

THE SPHERE

Vol. 175 no. 1, published for the 204th mailing of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance by Don Markstein, 14836 N. 35th St., Phoenix, AZ 85032, (602) 788-5442, DMarkstein@compuserve.com, www.geocities.com/soho/coffeehouse/2346. Headline font: Group Sex.

I'm once again getting my SFPazine out of the way early, because I've got very little time for it now, and I can see things are going to get worse quickly. I thought my schedule would clear up after CorsairCon — in fact, I almost expected to have time on my hands — but this has proven not to be the case. I'm up to my eyebrows in new projects, most if not all of which are expected eventually to result in or at least facilitate paying work, but right now, I'm in that worst of all possible situations — no time and no money.

Oh, by the way, about CorsairCon — GiGi did a superb job chairing it, at least to judge from the results. Attendance was about what we expected; and by careful management of the funds (another GiGi trait — the WesterCon she was treasurer of made a fortune), we came out well in the black. Pirate groups from Nevada and California were represented. And if anybody had anything but a wonderful time, I sure didn't hear about it!

So, now that the con is over, here are some of the time-consuming things that are taking its place in my life:

MY WEB SITE

Yes, I have a Web site now — like, who doesn't? It's not much to look at (yet), but I have Big Plans — not of making it much to look at, per se, but of filling it with a lot of cool stuff. So far, I have a press release for *Pirates: The CD-ROM* up, as well as a link to a few items I'm selling on eBay, the on-line auction house. And there are other projects coming up, that I'll also want to plug.

The current URL (and *what*, I ask you, would be so hard about simply calling it an "address"?) is (1)* — but I'm not sure I like the server (it's become rather obnoxious about in-house hucksterism, having recently started putting a little floating logo in the corner, obscuring part of my page). I'm probably going to move my main operations to (2)* in the near future (in fact, may already have done so as you read this). If so, I'll leave a front page on Geocities but use it mostly for storage of images that I'm displaying elsewhere (for example, on eBay).

(1)<http://www.geocities.com/soho/coffeehouse/2346/>

(2)<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/dmarkstein/>

* I hate what URLs in paragraphs do to the line breaks, since you can't hyphenate them lest people think the hyphen is part of the address. So

I've given each one a separate line (and had to drop the point size even at that, I see).

Anyway, as I was setting up the page, I was reading a book on HTML — so basically, the page is what I'm practicing on. After I think I've done enough scratchwork on the Web, I'll turn to using HTML on the Pirate CD interface (see below). I said last mailing that it's about time I learned it — well, now I'm learning it, and while I was at first put off by its limitations, I'm now starting to view it as a design realm with different (perhaps lesser and perhaps not) possibilities than print.

There are other things I want to advertise on the Web. For instance, soon as I polish off Version 1.1 of the Pirate CD, I'm going to take those photos I scanned last year and use my newly-acquired skills with HTML to make myself a super-deluxe family album on a CD-ROM. Then I'm going to use said album as (a) Xmas presents and (b) a portfolio piece as I hang out a shingle and offer to do similar CD-ROM albums for other people at a reasonable rate. I'll advertise locally, mostly (not everyone is willing to trust precious documents to delivery people), but also on the Web (some are). And we shall see what happens.

Things I need to do before I can do a really good job at this: (1) Acquire and learn software for transferring recorded sounds to computer-readable sound files; (2) Same for video, except in that case I'll also need new hardware; (3) become an authorized distributor for some genealogical software, preferably the one I have now (or an updated version), so I can legitimately put it on the disk (passing the retail cost on to the customer, of course).

Another thing I want a Web site for is to sell books. I've gotten myself set up as an associate of Amazon.Com, the on-line bookstore, the deal being, any books they sell through links on my site, I get 15%. So I'm going to set up a page of links to buy books about pirates. A few days ago, I dropped by their site (which includes most books that are currently in print and some that aren't) and did a quick preliminary search on the word "pirate". They have over 400 listings. So if I can get enough traffic going through my Web site, maybe Amazon.Com could pay for a trip to the grocery store every couple months or so.

Now — all I need to do is find enough time to put the page up.

I'd like to get Amazon.Com, or something similar, to sell my CD-ROM, too. But before I can approach anybody on mass-marketing the CD, I have to have Version 1.1 written. Speaking of which —

PIRATES!: THE CD-ROM

The Pirate CD-ROM did, as promised and expected, debut at CorsairCon, tho in slightly abbreviated form. Missing was a user interface, which I finally decided was not so necessary that it justified the expenditure of time that close to the opening of the con's doors. So I just wrote up a .TXT file telling where to find things, called it Version 1.0, and turned it loose.

It's okay. Version 1.1 will have an interface — as well as a few odd little items here and there that turned up after I finalized the cut (like, an entire novel, two more games, a couple megs of art . . .). Meanwhile, I've been able to sell a few copies (almost 4% of CorsairCon attendees bought it) and get a little buzz going. It's been very favorably reviewed in *No Quarter Given* (the most prominent pirate zine), as well as in a UPI column titled "Gizmorama". So it's off to a decent start.

I just hope I have Version 1.1 done in time for the WorldCon, which has a pirate theme. If I do, you'll probably be able to find it on sale in the huckster room.

Sorry about showing you only a black & white version of the label, but like I said, money's tight — can't afford color ink for SFPA right now. Maybe when things are going a bit more smoothly (say, in my next life). Meanwhile, tho, you can see it in color at the aforementioned Web site.

So far, it's being done in what I think of as "Junior Achievement Mode". The entire operation — writing each CD and printing each label — is done in my office, one disk at a time. When I have that user interface, I hope to have it replicated in an edition of at least 2,000. And then the *real* promotion starts, and either it'll make it (in which case it will be followed by CD anthologies about vampires, dinosaurs and other themes) or it won't (in which case I'll be sorely disappointed — it would be lovely to be able to make money in such a fun way).

FUNNYBOOKS

The *real* time crunch — what makes me want to get this zine out of the way before I get too busy to even think about it — is the news I just got from Denmark. Instead of giving me six months of assignments like they did for the first half of the year, Egmont has given me only three — and



it consists of three 10-page Mickey Mouse stories, spaced two weeks apart. First synopsis is due in 1998 Week 30 (July 20-24), with the script due in Week 33. Second synopsis due Week 32, script in Week 35. Third synopsis, Week 34, script, Week 37. So there will be a four-week period in which I have to turn writing in to them once a week.

I suspect this might be a test. They're seeing how well I can handle a sequence of tight deadlines, and the reason they're all one character is because that's the character mainly handled by Byron Erickson, the editor-in-chief. Byron will be the one putting me through my paces.

Well, I'm up for it. Writing comic book stories is hard, hard work, but it's also a whole lot of fun. I'm going to work like a dog getting this stuff out, but I'll be smiling all the way — not least, because it will mean sorely-needed income for my family.

And when it's over, I guess that's when they'll decide what to give me for the final quarter of the year. So apparently, my income depends on the outcome.

By the way, these are my fourth through sixth stories for 1998, for a total of 59 pages. With or without the last three months, I'm already ahead of my 1997 tally of five stories totalling 39 pages.

MORE FUNNYBOOK STUFF

A couple of mailings ago, I mentioned a magazine I'm involved in the launch of. We're going to review graphic novels with an eye

toward getting them into public libraries. Apparently, librarians are interested in shelving comics, but don't know anything about us and have no resources for learning. So these reviews are going to be aimed at people who buy books for others to read; and instead of dealing with the reviewer's personal taste, will concentrate on how well the books serve the audience they're intended for, and how likely it is that people will want to check them out.

I am, of course, the chief reviewer as well as editor, art director, and production chief of the magazine. Right now, there are a little over a hundred reviews written, and soon as I get a chance I'm going to do a few sample layout pages. Hopefully, we'll be able to meet toward the end of July, and set up a schedule for getting the actual magazine into print.

Response from the comics community has been unexpectedly mixed. Smaller publishers are very enthusiastic, and have showered me with review copies of their books whenever I've asked. But the big guys have just about ignored me — in fact, I can't even get some of them to reply to basic questions about their books, such as ISBNs and current prices of hardcover editions. Too bad for them — but when the magazine is a going concern, with actual issues out that I can point to, maybe that will change. I do think this is something that the industry needs, and I feel good about being able to provide it.

If only it paid better! There's a little bit of up-front pocket money involved, but the real compensation for the time and effort I've put into it is coming in the form of a cut of book sales that come from it. Which I do believe will be considerable in the long run, but that doesn't put food on the table right now.

PERSPECTIVE

Rachel and Karen both did very badly in school this year. Their grades in the past have usually been alphabet soup — all over the board — but this year, both slacked off horribly, and the top end virtually disappeared. It would not be very far off the mark to say that each of them has pretty much thrown away a year's worth of education.

GiGi and I are both very upset about this, and have lost few opportunities, all year, to say so.

"I wept because I had no shoes. Then I met a man who had no feet."

I got a call yesterday (June 6) from a family member named Bill Deitenbeck. Bill wasn't born into my family, but he's been part of it since I was

in my teens. He and my cousin, Lauralee, have been married so long, they have grandchildren.

Bill had just gotten a call from his brother, Paul, who lives in Phoenix. I'd never met Paul, tho I'd spoken with him on the phone once. It seems Paul and his wife had just come back from a short business trip and found their youngest son, Michael, 17, sprawled across their bed, dead.

He'd apparently lost a game of Russian roulette.

So, as we prepare for a small, impromptu family gathering (I haven't seen Lauralee since her brother's funeral in 1990), I reflect that maybe it isn't so bad that my kids have more-or-less thrown away a year of their education.

Here's a young man who's thrown away his entire life.

MAILING COMMENTS

EVE ACKERMAN:

It's not a romance novel, per se, but there's a love story between the adult characters in the children's book *Someday, Angeline*, by Louis Sachar. And the male member of the love affair works as a garbage man. Nothing is made of his work itself — apparently, the author chose his occupation just to get across the idea of dignity associated with lowly work.

So Joe Celko lurks in discussions about romance novels, eh? I guess by now, I should have learned not to let anything he does surprise me — but that one, I gotta say, was unexpected..

RICHARD BRANDT:

If everything works out, yes, we should have copies of *Pirates!: The CD-ROM* on sale at the WorldCon. I don't know how big their huckster room will be, tho, so you might have to look hard. As for the trouble one might get into for having "pirate disks" for sale — I'm actually making a schtick of it. Everything on the disk is either public domain or "fair use", so I'm not paying for it — hence, it's all "legally pirated". I'm using the name "PiratePubs" as the publisher, which I intend to continue even when (knock plastic!) there are disks with other themes available, because the running gag of "legal piracy" will continue.

I'm afraid I just don't see spam as much of a threat to my wellbeing. In fact, of all the direct-contact methods of advertising, it's probably second only to junk mail, which goes straight into recyke, usually unopened, for lack of intrusion. Junk faxes are annoying because they tie up my line and use my paper, but I get almost none of those anyway. Phone solicitors are the

worst — dealing with them requires actual, personal interaction on my part, if only to pick up the phone and say "Hello", which breaks my train of thought. Door-to-door salesmen, same thing, except they're kind of fun when it's religion they're selling, because they simply aren't prepared to discuss the Bible with someone like me. But spam? Big deal. Half of it gets deleted before downloading, just from the title, and the rest adds only a couple of seconds to a download that I'm doing anyway. A minor annoyance, sure, but the threat to the First Amendment of allowing the government to get its ham fist into the operation, is more than minor.

Why do you want all those Web addresses? I can see where one might have specific reasons for adding them, e.g., if you somehow managed to fill one up. Do you have that many megabytes posted online? Or am I missing something?

NED BROOKS:

The "Face on Mars" is just an accident of light — a few outcroppings of rock that happened to cast shadows that looked like a human face at the exact moment, and from the exact angle, a space probe was taking a picture of it in 1976. The fact that subsequent photos show nothing resembling a face is not surprising.

I always thought the explanation of the Hubble Boundary lay in the fact that length, like time and mass, is dilated with velocity (approaching zero as velocity approaches c). Thus, from the point of view arbitrarily designated as "stationary" (i.e., Earth), both galaxies and the spaces between them would get thinner as the boundary is approached, so that infinitely many of them can fit between the boundary and any given spot this side of it. As for what lies on the other side — since the boundary would appear equally far away from any point inside it (due to the relativistic effects), it's naturally unreachable and therefore, the idea of an "other side" is meaningless. And no, Earth itself wouldn't be on the Hubble Boundary from any other point of view, but depending on how far away the point of view is set, could be arbitrarily close to it.

GARY BROWN:

No, I've missed the Gemstone reprints of *Piracy* — just haven't been getting to a comics store regularly, I'm afraid. I'd like to get the collected edition, if I happen to see a copy when I've got a few bucks to spend (or if they put the magazine I'm launching on the list for review copies), because I've come to like comics in book form better than the old 32-page pamphlets. Mean-

while, tho, the covers of the seven original EC issues of *Piracy*, along with over 50 other comics covers with pirate themes, are indeed on the CD.

MEADE PRIERSON:

Several mailings back, you said something about envying all the little money-making schemes I have going, and I replied that if you knew how uncertain they are, and how much work I put into them, you wouldn't be so envious. I was just thinking of a way you might find out firsthand. Maybe you'd like to give it a try.

I've done some work in transferring large bodies of law and regulation into searchable databases, distributed via CD-ROM. I can see that there's a huge vacuum in that area, just waiting to be filled. So, here's how to fill it:

Get yourself a good scanner and a CD burner. The two together should be well under \$500 (these days, you may even be able to find them used), and the scanner will probably come with OCR software. Get hold of copies of all the legal code and bureaucratic regulations that apply to your locality (easy enough for someone who, like you, knows his way around the local system). Scan and OCR it, and store it in text files that can be easily accessed by statute number or something like that. Acquire and learn some software to turn text files into searchable databases — preferably something that allows a free runtime version in copies distributed. (In choosing software, go for something that's capable of making the databases menu-driven, so users don't have to worry about learning a lot of crap.) Put it all onto a CD-ROM, and have the CD replicated in quantity. Huckster it to real estate agents, restaurateurs, manufacturers, and anybody else who might find it useful to have legal stuff that applies to them at their fingertips instead of buried in the middle of massive tomes that only specialists know how to use. \$49.95 is not a bad price. If you do a good job of it, you could find yourself standing in a shower of \$50 bills.

Right now, you're probably asking yourself, if it's so easy, why doesn't *he* do it? Answer: Who said it was easy? It's a hell of a lot of time-consuming shitwork, with no rewards for a partial job. The worst of it is proofreading the OCR stuff — the only thing worse than that would be typing it yourself. I would estimate six months, start to finish, working fulltime hours. But you can listen to books on tape while you're doing it, so it's not a total loss. And once you've got one for Birmingham, it's a lot easier to do another for Mobile, then Huntsville, then Atlanta, then an updated version for Birmingham . . .

A couple of years ago, I was involved in a project of this sort for Phoenix. It was never completed, because the guys backing it lost interest, and I wasn't able to give it the time it needed without neglecting other essential work. But it's still a good idea, and someone who spends a lot of time hoping for business to arrive might profit by keeping busy with something like this.

If you should happen to get rich this way, a 1% royalty might be a nice way to show your appreciation.

JANICE GELB:

If I wind up putting *Herbie* on a CD-ROM, I'll be sure to see that Elst knows of its existence and how to go about buying a copy. But I do *not* see myself giving him a free one. I've been pretty much out of fandom for years now, and have worked hard to rid myself of the fannish mindset. So I'm no longer interested in sending people something that costs me money to produce, just because I know they'll enjoy it. Any CD-ROMs I put out for sale are commercial ventures, not fanzines. The people who are likely to enjoy them are potential customers first, and sources of ego-boo only after they've paid.

Yes, I can see where the death of a young woman with children (even ones who will never have to worry about having somebody to provide for them) is sad. But it happens every day — and if you ask me, it's a lot sadder when it happens to someone whose few years contained less reason for joy, and whose children face starvation as a result of the death, than when it happens to a pampered princess. After all this time, people who ignore such events in their own neighborhoods are still wailing about that royal idler, as if she were more worthy than someone who works for a living. Anybody who feels a need to mourn a stranger should check the obituary column of the local newspaper. It contains cases every bit as tragic, every single day — about people who are entitled to a hell of a lot more sympathy.

Sorry you think the "Head" font was a waste of time, tho of course the fact that it was someone else's time should go far toward blunting the pain. Personally, I simply dote on novelty fonts (look at what I used for headlines this time), and that particular one has been more useful to me than most. The cover of the CorsairCon Program Book (right) is just one of many places where I've used it to good effect.

I haven't seen *Titanic* and doubt I will soon. I'm just not attracted to Hollywood spectacles.

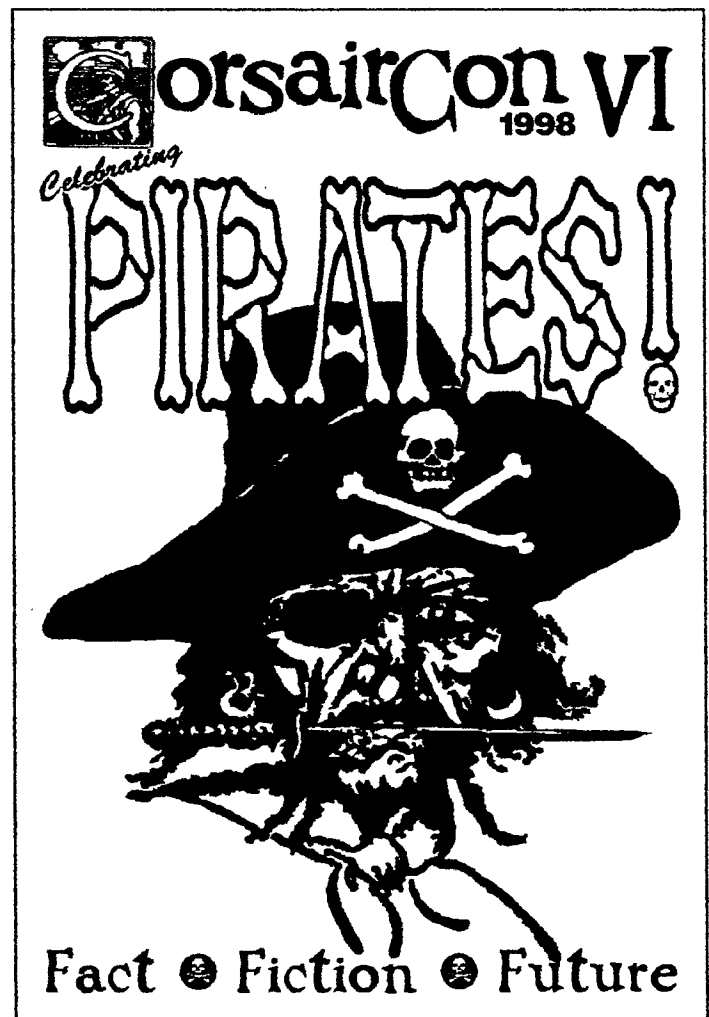
I've never read *Moby Dick*, but I once listened to a recorded version of it. I accidentally switched

two of the tapes and didn't realize until much later that I'd listened to them out of order. A couple of things were puzzling in a minor way, but that's about it. To me, this is an infallible sign of a book that needs major surgery. There's probably a pretty decent novel in the 70,000-word range in there, screaming to be set free.

ARTHUR HLAVATY:

I hate to see Kenneth Starr's name used in puns on the old Star Chamber, which has had a bum rap in history. Its major abomination was that it took social rank into consideration less than traditional courts; thus, a gentleman could be condemned on the word of a commoner. Of *course* the people in the best position to get their opinions into the history books didn't like it! If you've got to compare Starr to something out of history, Joe McCarthy springs to mind.

Yes, I was the one who described an apa as a "mail-order cocktail party". In fact, I'm almost certain I was the first to do so. It was somebody in SAPS (possibly Dave Locke, tho it may predate him) who called it "a system of interconnecting mailboxes".



MIKE WEBER:

Cute try, but not quite good enough to put across the idea that there's something wrong with *me* for thinking the death of a person notable only for her ancestors is less grief-worthy than that of someone who has actually done things to enrich the world. Personally, I think the people who are upset about the tragedy of it all need to get a life.

I also think that if your best explanation is "You'll never understand", then *you* don't understand either. Try explaining it to yourself. Maybe it'll help you figure out how to explain it to me. Or maybe you'll simply realize no good explanation exists.

I'll try to remember to send you advance publicity about the next Bunny Burning. But if I forget, just remember that it happens on Easter weekend, and that it's best if we know a week or so in advance how many people are eating bunnies, so we can calculate how many we need.

I haven't read *Bimbos of the Death Sun*, mainly because my local public library doesn't have it. But I did read the sequel, *Zombies of the Gene Pool*, and it was good enough to get me started reading all of McCrumb's work I can easily lay hands on. I suppose the charge that this criticism of fandom is unacceptable because it is levelled by an outsider might have some validity. Personally, tho, I don't think it's possible to skewer anything quite so devastatingly without an insider's knowledge, so I'd be inclined to grant her insider status just on the basis of having written the books. But that's splitting hairs. Tho she clearly sees a lot to ridicule in fandom, I do not detect hostility in her tone, and that's why I don't think anybody should take offense. The phrase I used at the time to describe her apparent attitude toward fandom was "affectionate, but without illusion".

THE END

Well, the "small, impromptu family gathering" has come and gone. It lasted less than 48 hours, but they were very busy ones. Discounting the basic reason for it, it was actually quite pleasant. I did attend the funeral and met a few of my "distant in-laws" there, but other than that, we had some very nice visits with Lauralee, Bill, and their oldest son, Erich. Tho Bill has been out here before, it was the first time Lauralee had met my family. (Funny, I never noticed before how much she looks like her late mother.)

She also got to see the family photo project that

I put so much time and effort into last year — and brought along enough of her own old family pictures to make a 14th CD-ROM.

By the way, the police have declared Michael's death a simple suicide, and don't seem to be taking great pains to find out if anyone was with him when he died. They came to this conclusion instantly upon seeing his bedroom, which contained such obvious and infallible suicide indications as *Spawn* posters. Case closed. Good to know they aren't going to trouble themselves over it.

(In fairness, I have to say there's a good possibility they're right — but one would think they could at least take fingerprints, and see if anybody outside the family had been in the master bedroom [where he died, and where his friends wouldn't have any legitimate business], to confirm it.)

I mentioned earlier that I'd once talked with Bill's brother, Paul, on the phone. He called to ask if I'd be willing to counsel Michael, who was going through a lot of teenage angst. Bill had mentioned to Paul that I'm into comic books, which Michael was also interested in (hence, the *Spawn* posters). I said sure — we weren't by *any* stretch interested in the *same* comics, but I could show him some old stuff, tell him about my work, and maybe as we talked some issues might happen to come up that I, as a parent-age guy who isn't his parent, could help him out with. I was expecting a call from Michael, but it never came, and eventually it just drifted to the back of my mind. That was about a year or so ago.

Of course, everything would probably have turned out the same if we'd connected. But maybe not. And I'll never know for sure.

I suspect I'm going to think about that from time to time as the years go by.