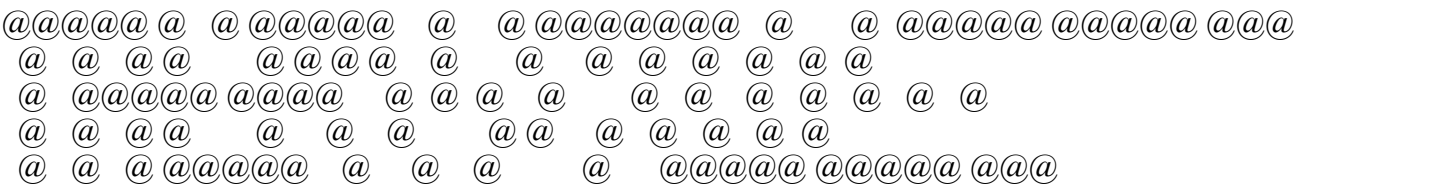

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 03/23/90 -- Vol. 8, No. 38

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
LZ meetings are in LZ 2R-158. MT meetings are in the cafeteria.

_D_A_T_E	_T_O_P_I_C
03/28	LZ: Book Swap
04/18	LZ: L. RON HUBBARD PRESENTS WRITERS OF THE FUTURE #5 (New authors)
05/09	LZ: Incarnations of Immortality Series, by Piers Anthony (Mythology as Science)
05/30	LZ: HOWLING MAD, by Peter David (The Lighter Side of Werewolves)

_D_A_T_E	_E_X_T_E_R_N_A_L _M_E_E_T_I_N_G_S/_C_O_N_V_E_N_T_I_O_N_S/_E_T_C.
04/08	Science Fiction Association of Bergen County: TBA (phone 201-933-2724 for details) (Saturday)
04/21	NJSFS New Jersey Science Fiction Society: Josepha Sherman (phone 201-432-5965 for details) (Saturday)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563 hocpa!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106 mtuxo!jrrt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 957-5619 mtgzx!leeper
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3D-225A 949-5866 homxa!tps
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-3346 lzfme!lfl
MT Librarian: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl

1. Lincroft, having no success in finding anything to read on such short notice, has decided that the time has come to give everyone a chance to read books that other people want to get rid of, so they're having a book swap. This is an opportunity to buy/sell/trade new and used books and other material. Bring in those paperbacks that have been collecting dust; those hardcovers you can bear to part with, even records or commemorative buttons.

There will be ongoing discussions about books, movies, and so forth, so your intellect, as well as your wallet, can be stimulated! [-ecl/jrrt]

2. The March/April 1990 issue of _F_i_l_m _C_o_m_m_e_n_t, Richard Corliss complains about the practice of reviewers associating a rating with a film. He bemoans the situation where in film reviews people think "shorter is sweeter. Today's busy consumers want just the clips, ma'am. And an opinion that can be codified in numbers, letters, or thumbs." For this situation he blames the practice of putting a rating on a film. I have to agree with him, at least in the first half. People do want shorter punchier summaries of films so that they can spend less time making a decision on whether to buy a film ticket or not.

And the same is true not just about film, but about nearly everything in life. When Mr. Corliss gets his car fixed, I wonder if he sits down and really takes the time to understand how his car works, what his alternatives in repair are, and how this particular repair will affect the environment. My suspicion is that some of this research work goes undone. When he goes to the doctor, does he research many of those same questions, but this time the machinery is his own body? How thoroughly does he research the drugs prescribed and their possible side effects? When he sits down to breakfast, how much does he know about the nutritional content of that breakfast? When he buys a house, does he know everything about the construction technique and the materials?

I have to say that I agree with Mr. Corliss in that I wish people spent more time reading about film. I do not feel it as strongly as he does because my hobby is his profession. If nobody reads my reviews I am no worse off. Actually, for all I know I may have only a few dozen readers out there and that possibility does not really bother me. But Mr. Corliss needs people to want to read film criticism to pay for that breakfast and that doctor visit that he probably has not so thoroughly researched. Like him, I do not have a lot of respect for the people who do not read film criticism and spend the time they save watching ALF instead.

But in truth I think that it is infeasible to do all the reading that by someone's estimation "one really should do." One could spend all one's time in enobling, enlightening pursuits and still have a need for a briefer summary of the virtues of a film that Mr. Corliss is likely to give.

Newspapers have long recognized that people vary a great deal in how much they are willing to read in a given article and have developed a technique of writing built on that observation. They call it the "pyramid" approach to writing, since wherever you slice a pyramid horizontally, what lies on top of the cut is still in the shape of a pyramid. In the pyramid writing style, you write the first sentence as if it is all the reader will have time for. It is a one-sentence news article. Then the next two sentences are written as if the reader is going to read just those three. Then the next three sentences are written as if they will mark the end

of what will be read. And so the articles goes, hanging more details and background on the main thrust of the article, which appeared at the beginning of the article.

Now this is a very stilted manner of writing. I intended to say that it is not really the way someone thinks about a subject, but on reflection it may well be close to how the mind really works. I guess in planning for this article I started realizing that I thought movie ratings were useful, then I thought about why I thought they were useful, then I thought about justifications for the reasons I thought they were useful. So even as I write this, I think I am deciding that the pyramid style is not so unnatural as I had originally thought. But what I did intend to say in its defense is that it is very utilitarian. It does a good job of allowing the reader to get just as much as the reader's time and interest permit.

Many of the reviews I write--probably too many--also fall into a fixed pattern much like the pyramid. The most compact piece of information is the rating. It may not be at the very top, but after reading one or two of my reviews, the reader knows where to look for it. Then there is the capsule, two to four sentences

summing up my opinion. Then there is the main body, which is usually structured in three paragraphs: background, plot, and quality of execution. It is not intended to be a very creative structure, but the reader knows where to look for what s/he wants to read. I do not expect the reviews I write to be literature; I want them to be useful for the widest possible range of readers' needs.

And it is in that vein that I wholeheartedly defend my own and other reviewers' practice of putting a rating on a film. Mr. Corliss, whose craft and profession is words, thinks that putting a rating on a film is reducing the film to a number. I have heard several other people express the same opinion. I think there are people who dislike numbers because they are impersonal. In a sense they are. Given any two different numbers, one s higher than the other. There is no room for equivocation. You cannot say that generally three is higher than two, but in some ways two is higher than three. Two is two, three is three, and in every way three is exactly one greater than two. I think some people find the definiteness of numbers off-putting. I, in fact, feel quite comfortable with numbers. I like their crisp definition and their lack of equivocation. But you have to take them for what they are, very precise positions in one very limited dimension.

In the case of a movie rating, I take all of my impressions of a film and decide how much on whole I liked a film, then I express that with a number. And there it is on paper in one or two printed characters, a very precise (and hopefully accurate--not the same thing) expression of my feelings toward the film. That is all I

can express in so little printed space. And for the amount of information those two characters convey I will pit it against any two characters that Richard Corliss has ever written about any film. I will go further and challenge anyone to find any two-character stretch in Shakespeare more expressive and containing more information. I make no apologies to Richard Corliss for including those two characters in my review. I am just sorry I run out of steam so fast because for those two characters cannot even come close to me for eloquence or information content.

3. 2BV!2B

Okay, so that's six characters. But Mark has to tell you what scale his number is on, so he needs at least that many characters as well. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzx!leeper

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.
--Goethe

PROMISES TO KEEP by George Bernau
Warner Books, 1989, ISBN 0-446-35605-0, $5.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

This is a parallel world novel masquerading as an alternate history novel.

Huh?

I'll explain. The back cover blurb reads, "November 22, 1963. Dallas. A time and place the world will never forget. An assassin's bullet strikes down the youthful, charismatic president of the United States. Miraculously, as a tearful nation prepares itself for the worst, the president survives." And the President is Irish, his wife is glamorous and interested in a Greek tycoon, his brother is the Attorney General, his Vice-President is an uncouth Texan, his (would-be) assassin is gunned down in the Dallas Police Station, etc., etc. But the President's name is John Trewlaney Cassidy, his wife is Suzanne, his brother is Tim, his Vice-President is Ransom W. Gardner, his would-be assassin is Arthur Allen Strode, and _h_i_s assassin is Leo Green. None of this is anywhere on the cover.

Now, an alternate history novel is based on the assumption that we are in our world, but something somewhere along the history line has changed. In the case of this novel, we are led to believe that everything up to November 22, 1963, was the same and that was when the divergence occurred. But that is not the case. _S_i_m_i_l_a_r things happened, but there does not appear to be a single split point that resulted in everyone having the same function but different names. Nor is it clear why this is the case, unless Bernau is worried about getting sued. (But even then, I doubt that a simple name change would get him off the hook.) No, so far as I could tell, the main function of the name change was to confuse the reader. At least I found myself constantly saying, "Rance Gardner? Oh, yes, the Lyndon Johnson character." This does not strike me as the most effective way to write a book. I wonder if Bernau is unfamiliar with the whole idea of alternate histories and didn't realize he didn't have to change the names. Or maybe he thought his readers would be confused.

"Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?"

Normally an alternate history is devoted in large part to figuring out what would have happened if event X had turned out differently. But this novel can't really ask the question, "What if Kennedy had survived?" since it isn't Kennedy. Oh, there is some examination of how his survival might have changed the course of our involvement in the Vietnam War, though most of the changes there are due to subsequent events rather than anything inherent in Kennedy's, I mean Cassidy's

personality. Instead, most the novel is devoted to tracking down the real brains behind the assassination attempt and the reasons for it. The book is far more a look at what if Bernau's ideas about the motivation of the attempt were true, not nearly as interesting as "What if Kennedy had survived?" And of course, since this is marketed as mainstream, there is the usual amount of explicit sex and violence.

As an adventure-thriller, _P_r_o_m_i_s_e_s _t_o _K_e_e_p is passable, even good. As a reasonable explanation to the assassination, it is unconvincing (though there is no indication that Bernau intends his explanation to be taken seriously in the real world). As an alternate history it is disappointing.

(It is noted on the copyright page that the paperback edition has been abridged by the author. It is still 671 pages long.)

THE HANDMAID'S TALE
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: _T_h_e _H_a_n_d_m_a_i_d'_s _T_a_l_e preaches to the choir in a rather formulaic look at a dismal possible (if unlikely) future where women have no rights. Robert Duvall's worst performance in memory highlights one of the less convincing arguments for feminism. Rating: low 0.

Back in the 1960s there were a number of science fiction films about horrible repressive futures. These films got their vision of the future by a fairly simple turn-the-crank formula: pick a current hot concern; imagine a society in which nobody or almost nobody has this concern. Now what will society be like with nobody worried about this issue? Pretty ugly, right? These films were all pretty much logical descendents of Orwell's novel _ 1_ 9_ 8_ 4, but that did it back when it was still original. Films along these lines include _ S_ o_ y_ l_ e_ n_ t _ G_ r_ e_ e_ n, _ Z._ P._ G., _ F_ a_ h_ r_ e_ n_ h_ e_ i_ t _ 4_ 5_ 1, and _ T_ h_ e _ L_ a_ s_ t _ C_ h_ i_ l_ d, and I would also include _ S_ i_ l_ e_ n_ t _ R_ u_ n_ n_ i_ n_ g. Eventually the public started finding these exaggerated dystopic futures too dreary, so the ones without much action died out and the ones with more action became mindless films such as _ T_ h_ e _ L_ a_ s_ t _ C_ h_ a_ s_ e and finally _ M_ a_ d _ M_ a_ x. As a literary style it did not go away and the occasional dystopic film like _ B_ r_ a_ z_ i_ l was still made on slightly more

abstract issues such as bureaucracy. This year the dystopic science fiction film is represented by _ T_ h_ e _ H_ a_ n_ d_ m_ a_ i_ d'_ s _ T_ a_ l_ e, about a future brought about by apathy to feminist issues.

It has been said that repressive views towards women see them as madonnas or whores. In this film, each woman is forced into the roles of whore, servant, or madonna, wearing uniforms of red, white, or blue, respectively. 99% of the women were left infertile after the plague. If they can afford it, these women become the madonnas; if not, they are servants. Those who are fertile become the handmaids. Their job is to be surrogate childbearers for the madonnas. The process by which they come to bear children starts by sending them to indoctrination centers which use Orwellian mind control techniques, but which seem to be curiously ineffective at winning hearts and minds. From there they are farmed out to homes where first they are ritually read the Biblical story of infertile Rachel getting a child with the help of a handmaid. After that, they are impregnated in a curious ritual involved lying between the legs of one of the madonnas while her husband does the dirty deed.

The film opens with Kate (played by Natasha Richardson), her husband, and her daughter trying to flee across the border. Her husband is killed and she does not know what happened to her daughter. After the first shock, all this she takes with a calm regret. This means that

between Margaret Atwood's book and Harold Pinter's screenplay somebody did not know how humans behave. The film follows Kate through her indoctrination into the society of handmaids and her assignment to the household of callous, selfish evangelist Serena Joy (played by Faye Dunaway) and her flat, cardboard husband, the Commander. This role is quite a departure for Robert Duvall, who usually acts in his films. The only film that Duvall was in but contributed less to was _ I_ n_ v_ a_ s_ i_ o_ n _ o_ f _ t_ h_ e _ B_ o_ d_ y _ S_ n_ a_ t_ c_ h_ e_ r_ s. To director Volker Schlondo "rff does the dubious honor of being the only director ever to wring an uninteresting performance from Duvall.

While the film was colorful, with lots of costumes, in many ways the production values were poor. In a scene where the main character is

holding yarn, she has two strands when seen from the front and at least six seen an instant later from the back. Also at one point a woman gives birth to a surprisingly clean six-month-old baby. And speaking of such scenes, for a film taking a stand against the exploitation of women, this film has more than its share of half-naked and scantily clad women and most of the nudity is gratuitous.

Director Schlondo "rff used to direct ABC "After-School Specials" and his style does not seem to have gotten any more subtle. I rate this film a low 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. Unless you embrace any film on a feminist theme, I do not recommend _ T_ h_ e _ H_ a_ n_ d_ m_ a_ i_ d'_ s _ T_ a_ l_ e.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE by Margaret Atwood

Fawcett Crest, 1986 (1985c), $4.95.
A book review with film comment by Evelyn C. Leeper

[This first part of this was originally printed in the April 10, 1987 MT VOID.]

They say that politics make strange bedfellows, and they point to the feminists and the fundamentalists marching side-by-side to "take back the night" and punish all those horrible, evil pornographers. Well, Margaret Atwood has brought new meaning to that cliche of bedfellows. In a world where the fertility rate has been drastically reduced because of pollution and who knows what other evils, the Gileadean solution is that of Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah. And this is made palatable by couching it as the solution that both the anti-pornography ("AP") fundamentalists and the AP feminists have been promoting for years. The AP fundamentalists get the strict morality, the elimination of divorce, the return of woman to her role as keeper of the home. The AP feminists get the banning of pornography, the death penalty for rape, and the elimination of violence against women. So why do I have the feeling that none of those promoting these goals today would actually want the reality Atwood gives us?

Actually one of the characters makes the point best. There are two kinds of freedom, she says, freedom to and freedom from. Both the AP feminists and the AP fundamentalists have been emphasizing the freedom from: freedom from fear, freedom from violence, freedom from anything that offends, etc. (Sounds a bit like Franklin Roosevelt, doesn't it? But I digress.) They have forgotten that freedom from and freedom to have to balance out: an increase in one is only achieved by a decrease in the other. Or, as Henry Drummond says in _I_n_h_e_r_i_t_ _t_h_e_ W_i_n_d, "Yes, you can learn to fly. But the birds will lose their wonder, and the clouds will smell of gasoline." In the case of _T_h_e_ H_a_n_d_m_a_i_d's_ T_a_l_e, the freedom from fear et al has been achieved by giving up the freedom to live as one chooses, to work in a profession, to have financial independence, to have an identity of one's own. The handmaids are "Ofglen" or "Offred"--which Atwood mislabels as patronymics--having given up their own names when they were recruited. The AP fundamentalists and the AP feminists have been so busy joining forces on what they want everyone to have freedom from that they have overlooked the fact that they disagree on what people should have freedom to. If they achieve their goals they may discover that the world they have made is not to their liking after all.

The other interesting point about the society that Atwood portrays is that it is very similar to another science fictional society--that of John Norman's "Gor" series. Bizarre though this sounds, let's examine the two. Atwood describes women's roles as being one of five types:

Marthas, Handmaidens, Wives, Aunts, or Colonists. The Marthas do the cooking and cleaning; they are the equivalent of Norman's state slaves. Both dress in drab colors and do the menial work. The Handmaidens provide procreation (and sex); they are the equivalent of Norman's pleasure slaves. Both dress in red. The Wives are the equivalent of Norman's free companions--honored and respected, living their lives on a pedestal. The Aunts are the equivalent of the slaves who train the pleasure slaves (I don't recall if there is a specific term for them). The Colonists have no direct parallel, though a disobedient slave on Gor does end up doing some sort of unpleasant/dangerous work. While it's true that these roles are not unpredictable, the parallels between Gilead and Gor are thought-provoking, to say the least. Add to this that Atwood, as part of the main character's description of her indoctrination, includes graphic descriptions of violent sex, and one wonders if those who would ban Norman's books would do the same to _ T_ h_ e _ H_ a_ n_ d_ m_ a_ i_ d'_ s _ T_ a_ l_ e. Consider the following excerpt from a proposed anti-pornography ordinance: "Pornography is the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following: ... women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities...." (Note that the portrayal does not have to be favorable.) My reading of this is that _ T_ h_ e _ H_ a_ n_ d_ m_ a_ i_ d'_ s _ T_ a_ l_ e would be considered pornographic by this definition. All this indicates, of course, is that this definition is crap.

I haven't said much about the book itself. That's because the plot itself is not that original, or enthralling, or amazing. It's what the book makes you think about that counts. Atwood makes you think about what can lead to this society and, conversely, what the actions and attitudes of today can lead to. It doesn't bear multiple readings the way a novel like _ L_ a_ s_ t _ a_ n_ d _ F_ i_ r_ s_ t _ M_ e_ n does. It's not a masterpiece of literary style. But the thoughts it generates will stay with you long after the details of the book itself have been forgotten.

[Addendum after seeing the film: In general, the film remained true to the novel, but some important bits were only hinted at or left out entirely. In the film we see all the shops are labeled by icons rather than lettered signs; in the novel we discover this is because women are forbidden to read and even the signs were considered too much temptation. This makes the Scrabble game take on a whole new level of meaning as well. In the movie, everything is bar coded--is someone

claiming that bar codes are evil or what? The movie also drops all references to the fate of the Jews in Gilead, but uses--rather unsubtly--a scene in which women who fail their fertility test are first directed into a separate line from those who pass and then are put in a cattle-car to transport them to the "Colonies" for "resettlement." There are other bits, important to the novel, that are dropped entirely in the film, and the film suffers from it.]

Boskone 27
(Part 3)
Con report by Evelyn C. Leeper and Mark R. Leeper

_ S_ c_ r_ e_ a_ m_ i_ n_ g _ Q_ u_ e_ e_ n_ s: _ G_ a_ y _ C_ h_ a_ r_ a_ c_ t_ e_ r_ s _ a_ n_ d _ T_ h_ e_ m_ e_ s _ i_ n _ H_ o_ r_ r_ o_ r
Saturday, midnight
Franklin Hummel (mod), John Dumas, Christopher Fahy, Stephen Owens

The panel started by saying that there seemed to be a dearth of gay characters (and lesbian characters--in this article I will use the word gay as applying to both sexes) in horror fiction. However, there seemed to be a split between the 10%-ers and the 40%-ers, i.e., those who said that 10% of the population is gay, and those who said 40% is. The discrepancy is due to imprecise definitions: according to Kinsey 10% of the population are entirely gay (6 on the Kinsey scale), but 40% are gay or bisexual (4 through 6 on the scale, I think). At any rate, one doesn't find even 10% in horror fiction, so perhaps this is a moot point.

There was acknowledgement that there are a lot of characters in horror fiction whose sexual orientation is not known. (Quick, how many Jewish characters are there in horror fiction? Not many that you can name, yet how often can you tell _ a_ n_ y_ t_ h_ i_ n_ g about a character's religion?) From the audience, Kate Pott said that several recent horror novels seem to deal more with the annihilation of sexuality than of any particular orientation (Iain Banks's _ W_ a_ s_ p _ F_ a_ c_ t_ o_ r_ y and Dean R. Koontz's _ W_ h_ i_ s_ p_ e_ r_ s).

Some interesting problems arise if you do have gay characters in horror fiction. Sending a succubus to tempt a gay man seems as if it could have comic possibilities (I keep hearing _ T_ h_ e _ F_ e_ a_ r_ l_ e_ s_ s _ V_ a_ m_ p_ i_ r_ e _ K_ i_ l_ l_ e_ r_ s' "Oy, do you have the wrong vampire!"), and an incubus might get an unexpected reaction from a lesbian. There was, in fact, discussion of whether succubi and incubi are merely manifestations of hermaphroditic beings and hence a succubi visiting a gay man would appear as an incubus. At any rate, there is certainly enough material for several stories here.

Of course, it was recognized that having gay characters in horror fiction has its own pitfalls. If you make the gay character the villain, you run the risk of being accused of being anti-gay (or homophobic, depending on the critic's word preference). On the other hand, making the gay character the victim could be construed as "gay-bashing," so the author must walk a fine line. The author is on much firmer ground, of course, if s/he makes the gayness of the victim irrelevant to his or her victimhood, rather than the reason for it. Another way out of this dilemma is to set the entire story in the gay community; then rather than have to decide which characters are gay, just make them all gay! (Oh, I suppose you could throw in a token heterosexual or two if you felt obliged.)

Several examples of horror fiction having gay characters were cited: Tom Reamy's "San Diego Lightfoot Sue," some of Stephen King's works, and Wilde's _ T_ h_ e _ P_ i_ c_ t_ u_ r_ e _ o_ f _ D_ o_ r_ i_ a_ n _ G_ r_ a_ y (though the last is considerably subtler than the other two). Jeffrey McMahan's _ S_ o_ m_ e_ w_ h_ e_ r_ e _ i_ n _ t_ h_ e _ N_ i_ g_ h_ t is an entire anthology of gay horror fiction. In films, one finds several in which gender-switching is used: _ F_ r_ a_ n_ k_ e_ n_ s_ t_ e_ i_ n _ C_ r_ e_ a_ t_ e_ d _ W_ o_ m_ a_ n and _ D_ o_ c_ t_ o_ r _ J_ e_ k_ y_ l_ l _ a_ n_ d _ S_ i_ s_ t_ e_ r _ H_ y_ d_ e are perhaps the best known.

Sunday Morning

On the way in, the conversation turned to Esotericon, a convention

focused on religion and the occult in science fiction and fantasy. Barbara (or Kate, I forget which) said that Katherine Kurtz had founded a Michaelean order, which Mark heard has a "microwave" order. So the next thing we knew, Mark and Kate were chanting the new mantra of the order, "A-man-a" (or alternatively, "I-wan-na A-man-a"). This was followed by the singing (to the tune of the guards' song in _T_h_e _W_i_z_a_r_d _o_f _O_z) "A ne-o is com-ing!" and the decision to found "Noreascon First Fandom," consisting of those people who attended Noreascon 1. (Well, it's limited to only about 2100 that way.)

Kaffee Klatch
Sunday, 11:00 AM
mod

I was scheduled for a "Kaffee Klatch" Sunday morning at either 9:30 AM or 11:00 AM, depending on what newsletter you read. Since this event was not listed on the schedule of my events that I was handed, I was rather confused, especially since hardly anyone knew where it was supposed to be either. When I showed up at 11 AM the previous klatch was just breaking up, and no one new showed up for mine (the other two official participants had canceled out, and now that there were other things to do in terms of programming, no one had enough interest to drop in). I did spend about a half-hour talking to Bill Davidsen about electronic fandom, armor, weapons at conventions, Shakespearean plays, and a whole raft of other things I've forgotten.

_T_h_e _S_p_h_e_r_i_c_a_l _C_o_w: _H_o_w _S_F _A_p_p_r_o_a_c_h_e_s _I_d_e_a_s
Sunday, noon
Katherine Kramer (mod), Lisa Barnett, John R. Douglas, Alex Jablokov
[written by Mark R. Leeper]

Katherine Kramer moderated this panel which took its name from an article she published in _T_h_e _N_e_w _Y_o_r_k _R_e_v_i_e_w _o_f _S_c_i_e_n_c_e _F_i_c_t_i_o_n. In that, she tells the story of a physicist who finds himself out of work and has to turn to dairy farming. Eventually he feels he wants to share his discoveries with other dairy farmers and at the grange one day he gives a lecture which starts, "Consider a spherical cow of uniform density...." Kramer opened the discussion by saying that the science fiction writer must explain the foundations of his/her science to

readers "who do not like equations."

Alex Jablokov said that science fiction is like having a laboratory. You can take a single idea and expand on it, building a whole world around it. The conversation shifted to how some writers are more careful than others. Kramer said that world-building is the most obvious application of scientific principles to a story and certainly some authors are more careful than others in their world-building. The physics of the world is usually what is best thought out. In some senses this is because the physics is comprehensible and not too difficult to explain. Biological systems are more complex than physical systems. The biology is much harder to get consistent and accurate than is the physics. Getting the physics right and then emphasizing that in the story is essentially like looking for your keys in the light. John Douglas said that emphasizing physics is the sort of thing Hal Clement does well. "Clement writes Clement stories." But there are other things to look for in science fiction. Lisa Barnett said that the full job of building the world, getting the science and the sociology right, is not easy and some people are much better at it than others.

Kramer said that at a world-building panel she attended, she found it interesting to ask writers what disciplines they are _ n_ o_ t interested in world-building. This is less obvious and more telling than asking what disciplines they _ w_ e_ r_ e interested in. Some authors would say things like they tend to ignore the economics of the planet. Others would ignore the history. However, Kramer feels that dealing with a lot of data on broad subjects about her planets is what she calls "vulgar." Contemporary fiction tends to concentrate on small subtle things about human relationships. Earthquakes and nuclear wars are vulgar. If you focus in on the small subtle behavior of a few individuals, you lose a lot of data outside your field of view.

Jablokov went on to talk about how scientific imagery is hard for people to assimilate. Nonetheless, people do seem to use it, even in everyday life to explain things that are simpler. He talked about someone who in breaking up with someone else used the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle to explain his emotions. Jablokov said you don't use Heisenberg to explain something from life; you are supposed to use familiar situations from life to make things like physics more comprehensible.

Douglas suggested that people think that they understand physics and they perhaps know they do not understand society and emotions.

Jablokov told an anecdote where he himself used scientific imagery to explain something simple. A friend refused to open a piece of mail she knew would be containing a bill that she could not currently afford to pay. He told her that it had become Schroedinger's Bill [Bill the Cat? -ecl]. It was not currently a bill but would become one when she opened the envelope and the waveform collapsed. He then returned to the discussion. People use the metaphor of physics for things like emotion

because they feel physics is comprehensible.

Kramer digressed on the subject of emotion and physics to talk about Asimov's "Nightfall," which she feels she has come to a new understanding about with the interpretation that craziness is something that happens at night, not in the light of day. "Nightfall" is about a world that has deferred its craziness for a very long time and is soon to release all that craziness in a very short time.

The discussion shifted to whether it was possible to have fully developed characters and to develop the ideas at the same time. Kramer repeated a quote that Robinson Crusoe is the most interesting boring man she had ever read about. It is the situation that is interesting, not the man. If all characters are rounded and expanded, they will not all "fit in the box."

From here a comment from the audience about the interconnection of the idea and the style led to a discussion of the various ways to express ideas with style. One style discussed was the "scientific log." The example given was _ F_ l_ o_ w_ e_ r_ s _ f_ o_ r _ A_ l_ g_ e_ r_ n_ o_ n by Daniel Keyes, certainly a good choice. One very common example that was not mentioned but perhaps should have been is the two "Star Trek" television series, which was supposedly dramatizations of the Captain's Log. Kramer mentioned a story that packed all its scientific detail into terse little fact-filled sentences. "She took the lab mouse. She injected it with 33 cc's of [some poison]. She put the mouse in a plastic bag." Jablokov parodied this style with "I have this idea. I am going to write it with my rolling-ball pen. ..." Kramer talked about a humorous story that she read called "Stop Evolution in Its Tracks." She used this as an example that the science does not even have to make sense. One scene has as a proof that evolution was wrong someone with a film of a man getting into a really realistic gorilla suit. We are not descended from apes because all apes are just men in suits.

From the audience David Hartwell suggested that your look at the future can be distorted by the present. What if the political rate of change continues at the rate it has gone over the past few months? Another part of the audience asked, what if they gave I.Q. tests for politicians? Jablokov suggested they would cheat to lower their scores

so they would pass. Kramer said there is an active disdain for writers who write optimistic futures. Readers seem to think if you think things will work out, you are stupid.

One of the audience members asked how important internal consistency is to the panelists. With the hour running out, only Kramer had a chance to answer, saying that even in fantasy that the consistency was very important. In science fiction, you make a possible assertion and see the reasonable things that follow from it. Fantasy allows you to make an impossible assertion, but you still want to see reasonable things to follow from it.

_B_o_o_k_S_t_o_r_e_P_a_n_e_l:_H_o_w_T_o_L_e_t_Y_o_u_r_C_h_i_l_d_r_e_n_G_o

Sunday, noon

Glen Cook (mod), Brian Perry, Joe Siclari, Dick Spelman, Tyler Stuart

First the panelists introduced themselves and gave their credentials. Glen Cook sells paperback collectibles, Brian Perry runs a specialty store called Fat Cat Books, and Tyler Stuart has a specialty store called Pandemonium in Harvard Square (the same storefront where Science Fantasy Bookstore used to be). Dick Spelman and Joe Siclari sell new books, the former only at conventions, the latter in a speciality store in Boca Raton.

Those who dealt in new books felt that they would prefer a deeper discount with a no-returns policy (though the discount would have to be at least 60% to make it worthwhile, and they did say that they wouldn't be able to carry some authors without a full returns policy). Spelman said that two-thirds of his sales came from books released within the last three months, so keeping a large backlist of books rather than returning them might not be cost-effective.

Spelman says one reason that specialty dealers survive is that they are known to have all the books in a series when the last one arrives, and many buyers will go to them knowing they can buy the whole series, rather than picking up volume three in B. Dalton and hoping to find one and two elsewhere. Another feature of the specialty stores is that they

sell knowledge and service--they can tell you what other books are in a given series and where on the shelf they are, not just, "Oh, back there somewhere there may be another Moorcock."

The dealers in new books said that Greg Ketter seems to be the major specialty dealer/wholesaler who deals with all the various publishers and supplies the smaller dealers who want a single point of contact. Witter's F&SF Book Company is still around but much scaled back, and doesn't carry several of the major publishers. They mentioned several distributors they work with as well: Ingrams, Baker and Taylor, and the BookSource.

As far as used books, Cook says that his problem is that he pays too much for used books and sells them too cheaply (my kind of dealer!). He mentioned Bachman and Koontz as two authors whose older books have appreciated considerably in value. The panelists thought Lloyd Curry's catalogs were a good way to price used books, but one must buy from Curry to get them regularly.

Those who sold at conventions bemoaned the fact that the profit margin wasn't higher and that there was too much competition from too many other book dealers, but no one cited figures on just how much they made in a weekend. Sales apparently vary more by region than by convention, with the Northeast being the strongest in hardcovers, the Midwest heavy in paperback sales, and the South fairly soft all over.

The dealers had some problems with advertising. Traditional media are expensive and not well-targeted. College newspapers are considered a good medium. Perry said that he uses local advertising, but that it's important to spread it out over the whole year, not just a one-time blitz.

Stuart was the newcomer to this group and impressed me the least. First of all, he called what he carried "sci-fi" and while one shouldn't condemn him for that alone, he seemed to have some other basic misunderstandings. He isn't sure that the Boston area can support a science fiction specialty shop--the San Francisco-Berkeley area supports four. He says his shop (at 500 square feet) is too small--the Science Fiction Shop in New York for years got by on much less (they have moved within the last two months to bigger quarters). And his whole attitude

seemed to be more of someone who deals in items such as videotapes, posters, buttons, and mass-media stuff, than of a specialty science fiction dealer. (Forbidden Planet gives off some of this also, but the sheer volume of their book stock helps them overcome the mass of everything else they sell.)

_ S_ e_ c_ r_ e_ t_ s _ o_ f _ N_ o_ r_ e_ a_ s_ c_ o_ n _ I_ I_ I: _ Y_ o_ u _ m_ e_ a_ n _ w_ e _ h_ a_ v_ e _ t_ o _ w_ a_ i_ t a a a an n n no o o ot t t th h h he e e er r r r_ n_ i_ n_ e _ y_ e_ a_ r_ s?

Sunday, 1:30 PM

Priscilla Olson (mod), Rick Katze, Teresa Neilsen-Hayden, Mark Olson, Joe Siclari

This was pretty much a glorified (and un-billed) collating session for the last issue of _ T_ h_ e _ M_ a_ d _ 3 _ P_ a_ r_ t_ y, but there was some discussion of Noreascon 3. One of the things Mark Olson emphasized was the need for a staging area before and after the convention--and traditional storage rental places probably won't suffice, because they're often not open nights and weekends when most of the work is being done.

The whole question of facilities was raised. The three-year lead time is too long for convention planning itself, but too short in terms of getting good facility space. The decision to use as much space as possible for Noreascon 3, including the large ConCourse instead of a con suite, was brought about by the "Boskone from Hell" (Boskone 24), in which overcrowding and anonymity led to most of the problems. The anonymity part led to the decision to require people's real names to be on their badges, and for the badges to be readable from a distance. It turned out, of course, that many fans liked this for a totally different reason--it meant they could manage to figure out whom they were talking to without having to "peer" at the badge.

Regarding the Hugos, Mark Olson said that at least one-third of the WSFS business meeting is spent discussing how the Hugos need to be revised, without ever achieving a consensus on how to do it. (This is following the one-third time spent on the question of worldcon rotation--also equally undecided.)

While there was some interesting discussion, the constant noise of stapling and people moving large quantities of fanzines around was very distracting. In the future, collations should be billed as such and not disguised as panels.

B o s k o n e: C h a n g e s o f t h e L a s t T h r e e Y e a r s

Sunday, 2:30 PM

Elisabeth Carey (mod), Jim Mann, Ben Yalow

Well, by now everyone in fandom (or at least everyone who cares) knows about the infamous "Boskone from Hell" (Boskone 24), which led to Boskone being thrown out of Boston. 4200 people jammed into the Sheraton Boston and half of them tried to have a science fiction convention while half of them wanted a wild party weekend. The result was that Boskone moved to Springfield, scaled down considerably (1400 two years ago, 1000 this year), and "focused" itself. This led to much unhappiness among fans, since once you offer something (costuming, films, whatever) it's hard to take it away. But most of the Boskone planners realized that they were working to produce conventions that they didn't want to attend and decided to stop.

The panelists seemed very defensive (perhaps rightfully so) about charges that they didn't like media or costuming. Ben Yalow pointed out that he is the treasurer of one of the larger New York "Star Trek" conventions, which would seem to indicate he had some interest in media. (Given the reputation of "Star Trek" conventions, this may have been a poor choice on his part--many are run based more on the profit motive than for love of the subject.) Also, Boskone has not discontinued films, but tries to concentrate more on hard-to-find media. Of course, one man's hard-to-find is another man's glut, and one audience member suggested Mike Jittlov's "Wizard of Speed and Time" as "hard-to-find." (I figure I've seen it at conventions at least a dozen times, and could easily have seen it a hundred.)

Yalow also said that Suford Lewis was doing costumes thirty years ago. Someone from the audience said, "Yes, but will she thank you for saying that?" to which Yalow replied, "No, make that twenty."

The other part of Boskone that changed was the parties. It used to be that Boskone actively helped parties, providing soda and munchies. Now they don't do that, and they require all open parties be non-alcoholic.

There was some discussion about the art show, which Boskone did not scale down. Is the art show too small? Too expensive? Too spotty in quality? Well, the answer to all of these is probably yes, but what can you do? The room is as full as they can make it and still meet fire codes, etc., and there is no better room. The prices are set by the artists. As for the poor quality, the artists buy the hanging space--there is no judging to be allowed in. (And if the quality goes up, I'm sure the average price will go up also.) Another complaint was what I

observed earlier: that the paintings are frequently marked "NFS" ("Not For Sale") and serve mostly as advertisements for the print shop.

_B_o_s_k_o_n_e_2_7_F_e_e_d_b_a_c_k_S_e_s_s_i_o_n

Sunday, 3:30 PM
Mike DiGenio, Rick Katze

This was a continuation of the last panel, which as you could tell, had drifted into a gripe session by the end. (Calling this a feedback session is a clever ploy to attempt to get some favorable comments as well.) There were not many gripes. I had a small complaint about the poor signs in the mall area showing the path between hotels. The dealers said that the decreased attendance meant decreased sales. People thought the pocket program was very good, containing accurate panel descriptions as well as maps. Electronic addresses for the convention (or various committee members) was suggested. Arranging the rooms so that the doors were always at the back rather than at the front, even if this meant re-arranging chairs for the Guest of Honor Speech, was strongly suggested.

One interesting complaint was that there were not enough "stars" (big-name authors and artists). Given that most regional conventions are lucky if they get a dozen big-name authors and artists, and Boskone had easily five times that number, I'm not sure what this person wanted.

One notable point is that the audience offered as many solutions as they offered complaints. This made this a constructive session rather than a brick-throwing time.

Miscellaneous

One sign of the times was the availability on the freebie tables of literature on AIDS and free condoms.

Last year, I predicted this year's Boskone would be under 1000 people. That turned out to be just about right.

Next year for Boskone 28 (February 15-17, 1991) the Guest of Honor is Mike Resnick.