

business. Well, presumably for something biological to take place, the participants still will be need to be physically together. But often the biological exchange is not really the intended purpose of such proceedings. (Am I saying things explicitly enough to get the point across, but not to get us shut down?) I guess you could

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think of it as a form of telecommuting. Cyber SM is looking at combining data communications, virtual reality, and special electronic suits to see if they can give a whole new meaning to "Reach out and touch someone." If you think this sounds too Buck Rogers even for Buck Rogers, dig out the April 1994 issue of W_o_r_l_d P_r_e_s_s R_e_v_i_e_w and read this reprint from L_i_b_e_r_a_t_i_o_n, a Paris magazine.

The initial models of the system are designed mostly for kinky sorts of things. Pain has always been easier to create than what is generally thought to be pleasant feelings. The participants can see virtual images of each other and can direct painful electrical shocks to specific locations. I guess for some tastes, that seems pretty nifty. But this is clearly a technology only in its infancy. It sounds like right now it is more like a computerized version of going after your enemy with paint guns. But the innovators think that it will only be a matter of time before they can make it to market with something a little more subtle. But, of course, the thing to do is make it to market with what you have, then get the capital to develop something to hit a broader market. So the first step is the S&M suit. More thoughts on this next week. (I bet you just can't wait!)

2. Lunacon '94 (part 3 of 3) (an abbreviated con report by Evelyn C. Leeper):

A_r_e_S_F_R_e_a_d_e_r_s_a_s_L_i_t_e_r_a_t_e_a_s_W_e_T_h_i_n_k?

Saturday, 4PM

John Hertz (mod), Moshe Feder, Michael Kandel,
Evelyn C. Leeper, Darrell Schweitzer

[Thanks to Mark, who took notes for me for this panel.]

Hertz started by asking the panelists each to say something useful about themselves. His "something useful" was a handout of excerpts from classics which seemed to be somewhat random. He said audience members might or might not have run into them (well, that covers all the possibilities, I guess). (The handouts included excerpts from Rebecca West's B_l_a_c_k_L_a_m_b_a_n_d_G_r_e_y_F_a_l_c_o_n, Thucydides' P_e_l_o_p_o_n_n_e_s_i_a_n_W_a_r, Samuel Johnson's "Preface to the W_o_r_k_s_o_f_S_h_a_k_e_s_p_e_a_r_e," Maimonides' G_u_i_d_e_o_f_t_h_e_P_e_r_p_l_e_x_e_d, and Dante's D_i_v_i_n_e_C_o_m_e_d_y ("Purgatorio").) Actually, Hertz also said that he was an editor and discovered that he was not literate. (If you're wondering exactly what "literate" means, that was never clearly defined.)

I said that I wrote book reviews, convention reports, and trip logs, mostly on the Internet but also in such fanzines as L_a_n'_s

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L_a_n_t_e_r_n, P_h_l_o_g_i_s_t_o_n, C_y_b_e_r_s_p_a_c_e_V_a_n_g_u_a_r_d, and A_l_t_e_r_n_a_t_e_W_o_r_l_d_s. In

an attempt to get (more) literate, I am currently reading the novels of the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens (as well as lots of other stuff). My observation was that I never liked the classics they assigned in school (though I often liked all the other books by the same authors), and thought that might be because they always expected you to remember all the details of the novel ("What color was Jim's coat when he went to Mary's house?").

I also related how when I read Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's I_n_f_e_r_n_o and mentioned to another fan that I liked the original better, the other fan asked, "Oh, you mean the magazine version?"

This, I said, was when I realized that at least some fans were illiterate. But not all fans--B_a_b_y_l_o_n_5 has a lot of literary references, including Tennyson's I_d_y_l_l_s_o_f_t_h_e_K_i_n_g and Mark Twain's "War Prayer"--so there was hope for the future. Maybe this will get fans reading Tennyson and Twain.

Schweitzer said he hadn't really noticed the literary references but he did note that they mentioned the space liner Asimov. I said that there was a lot of poetry recited or heard throughout the first few shows. Schweitzer thought that fans wouldn't mind as

long as the literary aspect doesn't get in the way.

Kandel is a translator of Stanislaw Lem, an author (Captain JackZodiac), and an editor (he recently edited Jonathan Lethem's Gunwith Occasional Music). He also made a stab at defining what "literate" meant, or rather what it didn't mean. He said we often say that someone is not literate if s/he has not read X, but a better distinction might be between people who read widely and people who don't. For example, one bookseller whose store sells science fiction and mysteries says that the science fiction fans who frequent his store will also look in the mystery section, but the mystery fans do not generally look in the science fiction section. And Kandel felt that the fact that he "couldn't read" Henry Miller did not immediately exclude him from the ranks of the literate.

I commented that a lot of my non-science-fiction reading was still "inspired" by my interest in science fiction. For example, I have been reading a lot of early travelogues (of travelers from the Middle Ages through the 19th Century) and they are a lot like the classic "first contact" stories of science fiction. Feder later mentioned that he read Greek and enjoyed it, partly because it was learning about an alien society.

Schweitzer thought one of the best ways to become "literate" is to read books by cultures other than one's own, from Herodotus to Chinese novels. Not that this means one should emulate all these writers--he felt one should learn how not to write from Suetonius, who was a letter writer when people wrote letters without saying anything. As he put it, "[He] reads like the later essays of

Samuel Delany. He lived through the fall of Rome and never mentioned it." He also said that Gene Wolfe learned classical Greek so that he could try to think like the classical Greeks for his writing. Of course, Schweitzer warned that it was also possible for something to be classical without being good.

I noted that people reading from other cultures with almost definitely be reading translations, and the differences in translations will affect their reactions to the works, and to the

cultures. The most common example of this would be the many translations of Dante's D_i_v_i_n_e_C_o_m_e_d_y, each with a different flavor.

Hertz said that the trouble with art is that it is often hard to recognize assumptions. As he quoted, "Whoever discovered water, it wasn't fish."

As far as what makes something a classic, Feder believes that if you wait long enough, only the good works survive, and that there are standards, but that they are not absolute. Hertz disagreed somewhat, saying that what survives is what can muster support at the time (sort of like what wins the Hugo awards). Schweitzer added that if you look at the old Modern Library Classics, you would discover that there are a lot of "ex-classics," while much of science fiction is not part of the "canon." Kandel's response was that this might be true, but much of what is part of the canon is not great. Hertz agreed, saying the canon helps you but is not conclusive.

I asked how many people had read James Fenimore Cooper, an author much more popular towards the beginning of this century. It turned out that a large number of people had, though someone noted that the popularity of the film T_h_e_L_a_s_t_o_f_t_h_e_M_o_h_i_c_a_n_s may have had something to do with that. In any case, this somewhat undercut my point that Arthur Conan Doyle, who was considered a mediocre writer then, has far outlasted Cooper. (Someone else claimed that Doyle also retained his popularity because of the Holmes movies, but this was quickly dismissed as not true.) Schweitzer said that Cooper was "too observably ridiculous" when he was in high school to be read by many. "Kids would laugh at you" if you read him. Even an excerpt given in class was funny. (Well, Twain certainly managed to tear him apart quite thoroughly.)

Schweitzer said that authors were popular for reasons not connected with merit. Cooper, for example, was popular because people wanted to read about the frontier, to see some action. (Was Natty Bumppo the Arnold Schwarzenegger of his time?) Hertz felt that this was merely another argument in favor of the "test of time" theory. There can be great art, he argues, that never appeals to the masses.

We noted at this point that we had barely touched on the topic of the panel, but the fact that people were still in the room indicated that there was s_o_m_e interest in what we were saying.

Feder, trying to get us back on track, said that it was hard for him to say someone was "well-rounded" (literate, I presume) unless they have read certain specific books (which he didn't name).

Hertz was of the belief that if you know the "classics," or how to recognize a classic, you can get a lot more out of science fiction. He gave the analogy of a scene in D_i_a_m_o_n_d_s_A_r_e_F_o_r_e_v_e_r in which James Bond is shown a stone and asked what it is worth. After he answers, he is told that the stone was just paste, and shown a r_e_a_l diamond. Hertz said we should be concerned with how well we read as well as how well-read we are, but that "great books magnify our sense of wonder." (The mention of James Bond resulted in Kandel saying that Natty Bumppo was the James Bond of his time. And here I thought he was the Arnold Schwarzenegger!)

Someone said that "great books" are those that have great ideas, leading Hertz to say that he hates Mortimer Adler because Adler thinks that great books are about great ideas. Hertz observed that the trouble with the "great idea" notion is that then you are open to anyone who can "twiddle" you. On the other hand, people who go back and re-read their marginalia in books after several years often find that the "great ideas" that struck them then were all wrong.

One problem with defining the "classics" is that some of them seem to be excluded by their nature. T_h_e_D_i_v_i_n_e_C_o_m_e_d_y is a genre work (according to Schweitzer) and Shakespeare wrote for the mob (according to Hertz), yet both are accepted as classics, because they are more than just genre works or "pop" works. Kandel thought that as soon as you got into "high-brow" versus "low-brow," you were in a trap.

But are fans literate?

A quick survey indicated that most of the audience members read mostly science fiction, though a fair number had science fiction as only about 25% of their total reading. People said that their co-workers usually read less than them, but Hertz and I noted that in determining whether fans are literate we should be comparing them to other readers, since compared to the majority of people in the country (probably) or the world (certainly), they would be more literate simply because they read s_o_m_e_t_h_i_n_g. I observed that there was literary fiction (say John Cheever) that sells, so there must be people out there reading somewhere.

The phenomenon that a good percentage of fans want to be writers-- at any rate, a higher percentage than one finds in most other

fields--would probably result in increased literacy among fans, since writers tend to read a lot. (Of course, who's to say that these "wannabe" writers do the reading?) People thought in general that while readers (and writers) tend to be well-read, they are still surprisingly illiterate in areas of science. As Hertz said, "'Science' is our first name," and hence we should try to be more knowledgeable about science. Schweitzer said that may be true, but we weren't: there are a lot of crystal believers and such (whom he termed the "reality-impaired") at conventions.

Someone said that H_a_r_p_e_r's wrote some anti-science-fiction articles a few years back, and that an article there or in T_h_e_N_a_t_i_o_n said that science fiction was an outgrowth of children's literature. Hertz suggested that maybe we don't care what H_a_r_p_e_r's or T_h_e_N_a_t_i_o_n say and Kandel responded, "What's wrong with children's literature?"

One reason that fans may be more literate is that fandom is a place where literate people look for other literate people. Outside of fandom, there are few ways to find the literate population. The Net is one; as I said, "There are people in r_e_c_a_r_t_s_b_o_o_k_s who know more about literature than I ever will." And occasionally you will find someone at random (for example, the supervisor at work who could discuss semiotics and deconstructionism). The theatrical world also attracts literate people, although Schweitzer says they usually know even less science than we do. Some bookstores attract literate people (that's how we met George "Lan" Laskowski, for example). Basically, according to Hertz, we have worked out a cultural recognition system, and in fandom your chances of finding the literate is much greater.

Feder closed by saying that we should not be too hard on ourselves. In the 18th Century it was tough to be literate, but as society got larger there is more stuff out there. This is a two-edged sword. It's easier to find what makes us literate, but there's so much of it that it would take more than a lifetime to read it all.

S_F_f_r_o_m_B_e_f_o_r_e_Y_o_u_W_e_r_e
B_o_r_n

Saturday, 5PM

Keith De Candido, Nancy C. Hanger, John Hertz, Andrea Lipinski, Bob Lipton

In discussing this topic, the panelists said that at first they were going to make the cut-off date somewhere around 1970, because they were worried that they wouldn't be enough to say about r_e_a_l_l_y early science fiction, but that turned out to be a groundless fear.

The obvious beginning was to talk about Mary Shelley's F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n (1818), which marked the origins of science fiction. There had been a few "questionable" inclusions before then: Lucian of Samosata's T_r_u_e_H_i_s_t_o_r_y (second century C.E.), Cyrano de Bergerac's V_o_y_a_g_e_s_t_o_t_h_e_M_o_o_n_a_n_d_t_h_e_S_u_n (1687), Marie Corelli's A_r_d_a_t_h, and

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so on. But one reason F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n was such a landmark was that it used science instead of magic. In this regard it was a product of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and represented one side of the dichotomy between the supernatural and science. Previously there had been rationalist trends in religion, it's true, but during Shelley's time rationalism was put forth as a r_e_p_l_a_c_e_m_e_n_t for religion. (Perhaps as a result of this challenge, Western religions--as contrasted with Eastern religions--have a strong thread of rationalism in them. On the other hand, it is probably more accurate to say that the strong thread of rationalism in Western religion before the Enlightenment was what led Western philosophers to come up with the Enlightenment in the first place.)

This was also a period of Utopian movements as well, which resulted in such works as Samuel Butler's E_r_e_w_h_o_n (1872). Contrast E_r_e_w_h_o_n with the earlier U_t_o_p_i_a (1516) by Thomas More (or even Swift's G_u_l_l_i_v_e_r'_s_T_r_a_v_e_l_s (1726)). The earlier works were religious in nature; Butler and others were not. (Hertz seemed to think Jonathan Swift was "fannish.") Although later than some of the rationalist works mentioned, Stevenson's S_t_r_a_n_g_e_C_a_s_e_o_f_D_r. J_e_k_y_l_l a_n_d_M_r._H_y_d_e (1886) still had its roots firmly in the notion of original sin. (Although some see it as early psychoanalysis along the lines of Freud's work, Freud did not publish his first psychoanalytic work, S_t_u_d_i_e_s_i_n_H_y_s_t_e_r_i_a, until 1895.)

Hertz reminded us that although the Shelleys were both apostates in the terminology of their time, we would consider them religious today. Percy Bysshe Shelley said, in fact, "Religion has betrayed me and I have to rebuild to somehow," which indicates that he did not entirely turn his back on the concept of religion. It was also noted that religion has been "disestablished" in the United States, which means that those of us from the United States don't always realize what challenging the established religion meant in other times or other places. One of the main challenges by science to religion was the theory of evolution, which Charles Darwin first presented in 1858, and that caused considerably more tumult in the British government and society than it did here, though we did (and still do) have our share.

In F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n the creature (never named, though there is an analogy made to Adam, which results in the creature often being given that name) says, in effect, "I was not created evil, and I have a right to live." This is a very science-fictional concept, just as the question of what changes in science do to humanity is a very science-fictional question.

After Shelley, Verne (who started writing novels in the 1860s) and Wells (T_h_e_T_i_m_e_M_a_c_h_i_n_e (1895), T_h_e_I_n_v_i_s_i_b_l_e_M_a_n (1897), T_h_e_W_a_r_o_f_t_h_e_W_o_r_l_d_s (1898), and other works) are the earliest authors whose works would be called science fiction now. This of course led to a discussion of what exactly science fiction was. Someone

proposed Sam Moskowitz's definition: "Science fiction is a branch of fantasy in which the willing suspension of disbelief is made easier by an attempt to add an air of scientific verisimilitude." Someone else's famous definition is something like "a story that couldn't take place without its scientific content." Personally, I like Damon Knight's the best: "Science fiction is what I point to when I say it." One panelist claimed that art is on a (continuous) spectrum of imagination, and trying to set up clear definitions was unlikely to work. For example, Robert A. Heinlein's M_a_g_i_c,_I_n_c. and Poul Anderson's O_p_e_r_a_t_i_o_n_C_h_a_o_s seem to be both fantasy and science fiction.

science fiction. Is Twain's ConnecticutYankeein
KingArthur's
Court science fiction or fantasy?

Another characteristic of science fiction is that it is knowledge-based. As Hertz expressed it, "if knowledge is important [in the story], then it's science fiction."

De Candido used this opportunity to plug his latest productions,

TheEssentialFrankenstein,
TheEssentialDracula, and The
EssentialDrJekyllandMr.
Hyde.

Miscellaneous

The Green Room was close to the programming and had a large assortment of beverages and light snacks. It was also a more popular gathering place than at some other conventions. (I'm not sure when the con suite was or if it was open.) The restaurant situation was less than ideal--nothing was within walking distance, and even driving didn't add a lot of options within a reasonable radius. There was no map to go with the restaurant guide, another problem.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
m.r.leeper@att.com

We use ideas merely to justify our evil, and speech merely to conceal our ideas.

-- Voltaire