, would that make any subsequent replicator food treif as well? Linowitz noted that in Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Venus" series, Muslims on Mars still prayed facing Mecca (Earth).

Someone in the audience said that a lot of science fiction writers have a bad tin ear about religions of the future, and that the third "Enders" book (by Orson Scott Card) got things really wrong, but Honigsberg disputed this, pointing out that Card was writing from an LDS (Latter Day Saints, a.k.a. Mormon) point of view. Someone else in the audience disagreed, saying she could not suspend her disbelief, because she felt that Card was "mucking with dogma."

Lewitt added that many authors get something wrong because they are not a part of the religion they are writing about. For example, many people get Islam wrong. There is a Western perception, she said, that Islam is violent and hates women, which is not really accurate. She was very moved by reading George Alec Effinger's "Marid" stories, saying that his take on Islam hit her very deeply because Effinger writes about Marid as an individual, a person pursuing a personal faith through Islam, and it is heartening to see one person "getting it right."

Douglas agreed with her assessment of the misrepresentation, but said that we may lose sight of the fact not everybody wants to get it right: some people just want a villain. (I would distinguish between having a villain who happens to be Muslim, or Jewish, or whatever, and having someone a villain **because** he is Muslim, or Jewish, or whatever. Stereotypes have dangerous things.)

Honigsberg also noted that once you write a story you can't fence-sit; you have to present a point of view.

Leeper said there was certainly room for story ideas in the various end-of-the-world scenarios predicted by some religions. Phil DeParto mentioned Arthur C. Clarke's CHILDHOOD'S END, which led someone to ask how Christianity will react to aliens. Honigsberg said that Jesus is always portrayed in each culture's image: in Scandinavia he is blond, in Africa he is black, and so on. "The redeemer shows up in way you can relate to."

At the end, an audience member said that Zenna Henderson's "People" stories showed people enjoying a different relationship with God.

Shabbos Filk

Saturday, 2:00 PM

Filking is singing either completely original fannish songs, or singing new fannish verses to old tunes. The classic of the latter would probably be all the new verses to "Old Time Religion" (e.g., "If it's good enough for Zarquon, then it's good enough for me"). The Shabbos filk consisted of singing various traditional Sabbath verses to better-known secular melodies. Apparently many songs have lyrics that fit "Greensleeves" or "Scarborough Fair," but people have even used such non-secular melodies as "Deck the Halls," My knowledge of Hebrew being minimal at best, I didn't always recognize the words, but there were a few I knew. (I was a listener, not a singer.) Because the people were Sabbath-observant, this was a capella.

The Science of THE LOST WORLD

Saturday, 4:00 PM
Charles R. Pellegrino

I arrived slightly late to this one. Pellegrino was saying that they had discovered Tyrannosaurus rex eggs in China with mummified (**not** fossilized) skeletons in them, and these could conceivably some day be used to examine dinosaur DNA.

As far as the vestigial limbs on T. rex, Pellegrino felt that they were used for moving eggs around,

and that the large theropods were more like birds than they have usually been portrayed. As he described it, "T. rex is what a parakeet would look like if it were designed by Stephen King."

The big worry about cloning ancient life is that you can't build a complete DNA molecule, so you would have to borrow from current living animals. For example, we may have 80% of theropod genetic code in today's ostrich; so we may have to recreate only 20% from mummified bone from eggs. But his research is somewhat limited because his wife has told him, "Charlie, you are not bringing any more radioactive dinosaur eggs into the house," and he added, "the operative words being 'any more'".

Pellegrino predicted that either moas or woolly mammoths may be biomorphed within the next ten years, and "in September 2015 we will have dinosaurs running around again."

Regarding the concept of using amber-preserved DNA a la JURASSIC PARK, Pellegrino noted that the best amber with flesh-feeding flies in it is in New Jersey.

If you worried about T. rex running wild, Pellegrino said, either don't clone T. rex, or sell the rights to hunt it. He suggested we think of the "culinary delights of the past, not just [that] raptor nuggets taste like chicken."

Pellegrino said that if we could read DNA--which we can't--we could try to reconstruct dinosaur DNA by reading all the partial DNA and taking the union of them. Could you combine different species' DNA successfully? If you could, Pellegrino also reminded us that the difference between human DNA and chimpanzee DNA is 1%, which is less than the difference between that of a donkey and a horse, and launched into a DNA filk song (sung to the tune of "This Old Man" ("DNA, PCR, OJ blood's was in the car; Daddy's building his own MRI, ...").

In museums they don't let you drill into or break bones, so accidents actually help. "Some of my most important discoveries were from things that were dropped and broken," Pellegrino said, and added that UPS helps by dropping and breaking things. He said that he discovered this doing his internship at the American Museum of Natural History. Steven Jay Gould also did this, and Pellegrino described them as the two clumsiest people who worked there.

Pellegrino corrected the textbook dogma that fossils were images of the past because they were not organic, saying that was because they used an analogy to Pompeii and volcanic rock, not sedimentary rock. He also said that the cantilever necks on dinosaurs we often see in drawings are inaccurate, as are really small mouths on huge dinosaurs. And he explained that long necks probably indicate cold-bloodedness since raising long necks is less a problem with cold-blooded animals. (But what about giraffes?)

Pellegrino said that one of the big questions, coloration, was not really dealt with in JURASSIC PARK. JURASSIC PARK 2 (now titled THE LOST WORLD) will have a lot more computer animation--about twenty minutes' worth--and it is supposed to be a lot better than that in the first film.

When portraying dinosaurs in their own era, Pellegrino said that there were stingless honeybees back to 95 MYA (million years ago--usually used instead of BC or BCE), so flowering plants could have existed then.

Pellegrino also talked about other life forms. Titanica rustacalis (broken rusticles off the Titanic) are a whole new life form, a "living fossil" going back three billion years.

Pellegrino said that one of the inventors of the MRI used on the dinosaur eggs is a creationist, so he says he was told "Just say the eggs go back before the flood" if the inventor asks.

Pellegrino said that many of the Chinese T. rex eggs were broken because the Chinese T. rex had a tendency to step on their own eggs. He suggested renaming it ditsisaurus and asked, "What do you call a dinosaur that steps on their own eggs? Extinct."

He also said that "tropical" fossils may indicate an equitable temperate climate rather than a tropical one, pointing out that, after all, we have tropical plants in our homes. And "ankle-biters" can overthrow a whole ecology. So what the asteroid didn't kill, the ankle-biters did.

What BABYLON 5 Gets Wrong

Saturday, 6:00 PM

**Beth F. Cohen, Barbara A. Hare, Michael O'Hare, Charles R. Pellegrino, Colin Roald (M),
Chuck Rothman**

O'Hare commented that this was the first time he was on a panel, rather than just a speaker. Lunacon seemed determined give everyone who wanted to be on a panel with him the opportunity, leading to a too- large panel. And maybe I'm being unreasonable, but I think putting someone on the panel who is also trying to tend a three-year-old at the same time is a mistake.

This was of course a very crowded item, and someone asked, "Couldn't you find a smaller room?" Someone else wanted to know if O'Hare watched the show (only occasionally) and if he could scream like a spider ship (apparently he can).

Roald asked, "Do any of the panelists want to leap in with an inflammatory comment?" Hare said that it was difficult to find a single point of failure in BABYLON 5. Cohen started off the list by asking, "How can a space station maintain slums?" Roald added, "The economics of Babylon 5 don't quite work."

Someone said the problem was that BABYLON 5 didn't invent all sorts of rays like STAR TREK, but did invent people (like Draal).

Pellegrino said, "We also have music which we don't really have in space," but people said this was dramatic license and didn't count.

O'Hare said that one mistake was that "they should've never gotten rid of Commander Sinclair." Someone in the audience pointed out that instead of just being a commander, he was now a god, but he replied, "A god without a paycheck is still a god without a paycheck." He also added a bit more seriously that he doesn't believe that Garibaldi would ride a motorcycle around the station.

Someone said that Melissa Gilbert was a bad choice for Sheridan's wife ("yeah, you could never believe she was Boxleitner's wife").

Another person brought up "the dreaded life force machine."

Hare thought that Ivanova needs to be developed more, and that female characters on other series are either "Earth mothers [STAR TREK: VOYAGER] or bitches with permanent PMS [STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE 9]." Roald also thought that Ivanova has the best sense of humor. Michael Burstein thought there were inconsistencies between "Babylon Squared" and "War Without End" (DeLenn's dress, and an aspect of the wall of bodies).

Roald thought some problems arose because it is like a first draft, but the first chapters can't be rewritten because they've been broadcast already. Burstein countered that they did adjust for this in some cases (for example, when Londo was wearing an old coat in a future scene from a prophetic dream, when the time arrived they had him go back to purple coat when black one was sent to the

cleaners).

O'Hare thought the environmental masks seemed ineffectual, but an audience member said there are reasonably innocuous atmospheres they would work in. O'Hare also said, "We used to call [Kosh] the juke box." One thing he thought they definitely got wrong was the air times of the shows. ("And rerun schedules," Roald added.) Burstein said that WNSD ran it the hour that didn't exist." (Mark Leeper compared this to the deck that didn't exist.) O'Hare said that they are basically looking for a mainstream hit or a breakout hit," and that BABYLON 5 is (for lack of a better word) competing with the "Star Trek" universe. It amazed him, he added, to see how many of you are science people. To the mainstream, all they see of science fiction is the masquerade.

O'Hare was a bit bothered by the title of the panel, but Burstein explained, "We love our shows so much that we attack them mercilessly and tear them to shreds," while Roald added "Does anyone look at the number of people crammed into this room and think we don't like the show?"

An audience member said that Sinclair was a little stiff at the beginning, and it took some time to get into the character. O'Hare explained that he had to be the serious one to counterbalance the others horsing around. His favorite character is Delenn. Someone in the audience said they liked Marcus for his romanticism, and others commented that it was really quite a change to see someone who was "saving himself" for the right partner.

Ripping Off History for SF and Fantasy

Saturday, 8:00 PM

Ellen Asher, Jack Chalker, Russell J. Handelman

Handelman began by saying that he thought STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE 9 was modeled on the conflict between Great Britain and Russia in Eastern Europe. Asher said that there was a difference between using history and ripping off history.

In terms of modeling, Handelman said that one problem is that you can't repeat your experiments. However, you can look at what the elements of a revolution, or a counterrevolution, or whatever are. For example, Chalker said that his "Soulcatcher" society depended on taking a certain percentage of children and killing them, but still seemed very benign. He showed a revolution of people against this by putting in ridiculous changes with logical reasons. (He also claimed that 80% of women readers "got it," but only 35% of male readers. I haven't read it, so I'm not sure what all this means, or if I'd "get it.")

Asher thought that "ripping off history" is borrowing historical characters and using them as characters in your book, which she also described as sticking real characters into totally fictional situations that have nothing to do with that characters. (I wonder if she includes books such as Peter Heck's mysteries which have Mark Twain as the detective, or are these really something else?) She did talk briefly about alternate history specifically, saying that she thought Harry Turtledove (in THE GUNS OF THE SOUTH) and John M. Ford (in THE DRAGON WAITING) did it well.

Someone in the audience asked about how Isaac Asimov copied the Roman Empire in his "Foundation" series. Handelman noted (somewhat tautologically) that if you get it to work successfully, then you've succeeded. Asher added, "Really good SF is not about aliens; it's about us." (This is, of course, not unlike Turtledove's claim that alternate histories are really a mirror by which we can look at ourselves.) She said that to do this, writers often borrow from exotic cultures to create alien cultures. In answer to a comment, she noted that Mike Resnick was not really borrowing history for his "Kirinyaga" series, but extrapolating it. However, it was noted that his "Inferno" trilogy does borrow history in this way: PARADISE is Kenya, PURGATORY is Zimbabwe, and INFERNO is Uganda.)

Chalker said that the question to ask is, "What is the writer trying to do with this copy of history?"

Handelman said that stylistically it is important to avoid the "sudden attack of common sense." Asher noted that "it's far more important in fiction to be plausible than to be accurate." Handelman pointed out that one of the difficulties is trying to get into the minds of people in the past is that the author (and the reader) needs to "take away" from them the knowledge we all have now. (This is Mark Leeper's criticism of the television series HAPPY DAYS, for example: it was set in the 1950s, but everyone has 1980s attitudes.) Handelman gave the example of a different sense of privacy in earlier times. The rooms in a house were all interconnected and people walked through all the rooms, shared beds, and so on. Asher also noted that women did not travel alone, and that in general, things were less safe.

Another example Handelman gave was the Civil War: many soldiers found a heavy religious meaning in what they were doing. Someone said that you can't just know what they believed, you have to believe it yourself, at least for the duration of the book. (Either Harry Turtledove or S. M. Stirling have talked about the difficulty of having a hero who has "politically incorrect" thoughts, such as approving of slavery or thinking that women are inferior.) Asher felt that one has to create a character's backstory so that the reader knows why that character believes what they do.

Someone suggested a panel on why monarchy is so ubiquitous in (high) fantasy, pointing out their were alternatives in the Roman Republic, Icelandic anarchies, or the Dutch Republic. Asher said the reason was because high fantasy is based on the Western European Middle Ages; in particular, it is patterned after a medieval world with an 18th century absolute monarchy (medieval allegiance was to your lord, not your king). An audience member added that fantasy also doesn't have elective monarchies, but has strict primogeniture, which is relatively recent. (Of course, this is all somewhat circular, but I suppose this means that the founders of the genre used monarchies so much that they became a rule you couldn't break-- something like the "rules" of mystery discussed in the "Detective Science Fiction and Fantasy" panel.)

One "ripping off" of history I'd recommend is Randall Garrett's "Despoilers of the Golden Empire." I won't say why; read it and find out for yourself. (I mentioned this story and one of the panelists noted that Garrett wrote that entire issue of ANALOG that it appeared in, including the letters!)

Again, I apologize for taking quite so long on this. Next year's Guest of Honor is Octavia Butler, so I'm looking forward to it.

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