

CRANK

ISSUE 4

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is published monthly (except once in a while, like now) and is produced & edited alternatively by Ted White (1014 N. Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, VA 22046, USA) and Rob Hansen (9A Greenleaf Rd., East Ham, London E6 1DX, Great Britain), and is available for LoCs, fanzines in trade (copies to us both, please), and editorial whim. US Production Associate: Terry Hughes, BNF. The editors are founding members, fwa. Editor this issue: TED WHITE

Avedon's Odyssey

FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE—DEC. 6-11
L TICKET CENTERS—350-3905

COMEDY

Friday & Saturday, 8:30 & 10:30
The Undisputed King of Comedy

BOB SHAW

1014 N. Tuckahoe St. is... 6 pages already and that's
shows I've seen in the past 2 weeks.
and at what kinds of SF he reacts...
to find a fan whose musical taste
my own—especially a single Brit
sent me a bottle of tape of 2 Boys
its recorded in Melbourne, in
my vote for Hero of the Month
was my birthday party and was
started arriving at 9 and the
out the door around 3am,
was to prepare for Dale Gnz. +
Sirens + P13's. The last person
out right, and Monday the
again found to be filtering
with their...
SO, CRANK IS FUNNY, INFORMATIVE,

my own box of fanzines.
(So where's my EBSON, Rob?)
love Sharee
#17
WHITE + HANSEN
1014 N. TUCKAHOE ST
FALLS CHURCH, VA
22046

CRANK MAIL: It's nice to get mail like the card partially reproduced above (from Sharee Carton) -- getting good mail is half the reason I put out a fanzine -- but I think I achieved a new plateau in my existence as a fan the other day. I received my first Fannish Junk Mail. We're all too familiar with the ordinary spate of junk mail that arrives addressed to "Occupant," but I was moderately surprised to receive a mailing from Equicon '86 (c/o Harry A. Hopkins of San Bernardino, California) addressed to "Ted White or present occupant."

Something about the sender's name prodded at long-dormant memories as I pulled loose the staples from what I thought at first was either a fanzine or a convention flyer. "Harry Hopkins," I mused to myself. "Wasn't he an assistant to Harry Truman or something like that?"

It wasn't a fanzine, and only one of the nine separate sheets of paper advertised a convention. The others hawked a variety of items, ranging from The Fandom Directory ("Become a visible fan!") to "Star Trek T.V. action figures" (I never knew Star Trek had transvestites). Then there's On The Good Ship Enterprise ("My 15 Years With Star Trek") by Bjo Trimble ("John, Bjo & Lora Trimble proudly announce We have a catalog!") and "The Sci-Fi Collector's Item With A Difference" ("Now you can bring the hand and footprint of your favorite Sci-Fi stars right into your den or office! These unique prints are ivory-tinted and framed in beautiful gold anodized frames..."). There's even a flyer from GNP Crescendo Records advertising their "Original T.V. Soundtrack" from Star Trek. I'm not making any of

this up.

Stunned by this sudden assault on my sensibilities, I turned with relief to a letter from Judith Hanna:

"Tut tut! Shoddy reporting in CRANK 3. Letting the side down, wot. We expect accuracy.

"FUCK THE TORIES is, as Ted says, a tricontinental and politically correct fanzine. However, it is penta editorial. Comrades Hughes, Edmonds and Nicholas are being kept firmly in line by Strike Force Commanders Brown and Hanna. Discipline will be strict. And should Comrade Hughes transgress, he will be instructed to beat himself up.

"Wherever did Ted get the idea that FTT is to be edited by some sort of Russian sledge? Surely Terry did not say anything of the sort. Here we see yet again the process by which history is rewritten to deny women's contributions. Comrade White, you have false consciousness. Re-education is required. Go beat yourself up immediately."

Ms. Hanna has, of course, fallen afoul of our editorial policy, which dictates that in all cases of married couples (or even unmarried couples of long duration), the couple shall be considered As One, a single unit expressing a single thought, or, to put it another way, a single TAFF candidacy, or a single apa membership. Or, as the CRANK Stylebook puts it: "Since we strive always toward our ideals, and the ideal of marriage is the perfect union of two souls, we shall endeavor always to refer to married couples (and unmarried couples of long duration) As One. Let us never betray our ideals!"

FUCK THE STORIES #1 is out, by the way, and locks Very Politically Correct.

Returning to the topic of The Mail, I must remark in preface that New York City has long had a bad reputation with those who use the mail: a letter can take a week or longer just to get in or out of the city, and there's no Special Delivery service available. And if any postal system in the country is likely to lose irreplaceable mail, it's New York City's. New York's postal system lost an envelope containing my only copies of some important correspondence, en route to the Nielsen Haydens. I asked for "a tracer." Eventually -- months later -- I received a carbon copy of the form I'd filled out, with "item lost" scrawled on it. Uh huh.

So at first I thought the card I recently received from the selfsame Nielsen Haydens was a joke. Printed by the United States Postal Service, it looks just like a change-of-address card -- the kind you send out to all your correspondents every time you move (and just one of many reasons why I haven't moved in over fifteen years).

But, printed at the top of the card is this stern warning:

"Receiver: This is not a change of address. This card is notifying you of this individual's APT.#, SUITE # or APT. MAILBOX #. Be sure to record the APT.#, SUITE # or APT. MAILBOX # in your records. The omission of APT.#, SUITE # or APT. MAILBOX # may result in delayed, misdelivered or 'Returned to Sender' mail."

Typed below is this short message from Patrick Nielsen Hayden:

. "This is an official Apt# CoA: run it in CRANK, hm?"

A few days later I happened to be talking to Patrick on the phone. "Got yer card, haha," I said. "I'd always wondered what the answer was to that old riddle, 'When is a CoA not a CoA?'"

"Um, Ted," Patrick said, his voice suddenly cold with deadly seriousness, "that card was not a joke."

"I was going to write a little funny bit about it for CRANK," I said. Then his words sank in. "What do you mean, it's not a joke? Your address hasn't changed. Why, right at the top of the card it says, 'This is not a change of address.'"

"Well, actually, we did move," Patrick explicated. "We moved across the hall, several months ago. But the building super* just gave us the key to the proper mailbox. There's a flake living in our old apartment, and if he receives any of our mail, we'll never see it. So, really, Ted, it's very important that our new apartment number gets published widely in the fan press. Naturally, I thought of CRANK...."

So, while the Nielsen Haydens (who are As One) remain at 75 Fairview, in New York, NY 10040, they have a new apartment number: 2D. Make a note of this, everyone: be sure to change your records.

And, say, has anyone else besides me noticed the uncanny resemblance between Patrick and Chris Elliot, the star of NBC's recently-concluded "Fugitive Guy" series? -tw

*Note to our British readers: read "super" as "superintendent" and see if that helps.

AUTUMN HARVEST: Now that pubbing your ish for a convention has become a firmly established, if lamentable, tradition over here, one made expedient by high postal rates, it seems logical to consider one convention's crop as a whole. After all, it's probably as close as we'll get to capturing the many elements both concrete and intangible that help shape fandom, and as clear a representation of it at a given moment as we can hope to achieve. These fanzines are a snapshot, if you like; one carrying an image formed not on a photographic emulsion but captured on duplicating paper and fixed in Gestetner ink. Not that the fanzines that came my way at Novacon 15 were in any way uniform, of course, but there were points of overlap....

I've only ever done a fanzine review column once before, back in EPSILON #14 (1983). In it I covered three fanzines and gave one a good review, one an average review, and one a bad review. This was no accident. The fanzines under review were chosen specifically to produce that result in order to demonstrate how I applied the criteria laid out in theoretical form in the same piece. Since I've always considered review columns that gave no idea, either explicit or implicit, of the terms of reference used by the reviewer to be inadequate and pointless, this seemed to me the way to go about things. Having thus laid my cards on the table I assumed, naively, that the editors of the fanzines under review would give the same consideration to my reviews that I had to their fanzines, regardless of whether or not they agreed with those reviews. Alas, it was not to be. The editor of the fanzine given an average, but on the whole favourable, review was most put out that I thought his brainchild less than 100% wonderful, while the editor of the zine given a bad review took it as a personal attack and has been sniping at me in its pages, off and on, ever since. All in all a pretty discouraging response, and the main reason I never did another. Nonetheless, actually doing a thing is a valuable way of gaining some insight into the problems faced by others who do it, and of being in a good position to criticise them when they don't shape up.

Someone who has long played at fanzine reviewing is Steve Higgins, and though he'd clearly like to think he was following in the footsteps of such as Pickersgill and West an important difference between their work

and his lies in the fact that the criteria they applied were either explicitly stated or implicit in their reviews (as earlier prescribed) whereas Higgins has, until very recently, spent most of his time agonising about what those criteria should be. At Yorcon 3 he chaired a panel that was billed as STOMACH PUMP #8 -- the eighth issue of his fanzine. Though too long, it was fairly lively and interesting and many made their points with wit and passion. (TAFF winner Patrick Nielsen Hayden described it as "...the best panel discussion of fanzines and fanzine criticism we'd ever seen.") With the help of his panelists and the audience Higgins debated the whole nature and purpose of fanzine criticism in an apparent attempt to arrive at some sort of consensus as to just what the criteria to be applied should be, by way of first establishing what the parameters governing the search for those criteria should be. Not surprisingly, this approach, while entertaining, took the debate down one or two blind alleys with absurd results. As Greg Pickersgill was moved to shout from the audience at one point:

"Hey, let's come back down from the stratosphere here. You're on the way to demolishing the foundations of the last five hundred years of Western thought!"

Quite.

Half a year later, it's Novacon 15, and STOMACH PUMP #10 appears -- this time as words on paper -- and Higgins is puzzled at something that happened at Yorcon 3:

"When Tom Weber and the Nielsen Haydens came over at Easter, I was surprised by their enthusiasm for British fanzines but not as much as I was by their vehement criticism of American fanzines."

He goes on to explain that he receives few US fanzines, and adds: "...but a lot of the stuff I do see impresses me more than most of the British stuff I get at the moment. Even the dull-but-worthys like HOLIER THAN THOU or EGOSCAN are at least technically competent. Most British fanzine writing seems hurried, slapdash and ill thought-out in comparison."

Obviously I don't agree that EGOSCAN was "dull-but-worthy" or I wouldn't have been so keen to do this zine with Ted White, but at the same time the thought that HTT is "technically competent" does strange things to my long-dormant sensawonder. It's a mess, and though most issues contain individual pieces that are excellent they're usually swamped by material that is mediocre at best, and by that horrible mountain of poorly-edited missives that masquerades as the HTT lettercolumn. To be sure HTT has improved, particularly since Robbie Cantor came aboard as co-editor, but it's still got a fair way to go. Since Higgins has had an article in HTT within the last few issues we have to assume he's serious in what he says about it, but claiming that it's better than most British fanzines is not the sort of thing that's going to do his critical credibility any favours. I suppose the fact that he said it was better than most rather than all British fanzines provides him with an escape-hatch of sorts but if the Novacon crop forms a reasonable cross-section of the fanzines we're currently producing over here -- and I think it does -- then HTT is most definitely not as good as most of them.

It should be noted that although HOLIER THAN THOU achieved Marty Cantor's fondest dream by appearing on the 1985 Hugo Awards Ballot, in the actual voting HTT placed dead last -- after "no award." -tw/

One fanzine that HOLIER THAN THOU is certainly inferior to is John

Jarrold's PREVERT, the thirteenth issue of which has a piece by Patrick Nielsen Hayden in which he once again says much the same things that so surprised Higgins at Easter. Entitled "Rough Mix," Patrick's column starts out reviewing US fanzines but quickly veers off into an examination of the differences between our two fandoms and why he thinks that...

"...the traditional positions of North American and British fandoms are, at long last, pretty definitely reversed. Fandom as we've always loved it best, and wanted it to be, only exists sporadically over here: its true home is Great Britain, with London as the most fannishly interesting and active city in the world. Congratulations, guys, you're it."

I doubt very much that Steve Higgins would agree with this since he seems surprised that Patrick, "...when asked to explain why he preferred British fandom, had more to say about fandom than fanzines. He complained about how American fandom has become fragmented as a result of its size. British fandom by comparison is unified and vital. If hordes of media fans and general fragmentation are what it takes to produce the sort of fanwriting coming out of the US these days, then let them come."

Patrick does indeed have more to say about fandom than about fanzines, but then he considers them more of a whole than Higgins does. Listing the best of the current US zines he comments that they, "...have their moments of brilliance, their points of vast amusement, and as literary efforts -- feats of Quality in writing and editing -- compare favorably with many a counterpart in the British Isles."

In other words they have what Higgins is looking for and is willing to have British fandom irrevocably altered to see more of, but this isn't enough for Patrick who complains that they "...never quite seem to take off and fly." No, he wants more:

"What's weirdly interesting and unique, and can compete for my attention with a good book any time, is fandom-the-network, fandom the densely-interwoven phenomenon of soap-opera, multiple-recomplicated references, up-to-the-minute gossip and all those other essential vitamins and nutrients. I rarely get this sense from even the best American fanzines. Give me something like STILL LIFE or NUTZ (neither one of which is utterly outstanding in terms of 'literary' quality) and all my little fannish cells are sated for days."

Fanzines are both a product and a reflection of fandom and to suppose that anything that changes the nature of British fandom by making it more fragmented is going to improve the writing in fanzines is to live in a dream world. Oh, sure, it's not inconceivable that it might produce a piece or two that was better-written but what would be the point? As D West said years ago:

"Good writing such a piece may be but if it is readily detachable from the web personalities and cross-references which give fanzines their unique character then it is doubtfully fanwriting at all."

Right. The whole point about fanzines is that they provide you with material you couldn't get elsewhere, with fanwriting. If it's only good writing you want then the libraries of the world are filled to the ceilings with material that should keep you happy for the rest of your life. Higgins is perfectly well aware of all this I'm sure, so for him to express surprise that Patrick should have more to say about fandom than about fanzines when asked about the latter is disingenuous, to say the least. Patrick knows that for fanwriting to flourish it has to do so within the context of a non-fragmented fandom, one not overrun by mediafans. And

even if you think, as Higgins does, that it's experiencing a low at the moment, a cohesive fandom still remains our best shot for the future.

An aside: Since penning the foregoing -- I'm a slow writer -- the latest HTT has arrived and, apart from being a distinct improvement over previous issues, it contains a piece by Eric Mayer. In this piece, which I'd heard about but hadn't read until now, he expounds his theories about that group of fans he terms "cafe society." Interestingly enough, he calls up the same D West quote I've used above, but unlike me he disapproves of it, and there's an awful temptation to respond to him -- but I won't. I'll let the preceeding stand as my response to Mayer since he doesn't deserve individual attention and, as anyone who followed last year's [1984; Rob wrote this in 1985/ unpleasantness will readily discern, his motives for writing this piece are as transparent as they are contemptible.

Leaving aside HTT (which doesn't really fall within the purview of this piece anyway) and looking again at PREVERT and STOMACH PUMP, it's interesting to compare the other material they carry. Apart from Patrick's "Rough Mix," the other articles in PREVERT #13 are Chris Evans' "The Science Fiction of Margaret Thatcher" and John Barfoot's "Playing the Electric Violin on Desolation Row." These are both excellent and my only complaint is that both are reprints. Well, sort of. The Evans piece is actually a transcript of the speech Chris gave at this year's Silicon in which he gave a very funny critical appraisal of the fiction our beloved fuhrer might have written had she been an SF writer ("...author of that classic novel of alien contact Sod Off, Frog-Features."). While I have no objection to anyone running transcripts of speeches, or of reprinting apa-pieces by writers of the calibre of John Barfoot, I question the wisdom of making what amounts to the bulk of an issue material that a fair percentage of your readership will have encountered before, something exacerbated in the case of the Evans piece by the fact that he gave the speech again at Novacon.

STOMACH PUMP #10 boasts a larger roster of articles than PREVERT but they're all shorter and, for the most part, less substantial. Not that lack of substance in any way impairs a good enough writer of course, as Nigel Richardson more than adequately proves with "Homily Grunts," one of those pieces people write when they can't think of anything to write about but only the best fanwriters can pull off -- and Richardson is one of our best. Then again, most of his fanwriting, even in fanzines like his own SWELLING TO MACULATE GIRAFFE (and no, I don't know what the title means) -- also distributed at Novacon -- or FOR PARANOIDS ONLY, has the same disjointed yet oddly coherent quality as here, so it's obviously the style of writing he's most comfortable with. More power to his elbow, I say. In many ways his writing resembles that of Dave Bridges in his pre-mystical phase and I fully expect him to pick up a Nova Award for it any year now.

Another of our best is D West, whose contribution took the form of a one-page comic strip called "Fan-zines In The-ory And In Prac-tice." Billed as the "New Noddy Fan Edition" of his magnum opus, it could be argued that this captures the essence of FITAIP and that everything else was just commentary. Read it for yourself and see if you agree that this is the best and funniest piece in the issue. By contrast, "Fake Fans Rule," by Michael Ashley (who seems to be pissed off with me for not sending him EPSILON 11, if the lettercolumn is to be believed) is a tedious ramble

tinged with the nihilism that was so fashionable in the late '70s, and editor Higgins' "Here Comes Everybody" is flat and lifeless. What makes this last so surprising is that Higgins proved he can do this sort of thing well with a gossip column in the previous issue that was lively and interesting where this was plain dull. I wonder what happened. Rounded out by an innocuous Tony Berry piece on insects and an intertaining vignette culled from her recent trip to Oz by Judith Hanna, STOMACH PUMP is on balance a good fanzine, but rather less successful than PREF- VERT, and I think the voters in this year's Nova Awards got them the right way round. For all the outside contributions are fine, though, there's a sour edge to Higgins' own stuff that makes you wonder if he actually enjoys doing a fanzine. Strange.

Other zines that came my way at Novacon were Lilian Edwards & Christina Lake's THIS NEVER HAPPENS, Jim Barker's HELMABOAB, MEXICON 2 THE FANZINE edited by Abi Frost (a fundraiser for the convention containing material by the committee members and selling for £1), and THE TRANSAT- LANTIC HEARING-AID, Dave Langford's report on his 1980 TAFF trip. Unfortunately, I don't have the space to give these the attention they deserve but all are good fanzines and should dispell the impression that while there may have been a drop in the numbers of fanzines coming out over here (debatable anyway) there has been an accompanying drop in the quality of fanwriting being produced. Langford's report is destined to be a classic, one of the works people are going to be reading years from now (though after reading it TAFF-winners Hansen and Carol were moved to say, "How the fuck are we going to follow that?") and even the slightest of these zines -- Barker's HELMABOAB -- is written in an easy and pleasant style and doesn't leave you feeling that you've wasted your time in reading it. Even so, I'd like to see fewer Autumn Harvests, fewer seasonal blooms, and a few more all year round hardy perennials to keep me going through the long hard months between conventions. That's what I'd prefer. But then, I'm in fandom for the long haul and if distribution of large numbers of fanzines at conventions is the way it's gonna be from here on in, then I guess I can learn to live with it. -rh

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE USA...: Fanzines do get handed out at some con- ventions, but not in a concerted fashion. This too is probably a sign of the fragmentation of fandom here. The unpleasantness of 1984 has had certain lasting effects, the primary one being yet more fragmentation. Those who believe that any lie in support of their cause is justified have formed their own self-righteous group -- and no longer send their fanzines to this address. Thus, I have seen neither the latest HTT, nor Mayer's denunciation of fannish fandom, a loss up with which I can easily put. The Seattle-New York axis dominates the fandom in which I participate, but it's been a while since the last fanzine from Seattle (Victor tells me Tom Weber has "some sort of big writing project" with Patrick, and that he, Victor, has been busy with his mundane life), and in New York the Nielsen Haydens seem to be simultaneously laboring over a huge IZZARD, the soon-to-be-finished TAFF report, and smaller projects like TAFFLUVIA and FLASH POINT.

Here in the National Capitol Area we've been busy putting together Corflu III ("The Fanzine Fans' Convention,") getting out three issues of THE DESK SET GAZETTE (not a convention-flier, but a fanzine: the best way to promote a fanzine fans' convention, as Corflu's founders recognized), and

missing Avedon's energetic presence. But our Production Associate, T. Hughes, BNF, has successfully degafiated and published the first issue of F~~UCK~~ THE TORIES, and that bodes well for us all.

Inasmuch as North America probably contains four to ten times the number of fans to be found in the British Isles, it is not surprising that Steve Higgins was able to find a number of American fans to admire as fan-writers: the law of averages sees to that. And it is very possible to get a NorthAm fanzine, of any quality at all, and find that it has its own "scene," its own group of regular participants, in-group jokes, and sense of community. To a British fan this "scene," although alien, might well appear to parallel the relatively coherent British fan scene; but the difference is that here, on this large continent, many fanzines have and exemplify their own individual scenes and fail to interact. What we have here is indeed fragmented: scores of non-interacting individual fan-scenes. It has been possible for the past ten years to become a legendary fan in one's own scene without being known at all outside that insular group. Thus, individual talents remain, for the most part, separated and apart, and fail to reinforce each other the way, say, Burbee, Laney, and Co. did in Los Angeles in the forties, Willis, Shaw, White and Harris did in Belfast & London in the fifties, and Kettle, Pickersgill, and Co. (Ratfandom) did in London in the seventies. Britain enjoys a considerable geographic advantage in this regard.

Can things -- will things -- change? Inevitably. We can only hope that change is in the direction of greater coherence. -tw

IMPORTANT CORRECTIONS Dept.: Dave Langford has written requesting an important correction. With those copies of CRANK #3 printed on the British side of the pond I distributed TAFFETA #2, a single-page newsheet produced primarily to inform British and European readers about the schedules for the forthcoming TAFF race (US readers should see TAFFLUVIA #2) and US readers will receive a copy of the TAFF Ballot with this issue/, that advertised Dave's report on his 1980 TAFF trip as being available from Rob Jackson for £2. But, as Dave points out:

"THE TRANSATLANTIC HEARING-AID is available from me (I have most of the copies, Rob Jackson only a few) at £2.25 including postage, or £2 for cafe society fans who accost me in person."

Much of the remainder of Dave's letter is concerned with the heinous goings-on detailed in the piece that follows, but before signing off he couldn't resist suggesting that a certain member of CRANK's crack editorial team should write out one thousand times, "As a fan artist I really ought to know there is no H in 'caricature'." (The thing is, I do know, I really do, and I'm at a loss to know why I spelt it wrong not once but twice last issue. In any event, this issue's Mal Ashworth Award for accuracy in fanzines goes to Mr. Langford.) -rh

SHOCK! HUGO SCANDAL! "I'm all for Justin Ackroyd's implied challenge to develop 101 Uses of a Hugo Award," writes a Mr. D. Langford of Reading, "but must respectfully give the thumbs-down to his mundane notion of weeding the garden with one. It has no cognitive dissonance. (But if witchetty grubs start swarming from my trophy's base, I'll know who to blame.) Back in 1979, when I was bolting together the Seacon awards, three other Things To Do With Hugos were discovered and

tested. The first, which was deeply crass, involved Leroy Kettle thrusting one between people's legs from behind and... perhaps we needn't go into detail. The second was chairman Peter Weston's notion of putting a Hugo on his mantelpiece, the innovation being that he didn't actually win it, but used his position of influence to override committee protests and sequester one of the spares. (No, I don't know whether he had it engraved Best Fanzine: SPECULATION.) My own contribution came when, as I ran off 5,271,009 fanzines for people to lose at Seacon, there was a loud disgusting noise and bits of the duplicator prolapsed. The technical details of my repair work, here mercifully suppressed, read rather like old 'Venus Equilateral' stories in ASTOUNDING. For six years afterwards I felt a glow of pride at owning one of the few duplicators in fandom to incorporate part of a Hugo...."

APALLING STORIES: I will admit to a twinge of envy when I read, last year, that Steven Spielberg would be making a TV series to be called "Amazing Stories."

"Why couldn't he have done that ten years ago?" I wondered uselessly to myself. But if AMAZING, the magazine, needed help ten years ago, it needs it all the more now, with sales still less than half what they were during my editorship.

"Now A TV Series," brag the covers of recent issues, but that proud boast was written before anyone had seen any of the television shows.

I watched the first three before giving up on them. By then, the formula was well established: cotton-candy stories with comic-book plots, unbelievable, implausible, and basically silly at best (stupid at worst). It's no wonder Spielberg didn't allow any advance screenings or critics' previews; when they appeared, the reviews were savage.

The first story was a piece of sentimental tripe about an old man who had missed his train seventy-five years ago, but now he's dying and it's a coming fer him. Nothing in the story made any sense at all -- not the reason the old man missed the first train, and not the reason for his grown son to build a house directly over where the tracks had been. But it sure was neat, you betcha, when that great steam locomotive came crashing through the house, tearing up the livingroom floor, and the old man climbed on board. But that was the whole -- and only -- point of the 30 minute show, and to get to it we had to wait through an agonizingly drawn out five minutes during which the train's light glowed outside the window, the house shook, and the old man's grandson (who is The Only One Who Believes The Old Man) ran around yelling, "It's coming! Mom! Dad! It's coming!" Mom and Dad had time to get up, brush their teeth, take showers, get dressed, and have a pleasant very-early-morning breakfast (well, I exaggerate, but only a little), while the kid bounced off the walls, the train hooted its whistle, and the house kept on shaking.

The second "Amazing Story" was worse: a cartoon in effect, about a highschool jerk who is -- get this! -- magnetized by a meteorite. Yup, all metallic objects, even aluminum hair-curlers, cling to him -- as if sewn to his clothes! Pretty shoddy stuff, right down to the special effects.

The next week "Amazing Stories" was preempted by a baseball game, but the week following the third Story was presented. This one stood a chance. The basic idea was intriguingly stfnal: a fifteen-year-old boy is fighting with Jim Bowie and Davey Crockett at the Alamo -- against the seige

of the Mexicans -- when he notices tourists wandering around, taking pictures and oblivious to the bullets and shells flying about. That's a decent opening premise.

But Spielberg -- who, I am becoming convinced, wouldn't know a good idea from a cliché, even if it bit him in the leg -- throws this, and several other Neat Ideas, away unexamined. Who are those tourists? How did they get there? Who cares? Not Spielberg. This is fantasy, see, and nothing needs to be explained. It becomes obvious that The Kid is the only one of the defenders of the Alamo (who were, you'll recall, wiped out to the last man) who can see the 20th Century tourists. Why? Who knows? Not Spielberg. It becomes equally obvious that the tourists don't interact with the defenders, and maybe can't even see them -- when The Kid yells at them to "Look out!" they don't react at all. If they can't see what's going on around them, why are they taking pictures of it? Who can tell? Not Spielberg.

It doesn't matter, because this doesn't turn out to be a time-travel story. It is, instead, the story of a Fool With A Mission. The Fool is The Kid, of course, and his Mission to to take a message to a general about how things are going. Well, when he escapes the Alamo, it turns out to be the Alamo Museum, in the middle of late-20th Century Houston. The Kid is loose on the streets of a modern city! Well, hell, he knows his mission, so he ignores all the weird futuristic stuff that surrounds him, runs from the police (who have no reason for chasing him in the first place), finds the descendent of the general he's seeking, and delivers the message. Taking one quick look at the fresh message, the man declares it "Authentic!" -- a genuine relic of one hundred years ago! The Kid returns to the Museum, goes inside, and the story is over. No explanations of any kind: pointless to the end.

I was left with the feeling that Spielberg may indeed be a wunderkind director, but as a creator of stories -- amazing or otherwise -- he's hopeless. One senses that in a less kind world he would have found a more appropriate niche: hacking out scripts for second-line Marvel comics.

And I can't help wondering if AMAZING will benefit at all. -tw

U.S. edition: QWERTYUIOPress

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