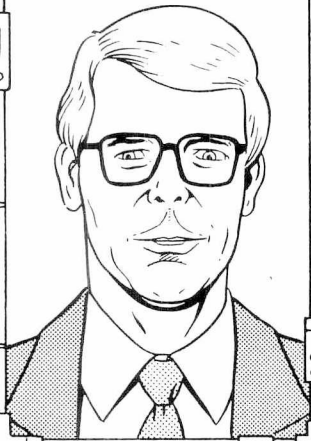


TIME·BYTES

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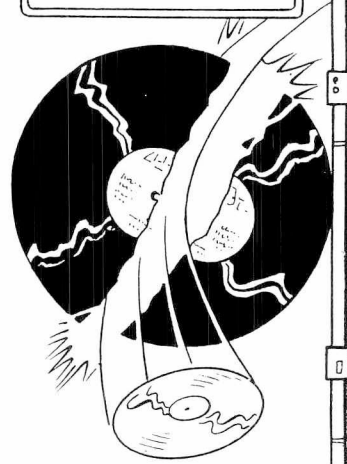
POLITICS



NEW VISIONS



NEW SOUNDS?



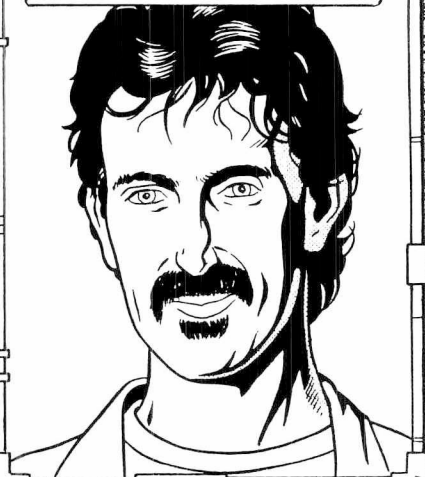
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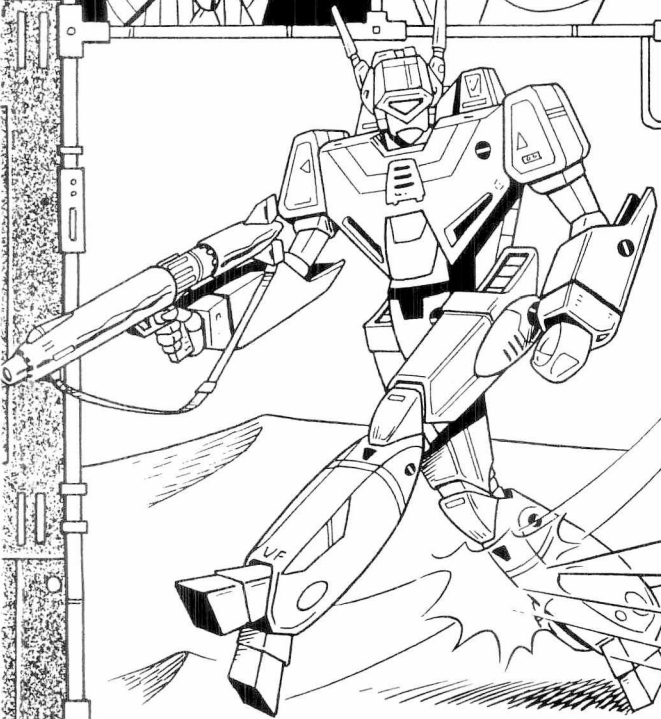
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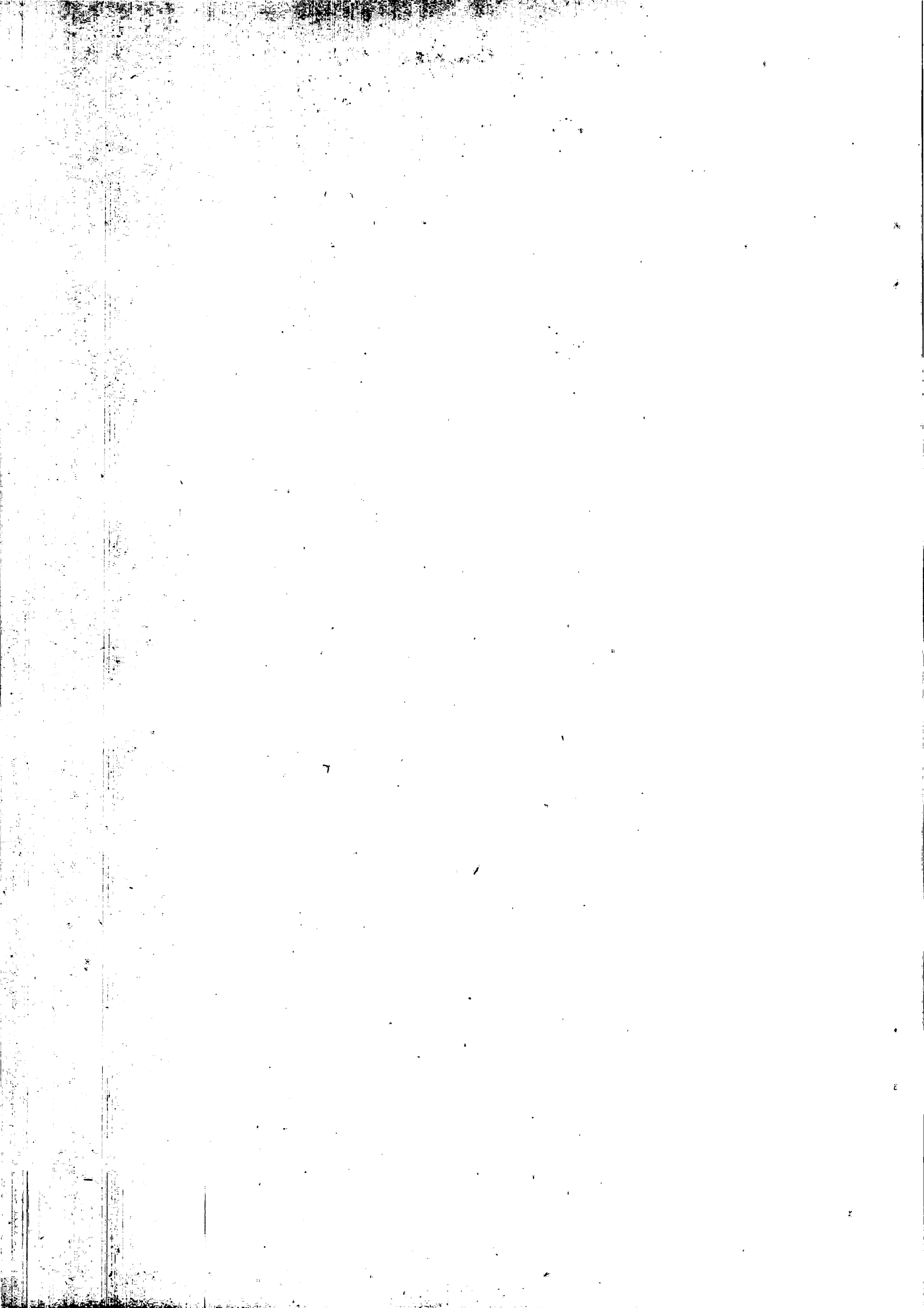


OLD STARS (R.I.P.)



AND, OF COURSE,
FIGHT SCENES





Timebytes

Part 2

It's A Wonderful Fannish Life

For Intersection, August 1995

Edited By

Lilian Edwards

and

Christina Lake

Contents

- 3. It's A Wonderful Fannish Life
- 4. Fun, Fandom And Feminism
- 7. Selling The World
- 13. More To Fandom Than Just A Pretty Beard
- 16. Fans Are Virtually Slans
(or, A Brief History Of Computers In Post-Conspiracy Fandom)
- 23. Putting Science Fiction Back In Fanzines Where It Belongs
- 28. Hairdressers In Space (or, The Great SF TV Revival)
- 31. Fans Can't Dance

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It's A Wonderful Fannish Life

Part one of this fanthology took as its ambit very roughly the everyday fodder of fannish life: fanzines, conventions, fan funds, feuds, awards *et al.* But much fannish writing is not specifically about fandom. For most fans, Fandom is a Part-Time Way of Life, submerged a great deal of the time beneath the more pressing demands of work, home, holidays, sport, dreaming about the lottery, watching *Eastenders et al.* . . . even the kaffeeklatch conversation of London or Leeds literati or smofs has been known to revolve as much around house prices, word processors and how to pronounce the word Björk as who sold what to whom in Café München last week. Most of us, sad to say, do not live in The Enchanted Halls of Ghu beloved of bulky timebinding American fanzines but, instead in what Greg Pickersgill has lately taken dismissively to calling consensus-world. This section is all about that.

While fans do write about the real world, not all they write about it is very fannish. **Abi Frost** illustrates this point by reference to Judith Hanna and Joseph Nicholas's *FTT*, a fanzine overtly about politics in every shape and form:

FTT has a reputation in some quarters as a serious Left Fanzine: it's rather however, a capsule of its editor's lives and interests, which include a quantity of political activity and apparently a great deal of political reading. Both Hanna and Nicholas generally manage to avoid the great pitfall of fanwriting on wider issues: loss of the personal voice. Compare Hanna recently on the pornography/censorship business (working out her own position and addressing her difficulties with another fan's) with much 'political' fanwriting which simply trots out statistics or whatever derived from pressure-group material and generally well-known to those interested.

— **Abi Frost**
Chicken Bones 2, Summer 1990

In *Trapdoor 10* the aforesaid **Joseph Nicholas** went so far as to suggest that:

. . . For fanzine fandom to survive we fanzine fans must turn outward, away from ourselves and the inbred concerns generated by our consensually constructed alternative to the ordinary world, and engage directly with it and with this larger torrent of personal writing — not in an attempt to dominate it or remake it in our own image, but to remake and therefore revitalise ourselves. Otherwise, it seems to me, we are doomed to sink complaining into the past, out-evolved by other groupings and unable to comprehend how or why.

— **Joseph Nicholas**
Trapdoor 10, January 1991

D. West was not impressed:

All right, fanzine fans are devoted to "inbred concerns". So what? (Heavy sigh.) Being devoted to inbred concerns is *the whole fucking point*.

Got that? This is what makes fanzine fandom 'special' — the fact that the people in it share a particular twist of mind (ultimately based — however tenuous the link may have

become — on SF) and a sense of community (or tribal identity) which means that we recognise each other, whether we're on good terms or bad.

The test of an authentic fanzine is that it contains at least some material which could be found nowhere else but in a fanzine. (If you can find it somewhere else, why bother with fanzines?) I'm quite happy for the same test to be applied to fandom in general: if there's nothing about it which can't be found elsewhere then I'll agree it's redundant. If it still contains something unique — what's your problem, kid?

Joseph hints that fans are somehow hiding from reality by failing to "engage directly" with the world, but in this he is not being very realistic himself. It's only the idealists (perhaps fleeing from themselves) who insist on interference and involvement all over the place. The more pragmatic majority prefer to 'engage directly' by concentrating on the bits of the world that are in front of them or that they like and ignoring whatever does not interest or concern them. This may not be glamorous or even admirable — but it's very practical. Time being short, it makes most sense to live your own life, not someone else's.

— **D. West**
Daisnoid 7, June 1991

D.'s concern for fanzines to contain material that can be found nowhere but in fanzine and Joseph's desire for a wider range of subject material are hardly incompatible. Apa writing for example tends very much to concentrate on real world material, but with a distinctly fannish tint. Another area which has always been seen as a synthesis of the personal and the political is feminism, which has spawned a great deal of interesting personal fannish writing in the last decade and a half. UK fandom sports nothing as committed as the US enclave of Madison fandom, complete with its own feminist convention and publishing empire, but *The Women's Periodical* (or *TWP*), the UK women-only apa has been a comparable supportive forum for UK female fans

Fun, Fandom And Feminism

Back in 1988, **Vinç Clarke** found himself in hot water when he tried to suggest that fandom was for fun rather than a place to talk about heavyweight issues:

□ Fandom is for fun. Olde '50s proverb. Of course, things have altered, and, as I remarked to a recent correspondent, it didn't occur to us that some people found their fun in pulling the wings off flies . . .

Fandom is for fun. Yes, it has a distinctly old-fashioned ring to it. Have you noticed what a lot of Causes are being promulgated in fanzines? OK, I can understand the reasons why various enthusiasts — woman's rights (hi, Avedon), gay rights (hi, whatsyourname), anti-Thatcherites (hi, nearly everybody), etc., find fandom a golden opportunity to let fly on behalf of their favourite Cause, and it often makes interesting reading, but aren't you preaching to the converted? Fandom is, as the man said, a ghoddamned hobby, and if I want to read about prejudice I can buy a newspaper. Has every subject of purely fannish interest been exhausted?

— *Vinç Clarke*
Extract from "Splinters" (editorial)
Pulp 8, April 1988

Vinç's co-editor **Avedon Carol** was not slow to respond. (As historical background here, recall that the Conspiracy committee had allowed the *Battlefield Earth* / Scientologists crew to sponsor the cover of the Pocket Programme book, resulting in a fetching frontispiece of a neo-fascist mailed fist in lurid colour.)

□ Right. Feminism. A nice thing for the girls to do on an occasional Wednesday evening, eh? Just as long as you don't trot it out in public. Like anti-racism and anti-fascism, an issue which has been left on the back burner far too often, with disastrous results. When Vinç dismisses it as un-fannish, mere preaching to the converted, I get a very nervous feeling. And I wonder, "Who are these converted?" I see sexism in fandom all the time, some of it pretty blatant, pretty ugly, and pretty painful to the victims. I see startlingly overt demonstrations of your basic redneck double-standard all around me. I hear men talking for all the world like women have no right to be treated as more than sexual property, and with a straight face, too. I don't think fandom would be hurt by a good solid dose of radical feminism. (And I can't say enough about how much I appreciate seeing a fanzine like *A Free Lunch*, which treats these issues seriously and intelligently.)

Moreover, in the depths of my dimming memory, I recall a time when this was called "Science Fiction fandom", and as shocking as it may seem, that did have something to do with why I got into fandom in the first place. I wanted to meet other people who read the stuff and who had ideas about it, and who

wanted to discuss those ideas. And to me, speculative fiction dealing with the way people behave is crucial to that complex — including, of course, how we do, and will, and might someday comport ourselves in terms of gender roles.

In fact, I don't think much else can be relevant without examining that question. I have no respect for any political morality that isn't grounded in feminism, to be honest. I think any attempt at anti-capitalism — or indeed, any attempt to root out the foundations of oppression — is laughable without a firm basis in feminism.

And I also think it's laughable for, say, a science fiction convention {Conspiracy, folks} to announce a "feminist policy" without establishing well thought-out ground rules and taking positive action to make that policy meaningful. You don't just say, "We're not going to do anything sexist," and honour it only in the breach. How much does a feminist policy mean if you have no feminist programming, no feminist material in the publications, and allow the cover for your pocket programme book to be chosen, virtually sight-unseen, by representatives of an institution which was founded by a man who had no time for women to begin with?

There is also something more than a little unsettling in the realisation that few people seem able to recognise just how dangerous the subject of nudes, erotica, and pornography can be — dangerous in that, with only a shallow analysis, attempts to prevent the sexual objectification of women can quickly become anti-sexual, and thus anti-woman. In a society in which women are defined as sexual, and sex is perceived as something essentially meaning "women", the temptation becomes too great to de-sexualise women altogether. Which lands us right back in the Victorian soup, divided into the Harlots and the Ladies — Ladies being the sexless accessories which may be prized possessions, but never biologically functional, and never human. It is not Frank Frazetta who poses the greatest danger to me.

I have heard it said that *any* female nude cover is (or, in the case of the worldcon programme book, would have been) sexist. And there is simply no way I can agree with this. One of the primary oppressions of women has had to do with making our sexuality the property of others, the denial that our own desire is, and should be, more important than any obligations to family, convention, church, society, or husbands (men), as the deciding factor in whom we sleep with. If an artist can portray a woman in ownership of her own body, or of her own sexuality, that artist has painted a feminist picture (and no, I am not for a minute suggesting that Frazetta did this).

This, of course, is a *radical* analysis, going far deeper than simpler questions of equal pay for equal work, childcare, and whether to burn down the gay centre — although it also speaks to those questions, and treats each of them as important. However, I submit that this level of analysis is crucial before we decide that the fascist message of a mailed fist is somehow innocuous when compared to the so-ubiquitous-as-to-be-invisible Frazetta nude. Fascism is not a question to be treated separately from sexism — rather, they are cut from the same fabric, and they are equally anathema to radical feminists.

A few years ago, a new edition of Delany's *Babel-17* was released, with a cover depicting a pretty blond woman in a pink evening gown. Some people might have objected to the sexy dress — some did, in fact — but they could have dispensed with the dress altogether, for all I cared, if only they'd ditched the blond hair and Aryan features along with it. The only female character of note in *Babel-17*, the protagonist, is a Chinese woman named Rydra Wong. A portrayal of a nude oriental woman fiddling with a computer could never have offended me the way this grotesque intertwining of racism and sexism did.

I have a poster of the cover for the first paperback edition of Elizabeth Lynn's *The Northern Girl* in my home. I am a radical feminist, and I am not offended by the picture. Lizzy Lynn is a feminist (and a lesbian), and she was happy with the cover. Where, pray tell, is the offense? The subject of the painting is a nude woman. The picture itself is not erotic in the sense of suggesting sex — rather, it is erotic in the sense of unashamed comfort within one's own body. To me, she looks a lot like freedom.

— *Avedon Carol*
Extract from "Splinters" (editorial)
Pulp 9, August 1988



Dave Mooring

Sherry Coldsmith (then co-editor of Avedon-stamp-of-approval fanzine *A Free Lunch*) was also not much impressed with Conspiracy's "feminist policy", particularly as applied to its Sex in Fandom panel:

□ The sex in fandom panel [at Conspiracy] was held at ten o'clock at night — not exactly the witching hour but certainly a time when you expect light-hearted jibes and a little good natured gossip. I expected the panel to be mixed. Don't men have sex after all? Even fannish men?

The panel was funny, all right, but I can't help thinking that it was a feminist process and women themselves who were the butts of the joke. Whether or not the women on the panel intended to be the objects of fannish voyeurism, that's exactly what their function was — to entertain men too out of it to entertain themselves with naughty little stories. The stories were no doubt welcomed by most of the audience, reflecting as they did the image that many fans wish to have of themselves: lusty instead of rusty, eager for beaver instead of eager for beer which is more often the case.

A few years ago, I was asked to appear on a panel which compared the output from The Women's Press with the output of Venture press, a small publisher which produces shoot-em-up skiff. Before my brain could instruct my tongue, I said yes even though I knew that the panel would not be a serious comparison of cultural worth but would be a chance for the audience to get off on braless libbers slugging it out with crusty old farts still enthralled by rocket ships. Both teams would appear as equally worthless and the audience would be entertained.

I like entertainment if the fun is honest. I don't like seeing my sisters support the common misconception that women's interest (and dissatisfactions) with sex are a ludicrous affair at worst or simply abnormal at best. If the organisers simply could not find any men to be on the panel then that alone should have told them something. If they still wanted to go ahead, then they should have made damn sure that a non-gossipy, feminist point of view would shine through the fun. There could have been a few penis jokes, father in law stories, tales of nervous bridegrooms, quotes from the feminist comedienne whose albums are readily available at Silver Moon. I would have thought that British feminists would be a bit embarrassed by hosting an all-women panel devoid of feminist content.

— *Sherry Coldsmith*
TWP 39

□ **Pam Wells** responded:

□ I'd like to pick up on what you said about the sex in fandom panel at Conspiracy. As a member of that panel, I think I'm in a better than average position to comment.

I feel personally offended that you "would have thought that British feminists would be a bit embarrassed by hosting an all-women panel devoid of feminist content." I was not embarrassed by the CONTENT of the panel at all. What does offend me is the way that some people seem to think that programme items with women on them must be chock full of feminist politics for them to be worthwhile. I DON'T NEED THIS, and I don't believe the rest of British fandom necessarily needs it

either. This panel was comprised of women as "people with something to say about the subject", rather than women as "feminists who only want to discuss feminist politics". That's not to imply that any of us are or are not feminists as individuals, simply that the panel was addressing a different topic. I for one would far rather see women talk about any damn thing they please; I'm fed up with feminist politics being seen as the only fitting subject for women's panels!

To correct you on a point of fact: this panel was always intended to be comprised of women only. It wasn't a case of us being unable to find any male participants; I know for sure that we could have found several had we wanted to. What we wanted to do was talk about sex in a light-hearted vein, to discuss our experiences of sex in fandom, and to put across a women's eye view, as opposed to all the well-known and oft-shouted-about male fans' opinions and stereotypes. Hey, you know women get laid at conventions too! And some of us even *shock, horror* GOSSIP about it! Perhaps this makes us no better than the guys, but certainly it doesn't make us any worse. Indeed, weren't our experiences and thoughts more varied than the men's?

I fail to see what was "dishonest" about the fun or the entertainment value of that panel. Damn it all, sex is a perfect vehicle for comedy, as it's something with which we can all identify. But what sex isn't, for me, is political. Not ever. I do it for love, or for fun, or not at all. And I'm sick and tired of only hearing the "rampant male" view, or the "right-on feminist" opinion. There are other voices.

— Pam Wells
Mailing comment
TWP 40

Pam is not alone in fandom in her frustration with the apparent monopoly feminism claims on politically correct views for women to hold. Our next extract from *TWP* finds Kari launching a ballistic attack on feminism, post-feminism and lycra. (Lycra? Read on!)

Legs 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll: a user's guide to post-feminism

I've been here before, this vanity thing, but I'm not thought out yet. What I want to know is the reasoning behind my vanity; and how it is that it so readily translates into spite. Yes, I know about women's oppression, and market forces, I know that *Cosmo* (or equivalents) got its claws into my fragile self-image when I was too young to know better. I know I'm programmed to think in terms of baiting myself to entrap men, and to believe that only perpetual youth will ensure that I can keep the man I catch. I know it's anti-feminist, and unnecessary, and wrong — and there is another area for the St Brönte sisters: guilt about being inadequately feminist and a poor ally for women. I know I don't need the creams and bottles, and I know I should dress for myself (deemed in the *Spare Rib* ethos to mean dressing in terms of strict practicality, and avoiding emphasis upon anything that might be interpretable as gilding for male benefit). But . . .

But I know that I can wear a short skirt, and high heels, and get eyed up in the street. But I know that I can leave one too many buttons undone and wear black lace underwear under a semi-transparent white shirt, and get away with it. My in-word is slut, and my other in-word is tramp, and I dress to thrill myself by winding up men — and I want to. I am, I suppose, a vengeful little bitch, but I don't want to be right-on, I want to be me. I enjoy the looks and the comments, and the air of faint shock. I enjoy the small and petty amount of power involved. My vanity is essential to this; to the maintenance of my image of tease and tart.

Luckily for me, my partner likes me this way: it amuses him. This hasn't always been the case with other men. Not that it stopped me; I know the difference between teasing and availability, even if they don't. (And, yes, I know the dangers of that, but my slut-image comes complete with acid tongue, and I don't come on to strangers. And acquaintances are all too well aware that my nature is barbed wire and spite. We are all playing games; we are all fraudulent, to some degree.) And I don't do this when I genuinely am available.

I define myself in relation to my partner. I am mostly pleased to be property. My status as property is my own choice; all shouts of sexism should therefore address themselves to me as culprit.

I enjoyed feminism. I enjoyed my right to control my own body (to gild or otherwise), my right to education, my right to opinions. For a while there, I thought I might also enjoy equality, when it came around. But it didn't, and it hasn't, and

it won't; and we have lost the feminism, too. We are, I learn, the post-feminist generation. We know our rights, we *love* our careers, but are happy to rejoice in our childbearing also, and we're all superwomen. We hold down high-flying jobs, maintain glossy homes, and accept that we can't expect a man to just keep us any more, especially not once a newer model swims across his view, and he wants his freedom to change body and children.

Not me, sweetheart.

Look, I'd rather not. I would damn rather be kept, and even spoken on behalf of, than exist in this perfect post-feminist wasteland, where the men still have all the bloody resources, and the tradition of courtesy to women has been thrown out with the sex discrimination act. I don't want the new deal; I'll take the old one, thank you; and before anyone leaps in to patronise me, she'll have to be prepared to deal with my barbed-wire tongue, because I'm not going to back down. The problems I have in relating to my being economically semi-dependent on any man have their roots in our *Cosmo* post-feminism, not in any fear that said man might try to eclipse me. It's the outside world that's out to get me, by expecting me to worry about my lack of private pension or £25,000 per annum.

But if our society still permitted it, I'd take the old deal over the new one. I wouldn't feel disempowered, nor would I collapse under the weight of my gratitude. I'm happy to be property: I'm safe that way. I get to have my cake and eat it, in lycra and lace.

Yes I'm insecure. Yes, I know it. The slut-image has got stronger as the number of local marriages has grown; my ego needs the attention to deal with the fear of being shelved. I'm the oldest woman in my particular sub-group, and the only one who is not now, and never has been married. Nearly all my friends are married, and yes, it does worry me. (For the interested, I have been asked; simply never by the right people.) I don't know that I specifically want to marry, but I fear that the younger, married women pity me, or look on me as a failure. I fear especially the odious comparisons. ('She may think she's so great, with her short skirts and tarty language, but you notice no-one really wants her.') My role, locally, has shifted in slow glides from older-sister-agony aunt (which is acceptable to the feminist model, of course) to the 'man's woman' whom the men flirt with (but look down on?) and the women suspect. The kind of girl that Andrea Dworkin has ordered real women to exile. Horrid little right-wing underminer of feminism. (Yet politically, I'm more left wing than most of the people I see regularly. It's a glitch, but there you have it.) Real women don't wear lycra. Real women don't flirt. Real women wear high fashion to please themselves, not men, and exercise and diet for their health, not their husband.

I don't believe it. I believe we are all competitive under the skin. And we like power as much as the men. *Cosmo*-girl is wearing her silk body as a shrimping net, not as an adjunct to her well-balanced post-feminist sexually-equal self-confidence. I wear my short skirts because my legs are up to it, and because I love to be looked at, and because, yes, once in a while, I like other women's men to look at me. My vanity and my spite are inextricably entwined, and I cannot be doing without either of them. The drug is the kick that being looked at can give me. The rock 'n' roll . . . "She's a very kinky girl / the kind you don't take home to mother" . . .

— Kari
TWP 71, March 1992

Selling The World

From the politics of the personal to how global — or at least national — politics affect the person. Fans were no different from other UK citizens of the period in obligatorily participating in that giant mad scientist's lab experiment known as radical Thatcherism. In this section we examine some of the most evocative writing that came out of the boom and bust years, from the glory days of privatisation to the greyness of recession overseen by a grey man eating peas and barely seeing off a challenge from a self-confessed Vulcan.

The closing years of the 1980s were characterised by one of the British government's more bizarre economic experiments, the mass sale of its public utilities to the man on the street (known as Sid for no apparent reason). Sid quite clearly was not a fan, did not wear a beanie and had no extraneous "h"s to his spelling (not surprisingly, since Harry Bond had cornered the market in them and was selling them at way above the price even a good speculating free-marketeer would offer). Most fans reacted with cynicism to this transparent ploy to simultaneously divest the government from environmental responsibility for the privatised utilities and raise extra cash to fund the tax cuts designed to keep the moneyed majority of the electorate voting for them in perpetuity. Few were quite as incensed as **Simon Polley**:

When the privatisations started, my blood bubbled. Over a quiet pint, friends said that they'd bought British Telecom shares to try and help them over a sticky financial phase to come. Something blew inside, and I launched into vitriolic denunciations of them and the whole shebang (I told you I'd get angry eventually). But the buyers chose their way — it was the sellers I really detested.

I feel physically sick at the advertisements for privatisation which bloat the television channels. This is, I am told, a step to make us a nation of shareholders. Alright, apart from the fact that the majority of shares end up in block portfolios and in the hands of rich tax-evading investors, look at the principle. If they wanted us to be shareholders, they could have given us all shares. Who put the bloody money into these companies in the first place? The Tooth fairy? Whose taxes have been misused, mismanaged and generally wasted by successive Governments? Mine. Yours. Theirs. How can they have the cheek, the sheer outrageous effrontery, to spend our money, millions upon millions of pounds, paying for advertisements which offer us a chance to buy a few paltry shares in companies which we already owned? Say I rob a woman. Then I spend her money on an advert saying that if she wants to buy part of her handbag back, this is what she should do. Is that just? Is it proper, fair, or anything else representing reasonable conduct?

— **Simon Polley**
Lavish Crone



Simon Polley

Sherry Coldsmith took an even stronger stance:

There's no point trying to hide my feelings from you or the opinions they fortify: shareholders lack morals. Not all of them of course. I can forgive my workmates at British Gas plc who took the free shares. Since I am a politically motivated pragmatist rather than an ideological purist, depriving the government of even more shares to sell off to finance their deconstruction of the world's oldest industrial nation doesn't disturb me in the slightest. When the legal minimum of time is up, I will sell my shares and donate them to the Labour party who probably still won't be in power by then. The country will be conned a third time but I deviate from my theme which we can now state more precisely: people who bought shares in the great British Gas White Sale are deadbeats.

— **Sherry Coldsmith**
TWP

At the time, though, the late 80s economic boom did not seem all bad. **Nigel Richardson**, for example, found it "Just Ducky" . . .

Ah yes, the financial year 89-90, that was a good year. Or so it seemed. I had opened my arms, belatedly, to the capitalist system and capitalism seemed quite happy to hug me to its marmoreal bosom. All the unemployment and boredom of my previous existence could now be seen as a minor hiccup, a false start in a potentially glorious career. I was doing just fine, life was cool, things were neat-o-rama. I set up my own company and became a Computer Consultant or a Software Documentation Specialist or whatever title took my fancy. I had business cards printed with *Director* beneath my name. The agency that got me my first contract were apologetic that they could only pay me £500 a week.

I gave them a boyish smile and went out and bought myself a CD player. Life was cool, things were neat-o-rama. I could afford to buy suits that did not feel as if chemistry teachers had been wearing them for thirty years. I maintained a steady 3-CDs-and-2-silk-ties a week habit. I ate out in places where you didn't have to queue to collect your order from teenage zit monsters. I read up on cufflinks and aftershave in *GQ*. Going to concerts now meant Gideon Kremer at the Wigmore Hall rather than Big Black at the Clarendon Hotel. Sometimes I was true to my roots and drank in dull pubs with computer programmers, but I felt more at ease in wine bars, drinking Chablis with the

sort of people whose answerphones play about three minutes of Miles Davis before they get around to telling you that they're not at home. Yes, it did seem to me that I was doing real good, that life was turning out just ducky and any possible traces of nemesis hanging around me were just the dying vestiges of my oldtime operational paranoia.

It wasn't all babes, booze and tapas, mind you. I still had to go and sit in front of a computer seven or eight hours a day, trying to produce informative and helpful user guides for some of the most boring software packages in existence. Writing instructions on how to use a highly specialised accountancy system for the construction industry was hardly a sexy way of passing the summer, especially as we did not have copies of the software and weren't allowed to speak to the people who were developing it for legal reasons. But being a contractor meant that I was excused from all the usual office squabbling and departmental backbiting that went on around me and could sweetly give the project leader a this-has-nothing-to-do-with-me smile when some thug from Sales & Marketing had reduced her to tears with his cretinous phone calls.

In hindsight, the recession seems to have been inescapable and inevitable, but even as late as last autumn government mouthpieces were still able to get away with describing it as a slight "blip" on the graph. Most people, myself included, assumed that there was some kind of natural law that said you only had to deal with one recession in a lifetime, that it was like measles or mumps and when you'd had it once you were immune.

Everyone knew that interest rates were sky high, but all the people thought about was how this affected their mortgages and, not having a house myself, I found it hard to feel much sympathy for someone with a £280,000 place in Purley or wherever. Of course, high interest rates meant that companies were reluctant to borrow, which meant that they couldn't develop new products, which meant that they didn't need technical writers. Or if they had products that required documentation they couldn't get the budget to take on someone like myself and they had to release it with some scrappy illiterate notes written by a programmer with a couple of minutes to spare.

When my last contract ended in November I wasn't too worried. Sure, there were distant rumblings regarding some recession or other, but that wasn't going to affect me, was it? No, the phone would ring within the week and I'd be offered eighteen quid an hour to translate the techno-gibber of computer programmers into elegant, user-friendly English. A short holiday would do me good.

My savings began to dwindle. My initial conviction that I would find a new contract within a couple of months had meant that I had gone on spending money with nonchalance, perhaps even spending more than when I was working, as I had all this time to kill and I often needed to cheer myself up. I had assumed that in the very worst event, I would only be out of work for three months at the most; I had put aside enough money to pay my rent, keep my company running and generally live a satisfactory life for this period, but once month number four came bobbing along and things still looked as if they still had a long way to go before they hit bottom, I began to panic. I put my pension plan on hold, seeing how it cost me more a month than I would get on the dole. I sacked myself from my company and went, head hung down, to the Peckham Unemployment Benefit Office to see what sort of humiliation I would have to endure. I had to make an appointment over a week in advance to see someone. "It's the recession," the woman on the desk said. "So many people are getting laid off that we've got to open on Saturdays now." I stopped buying CDs, had one last splurge on ties at Liberty's (my favourite shop in the universe) and wrote to tell all the estate agents that were still mailing me details of 85,000 houses that I had died, this being the only way to stop these people once you're on their files.

London, Infinite City . . . What happened? how did I run out of options so rapidly? I had resolved to sit and wait and ride out the recession when another problem came along. The people who owned the house where I was living had decided to sell up and live in Spain. Things had been going just fine for them. Just ducky. No grim hiatus in thier lives. So they gave me a month's notice, put the house on the market and went off to have a baby, bask in the sun and smoke dope. Without a job I couldn't get another place to rent. The only option open to me, short of dragging a cardboard box down to the Embankment, was to take up my parents' offer of accomodation in East Bloody Garforth, a safe retreat. It felt like surrender.

— *Nigel E Richardson*
 "Just Ducky"
Lip 6, September 1991

Computer contractors weren't the only victims of the yuppie boom of the '80s. The housing market was just as perfidious and people scrambled to get a toe-hold in a shoe box before it went beyond their means. **Lesley Ward** talks about her experiences when she and her partner Brian went into home ownership just before the bubble burst.

Lots of people have been badly burned by the property trap. Some of them maybe should have known better. Many of them are in a far worse situation than we are. Looking back at the False Boom years with hindsight, it is so easy to see how badly stacked a deck of cards it was and how far it was going to fall. It did seem to make sense to buy somewhere at the time, if we ever wanted to be able to buy a place at all. All we could afford was a one bedroomed flat, prices were rising all the time and we'd been turned down on getting a mortgage by a couple of other places before we approached the HPC. The fact that a couple like us, both at work, with a quite decent combined salary, found it difficult even to get a mortgage on so modest a home maybe should have warned me that there was something very artificial about these high prices. Still, from my background, I'd had the idea that only rich people actually BOUGHT their homes. Families like mine lived in council houses. My parents had actually bought the council house they'd lived in for years, shortly after I'd moved away. (It was a bargain price offer for long-standing tenants.)

What with it being a bargain and being in the Midlands rather than the Southeast, their house was a lot cheaper than our flat!

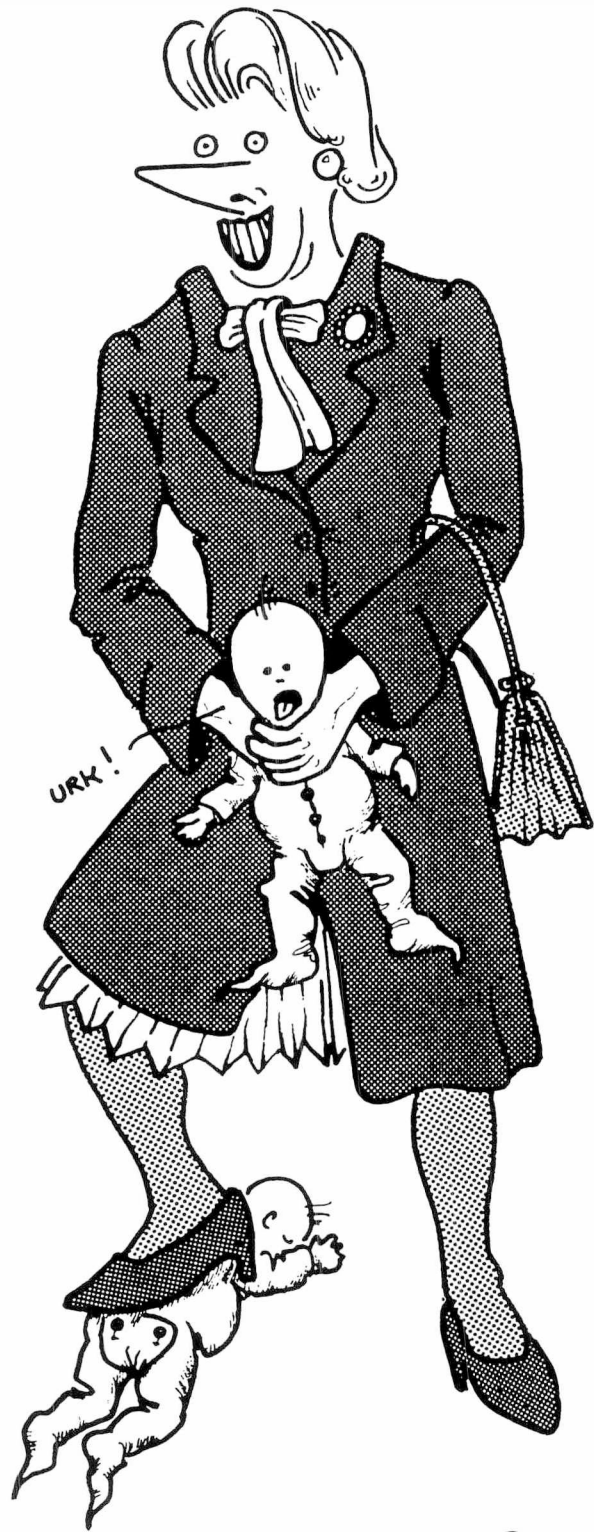
It had taken all their savings and Dad's redundancy money, but they were glad they had bought it. Brian's parents had finished paying off their mortgage and were enjoying a very comfortable retirement, with no such bills anymore and plenty of holidays.

I'd certainly been well impressed with the notion that it was ALWAYS a good idea to buy rather than rent if you were well off enough to do so.

Although I was happy enough in the rented flat we'd been living in, I didn't disagree when Brian wanted us to buy a place.

I couldn't feel all that enthusiastic about it: paying more to move from one small flat to another wasn't exactly a rise in living standards, although I was keen on having a garden. The small, disgruntled voice in my head kept saying that, if you had to pay so much for so little in order to buy a place, what was so wrong with staying in rented places anyway? Unfortunately, I ignored it. Preposterous as it was to be paying 41 grand for a small place like this, it did seem like we were doing the right thing. A year later prices reached their peak. We saw places like ours advertised for 50 grand and I decided that my doubts had been silly. Then came the long drawn-out crash . . . In this area, property prices are still falling and there seems to be no end to this trend. Since we have both changed jobs and are

LAVISH CRONE



shock news...
government retains stranglehold on
britain!

earning quite a bit more than we were and prices are cheaper, we could now afford to buy a decent sized house. Somewhere I could feel some enthusiasm about living in, rather than a place bought because we'd both believed it was the sensible thing to do.

However, we have been trying to sell the flat for two years and no-one is buying. So we're stuck here, with the place getting ever more and more cluttered, feeling more and more claustrophobic and frustrated.

— Lesley Ward
TWP

While a few fans were directly affected by the government's economic policies, the rest were able to shrug and get on with life as usual. Most though would be prepared to give their opinion of the government over a beer, if not in print. Ian Sorensen thought he was going one better when he found himself approached by a pollster:

After years of worrying about what was wrong with my appearance — was I too scruffy? too intelligent looking? too male? — I finally got stopped and asked my opinions by a pollster. Imagine my delight when I wasn't asked about my favourite washing-up liquid or cat food but what I thought of the government. Joy oh joy!

The questions came at me very fast but I reckon I got all the answers right: Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the government? *Dissatisfied*. Do you think John Major is a good prime minister? *No*. Do you think Neil Kinnock would make a good prime minister? *No*. Do you think Paddy Ashdown would make a good prime minister? *Yes, compared to the other two*. Which party do you think has the best policies for running the country? *Lib Dem*. How did you vote last time? *Lib Dem*. Then some questions about my socioeconomic position and it was on to part 2 — what did I think of the latest batch of British Gas adverts?

"Hold on," I thought. "Since when were gas ads an indicator of confidence in the government? Surely I should be being asked about the latest Party Politicals? Did Sean Connery doing a voice-over sway me towards the Scot Nats or simply make me think he had finally gone senile?" But no, British Gas had paid for a survey too and they were determined to find out what I thought about their ads. I must say that telling British Gas they've wasted a fortune getting Larry Hagman, Burt Reynolds and Bob Hoskins to sell their products was a big let down compared to the major blow I'd just dealt Conservative Central Office and the boyos at Transport House.

Ian comforted himself for the lost opportunity by wondering how much difference a change of government would make in any case:

Although I abhor the present government's attitude to just about everything, I feel sorry for the youngsters who can't remember a time before Thatcher and who think a Labour Government would be better. The one thing age gives you is the comforting knowledge that all governments are inept and will screw up in just the same ways. I'm tempted to launch into a protracted analogy linking politics and Worldcons but life is too short. In any case, I can't decide whether Vince Docherty and Tim Illingworth are more like Thatcher and Hesselstine or Kinnock and Hattersley.

I can't remember ever seeing anything about politics in fanzines, even at the times of elections. Joseph Nicholas has done a great many essays on nuclear disarmament in zines and has taken the vocabulary of Marxist Leninism as his own, but I don't recall much from him on straight party political issues — he usually concerns himself with geopolitics and the environment. Assuming the general election is next Spring perhaps we should spend some time discussing the real world in our fanzines, just for a change.

I have the impression that there are very few openly true blue Tories out there (except Pete Weston) and that any rabidly anti-Thatcher statements that have appeared did not necessarily mean the person making them was a Labour supporter, simply a person of good taste. In conversation with fans I've found Liberal or SDP the most common preference. Rather than indicating a wishy-washiness in fandom I reckon it shows a realisation that both the big parties are too tied down to rigid dogmas to offer any chance of rational policies being implemented.

— Ian Sorensen
"How I Brought Down the Government"
BOB? 2, October 1991

Top Five SF Books Politicians Should Read

Stand on Zanzibar — John Brunner
The Dispossessed — Ursula Le Guin
Islands in the Net — Bruce Sterling
1984 — George Orwell
The Man in The High Castle — Philip K. Dick

Top Five SF Authors For Politicos To Read

John Brunner
Iain Banks
Robert A. Heinlein
Kim Stanley Robinson
Philip K. Dick

(Matrix 98 poll, February 1992)

Spring 1992 did see the long awaited general election which many thought would finally oust the Tory government, or at least leave them in a minority. The election where the public told the pollsters one thing, then snuck into the polling station and voted shame-facedly to preserve the status quo. Fandom was sufficiently shaken from its normal apathy to start a political apa which reached at least two issues, featuring the usual suspects such as Abigail Frost, Roz Kaveney and Ken Brown.

But on the whole, fans remained happier writing about their own lives, and focussing their politics on the personally meaningful. Maureen Speller for example decided to stop subscribing to the big green organisations and embark on her own private recycling project, the lynch pin of which was the worm bin:

The worm bin sat in the garden all summer. After some months of inactivity, I discovered I wasn't supposed to be throwing teabags into it because the tea-leaves were too acidic, and I assumed that the worms had died. Having decided to go and get some more worms — easily available at all good fishing shops, though without the plastic dustbin — I went to scrape out the bin, only to discover that the worms were alive and well and thriving on tannin. So, I carried on throwing in rubbish, and carried on throwing in my neighbour's rubbish and the worm bin sat doing its stuff.

Come the cold weather, processing does slow down, the leaflet warns, and I noticed that the level of the rubbish was gradually rising. Then, during the cold snap over Christmas, I realised

that the bin was freezing solid. Poor worms, what was going to happen to them? After all those struggles with acid and drought during the summer I couldn't bear the thought of losing them to the frost so one night we dragged the worm bin into the house and carried it down to the cellar where we tenderly covered it in old blankets and hoped the worms would survive. They must have been killing themselves laughing.

When I investigated the bin several days later, not only had it thawed out but the comparative warmth of the cellar had put the worms in overdrive. Squirming masses of tiny, white threads — I assume, baby worms — were falling into the cellar floor, because the babies slip out through the gaps between bin and lid. Every time I open the bin the top of the rubbish is a heaving, squelching, glistening mass of tiger worms, munching their way through my household rubbish, and falling out when they get a chance.

The next move is to move them back into the garden to cool their ardour. I also need to acquire a second worm bin to keep the process going, as well as converting the outdoor dustbin into a compost store. In the meantime, I'm treading very carefully in the cellar, hoping I don't squidge my little wriggling friends, and helping them back into the bin.

— *Maureen Speller*
TWP 78, early 1993

Other fans also tended to be keener on issue than party politics. **Judith Hanna** has been talking about public transport policy for some time but has also diversified to more general green economic ideas — like how to cultivate one's garden:

□ This year, you will have gathered, has been different. This year, I've taken up permaculture in a big way. This year, we have a properly theorised backyard ecology.

Permaculture as I see it is mostly commonsense. The main reason it has had to be written up by Bill Mollison as a weighty and expensive Permaculture Designers Manual is because being brought up with common sense pottering about in your parents' own garden or farm growing your own food and acquiring a feel for how things grow is not easy in the average city. The other reason is it is kinda useful to have a compendium of others' experiences of what works under different conditions. The basic principles are:

Work with nature, rather than against it: for instance, rather than spraying aphids, move ladybirds and their larvae onto the rose bushes or lettuces. Likewise hoverfly larvae. This, of course, would be easier if the organic gardening books actually showed you what these helpful larvae look like.

The problem is the solution: that is, making use of what's there rather than fighting it. Slug tea is the perfect example. A recipe passed on to me by Yvonne Rousseau, it involves putting your local gastropod into a solution of about three parts water to one part sugar, plus a good pinch of salt. This upsets the osmotic balance, just like the traditional saucer of beer. Allow them to brew for a while. Then use the malodorous solution, diluted by up to ten, as a slug and snail repellent spray. Logical enough: you'd keep away from something that smelled of dead humans. Basically, instead of Joseph's nightly mollusc patrol horribly crushing, slicing and mangling the critters, they are cast into the brew, and their carcasses help keep their kinsfolk from the plants we don't want them to nibble. Seems to work.

Make the least change for the greatest possible effect: *laissez-faire* ecology, with cleverness valued over sweat and brute force. I guess my version is shaking self-seeding plants, like forget-me-nots, alyssum, foxgloves, honesty and pansies over the patches where I would like them to show up next year. Or, particularly in a mini-garden like ours, going for plants which are both edible and decorative, such as nasturtiums,

Political Events

1987

General election
Conservative majority
(375 seats, 13,760,525 votes)

1988

Beginning of property slump

1989

Privatisation of water industry

1990

Privatisation of electricity industry

1990

Margaret Thatcher removed

1991

Abolition of poll tax

1992

General election
Conservative majority
(336 seats, 14,048,283 votes)

1994

Privatisation of post office defeated

1995

John Major clings on to leadership of Tory party

which make a terrific peppery leaf for salads. Laziness as a virtue — or at least as cleverer than working up a lather.

— *Judith Hanna*
"The Urban Jungle"
FTT 15, October 1993

But are personal concerns about the world replacing traditional political activities? **Joseph Nicholas** comments:

□ The media's obsession with Parliamentary politics and traditional parties might lead one to believe that no other form of political activity is possible. Yet the suggestion that political parties still represent anyone other than themselves is absurd. Real-world (as distinct from Parliamentary) politics now is not class-based but issue-based, leaving politicians floundering well behind popular opinion. Such fragmentation reflects the diversity of modern culture, and thus the diversity of modern dissent — a dissent which the government clearly doesn't understand and to which it doesn't know how to respond. The Criminal Justice Act is a near-perfect expression of this: it sees people doing something it doesn't like, and can only deal with it by passing a law against it. "Part Five of The Criminal Justice Act is widely seen as a direct attack on the young," wrote Camilla Berens, co-ordinator of the Freedom Network, in *New Statesman & Society* for 3 February 1995. "But the criminalisation of direct action, the clampdown on the pursuit of alternative lifestyles and free parties and festivals has only succeeded in bringing more and more young people together and uniting them in a common struggle" — never mind that the deliberate repression of travellers, ravers, squatters, hunt saboteurs, and motorway protesters is scarcely likely to stop people *thinking* about alternatives to the present system. The Act is an old-style response to a new-style challenge — a challenge which, because

it is indirect, cannot be blunted by direct repression — and more importantly, an implicit acknowledgment that the government — that traditional, 'mainstream', party-based politics as a whole — had lost the struggle for political and cultural hegemony. But then this is hardly surprising: having never paid attention to the world beyond Parliament, party politicians now have no idea how to re-establish their authority over it.

The D-I-Y ethos characteristic of those aged 19-24 (and to a certain extent those aged 25-34 as well) may be invisible to politicians and the media, but is growing nevertheless. Where former generations marched in the streets *against* something, the modern generation gets on with something constructive — and is then called "apathetic" by politicians and the media solely *because* they don't march in the streets; an accusation which further alienates them from traditional politics and politicians. But then what do men in suits have to offer, other than their own pomposity and stupidity?

That's what the youth of the sixties rebelled against, of course. But whereas they wanted the revolution to happen overnight ("London, Paris, Rome, Berlin — we shall fight and we shall win!"), today's revolutionaries are in it for the longer haul. In addition, today's revolutionaries seek not merely a quantitatively but also a qualitatively different society — whereas the rebels of the sixties sought to replace the certainties of the right with the certainties of the left, their contemporaries have recognised that for all practical purposes 'left' and 'right' are identical. In their reliance on the technocratic approach, their embrace of systemisation and hierarchy, their attempt to order the world from the top down, organised political parties of left and right share far more than divides them, and certainly far more than they realise or will admit. Harold Wilson's "white heat of the technological revolution", Newt Gingrich's "information superhighway" — is there really any difference?

The counter to the 'mainstream' political view of the world is environmentalism: the drive to reconnect human society to the natural world from which the Industrial Revolution separated it. Environmentalism poses so direct a threat to the technocratic worldview that the only surprising thing about the "greenlash" of the environmental contrarians is that it has been so long in coming. But, like the government's Criminal Justice Act, the contrarians have missed their target. Seizing on the more lurid predictions of the sixties' and seventies' doomsayers, and arguing that because these have not materialised today's threats to the biosphere are also exaggerated, the contrarians overlook the extent to which concern for the environment has penetrated everyday thinking — ignore, in fact, the paradigm shift taking place across the industrialised world. People who buy CFC-free refrigerators, grow their own organic vegetables, join LETS schemes, invest in energy-saving and insulation for their homes, persuade their local councils to adopt traffic calming schemes, publish newsletters for the local peace or environment groups, boycott the products of unsavoury regimes, participate in workshops on sustainable development — such activities are clearly indicative of something far deeper in its impact, and therefore more long-lasting than a panicky reaction to ecological doomsaying.

— Joseph Nicholas
FTT 17, April 1995

It is questionable how many fans outside the Nicholas/Hanna household are involved with any of these activities. Yet, there is a clear sense that today's fan is as uninterested in the old-style political issues of fandom, fanzines, fan funds as well — party politics. They are all out there in their own world, doing some very strange things.

More To Fandom Than Just A Pretty Beard

"And those beards. What was the deal? What was the correlation between an interest in low-grade genre fiction and *those beards*?" wrote a bemused Nigel Richardson in his short career as London yuppie. "I'd seen some prime examples at conventions, but each visit to the Wellington would throw up new specimens to be admired. Fresh-faced youths just out of school would be cultivating the sort of growths usually found on Norwegian submarine skippers . . ."

From the outside, fans seem to be a distinctly uncool set of people, anoraks of the first order. Yet, surely there is more to the fannish life style than a hankering for real cider and an expense account on the Internet. A few have broken the silence and revealed what they really get up to in their spare time. **Jaine Weddell**, for example, dons her magic armour and becomes, for a day at least, a Sunburnt Norse Goddess:

Live Rôle-Playing is a very different thing from sedentary rôle-playing, in that it is more rewarding when it does work, and more frustrating when it doesn't. Don't worry, I don't start seeing cars as dragons, say "thee" and "Aye" all the time or forget, in the back of my mind, who I will be when I leave. I am always aware, somewhere deep down, of the absurdity, nay immaturity, of a lot of the 'play-acting' side of it. You have to retain a sense of humour, because if you take it too seriously it becomes embarrassing. At the same time, LRP relies a lot on the sincerity and honesty of the players.

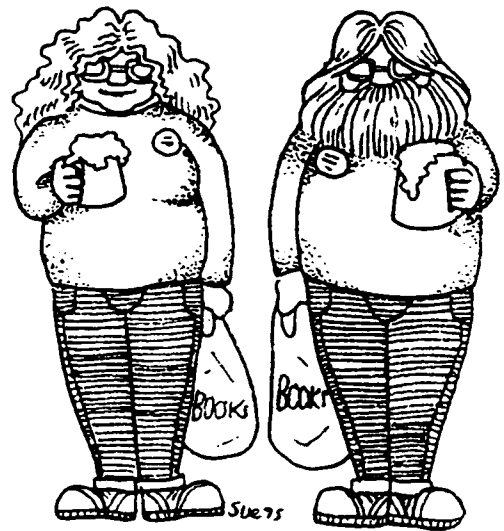
Its main advantage is that it is a lot easier to stay 'in character' because all the time you are there you live the game. Actually probably less than half of my conversations last weekend were truly in character, but the shift was very subtle, and even out-of-character conversations were never mundane. There was a camaraderie, a kind of 'all loonies together' atmosphere, which meant you could strike up out of character conversations with complete strangers, and then by a conversational process which I would love to analyse, slip into character (I did, as part of my linguistics degree, a conversational analysis on a game of Runequest I had recorded without the players knowledge: oh, the intricacies of dominance and submission).

So, what, other than drinking and hitting each other, goes on?

Well, there are actual adventures for groups of about 10 people, which take place outside the main areas, but these were heavily over-subscribed. However, the political set up was enough to give plenty of excitement and entertainment. The Gathering always ends with a bloody great battle (about 1500 people fought this year), but exactly who fights who and why is something which evolves over the weekend.

Being part of a re-creation battle is, like riding a motorbike and chemical experimentation, one of those things that I think everyone should do (just kidding). It is a very strange experience though. Incredibly confused, frightening (even though I knew I was perfectly safe both in and out of character), wildly exhilarating. I hate violence, but those couple of hours were utterly wonderful. I felt enervated, and it wasn't until later that I realised I had been constantly moving — running mostly — for about an hour and a half and was totally exhausted, seriously dehydrated, and sunburnt. But we won. And I will never forget being cheered by 3000 battle-weary soldiers at the end of it all.

— **Jaine Weddell**
"Sunburnt Norse Goddess"
TWP 84, October 1993



Sue Mason

Just a little bit stranger than playing normal rôle-playing-games, perhaps. But what about *Rocky Horror* fandom? **Bridget Hardcastle** considers the matter:

I wouldn't call *Rocky Horror* an obsession of mine but people keep saying it is, which got me thinking. So I know all the words to it — and the movements the characters make on screen. So I've made replicas of most of the costumes in the film, often at great cost and certainly a huge amount of time — searching for material just that right colour and texture, looking for shoes of a particular design, sewing and sewing and sewing sequins. So I act it out down in front of the screen every week, when I'm tired after a week's work and sometimes in pain. So I spend the odd Sunday morning rehearsing with the rest of the cast. I spend hours working on the programme, stuffing prop bags, dealing with preshow. I arrange my weekend social life around *Rocky Horror* (to the extent of missing the odd Friday night at an SF con — ghasp!). I carry a huge bag with at least six changes of costume. I go on the odd tour date (traipsing across the country in the dead of night to somewhere like Eastbourne or Leicester that wants us to do a show on a Saturday night). I keep going even through times of cast strife and long and involved phone calls, times of cast lethargy, times of angst, infighting and despair, times of being messed around at short notice, time after time of waiting for the night bus and not getting home till 3am. I spend lots of time and money on it, I work my life around it. Am I obsessed? Is RHAWOL?



“Get on with the show!”
“We are the fucking show!”

Bridget Hardcastle

Sometimes crap happens — we’ve arrived at tour venues to find there is no changing area near the stage, or been given a room with a glass door, next to the Gents’ toilet, and all the gents stare in at us between rounds of Bingo in the next door room.

We’ve performed to a film running at television speed (and yes, it does make a difference, especially in the quick costume changes), and a film with huge cuts in it, making us leap across the stage. We’ve played at the Prince Charles for weeks with no carpet, just a concrete floor with nails sticking out of it, and with a big blue plastic car in the corner of the stage area.

We’ve had cast members leave giving no notice, taking their and other people’s costumes with them and we’ve had troubles from cinema management and irate parents.

So why do I do it? When it’s good it’s very good. It’s showbiz fantasy fulfilment — you too can be Steve Martin, ABBA or the MC from *Cabaret* in preshow without ever having to sing a note. (Am I a frustrated drag artiste?) You get to dress up as a character and behave abnormally. Everyone knows the form, and what you’re doing, so you can dance with strangers in the audience, eat from their hands, sit on their laps, without it getting nasty or people getting the wrong idea. You can shout in the cinema, in union with everyone else for a particular line or yelling out some topical joke in a quiet moment to crack up the audience. The participation script is always changing as we adopt new, funnier lines to replace things that were topical five years ago. When you’ve been a part of helping the audience to really enjoy their night out it gives you a real sense of achievement.

But now I’ll come clean about why I come to *Rocky* — it’s just an excuse to wear women’s underwear!

— *Bridget Hardcastle*
“My favourite obsession”
Obsessions 4, April 1995

But after all, maybe this comes as no surprise, people have been doing weird things to *Rocky Horror* for a number of years. But the logical next step is to do the same to, well,

absolutely anything, or in this case *Absolutely Fabulous*.
Alison Freebairn explains about her friend Darren:

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the glamorous splendour that is Darren Scott, let me explain.

He’s an *Absolutely Fabulous* fan and a fanzine fan. He’s published *Women of Wandsworth* (*Prisoner: Cell Block H*), been involved with *Paisley Pattern* (*Doctor Who*), writes fiction and has recently been the driving force behind the multi-media SF ‘zine *Talking Cabbage*.

He is now heading for even more notoriety as co-editor of *Ella* — the world’s first coffee-table fanzine. Yes, it is an *Ab Fab* zine, named after the magazine that Patsy Stone attempts to work on in-between picking up window cleaners at the traffic lights.

He’s smart, sassy, witty and more camp than an all-night showing of *Carry On* movies at the local fleapit. On a particularly outrageous day — and with a large enough audience — Darren can make Julian Clary look like the Terminator. He can make Divine look like Henry Rollins.

We were quaking in our boots at the thought of what lay in store when we went to see an episode of the series being taped [with Darren].

Would he stamp his feet at the security men, demanding to see the lovely Joanna? When Julia Sahwala appeared would he scream “SLUT!”?

When Jennifer Saunders walked on stage, would he leap up shouting: “No! No, dahling! I’m Edina! Get off the stage, sweedie, I’m the star. Me! Me!”

Amazingly enough, he did none of these things.

He did feel slightly uncomfortable at one point, as this was all new and for the first time in months, he couldn’t speak the lines at the same time as the characters, but apart from that he was fine.

— *Alison Freebairn*
“Travels with my camp”
From The Kelpie’s Pool 2, November 1994

Somehow it comes as no surprise to find that Darren is also a *Rocky Horror* fan. But not all of fandom's alternative lifestyles centre round campy cultish shows. Fandom shares territory with other obscure or submerged sub-cultures and across its thinly defined borders come emissaries from a *demi-monde* of threateningly non-mainstream sexualities and bodily pleasures (or pains).

Steve Green's late 1994 issue of *Gaijin* looked at "secret fears and private pleasures", producing a compendium of personal writing that ran the gamut through nightmares and death to nakedness, tattooing and body piercing. This is **Jenny Fields** on the joys of the last mentioned:

My Recent Piercing

... was the most intensely painful experience I have ever had. Yet I cherish my little bit of cunt metal and I relish the memories of the pain.

Yes, I do fantasise about the pain I had, but it's not quite as simple as that. Pain on its own bores me — no, less than that: it does *nothing* for me. Unless, of course, I am giving the pain to another, in which case it is not *just* pain, it is Pain and Power. Pain combined with something else, something pleasurable.

But back to the piercing

No one else in the room knew this, but I was combining the pain of the piercing with a wonderful pleasure.

My male companion was watching. I am an exhibitionist at heart.

Both at once. Pain and pleasure both at once are what creates the excitement. Pain can be boring and pleasure can be bland; add the two together and you get suspense, sensation.

I was panting and sobbing and holding my breath all at once and I could feel what must have been a needle through my flesh (it didn't just feel like a needle through flesh, though; it felt as if the needle was pushed through flesh covered with nettle-sting lumps). I think the piercer was waiting until I had calmed down a bit, as the anaesthetic had hardly worked at all. He said, "Just one more push and we're through, okay? Just one more little push." And then came the industrial strength staple gun.

And while my companion was stroking my face and calming me down and drying my tears and rubbing my throbbing hip, the jewellery was put into me, finishing the job, and I didn't even notice.

I had forced my friend to watch, although his own curiosity dictated that he did it willingly. He did not expect to see so much pain, though, so many tears, so much wincing, writhing and screaming. The pain did not turn me on. It turned me on to have him see me in that pain, to watch me bleed; especially — and here's the icing on the cake — as he was a relative stranger to sadomasochistic activities. I mean, *him*? He's a vegan, pro-animal rights pacifist; he's not into enjoying pain! But he watched, all right, mesmerised, until my screams became too much and he jumped up and gripped my hand.

So that was the start of a good weekend.

— **Jenny Fields**
"My Recent Piercing"
Gaijin 4, November 1994

One of the oddest bastard offsprings of strange sexual interests and fannish pursuits has to be slash fandom: a weirdly popular fandom in which predominantly straight women write stories about fictional heterosexual media/sf heroes having homosexual sex with each other. **Moir** Shearman attempts to explain the attraction:



Sue Mason

I'd heard a lot about slash, and more specifically K/S {Kirk/Spock — eds.} for years and apart from the production of *Spock in Manacles* that was done at Beccon in '85, I had never actually read or seen anything much until Jane {Carnall} started to publish her *Professionals* slash. I had this mental image that it was all pure sexual fantasy, titillation for fans who felt they wanted to be screwed by the character of their dreams and though up a relationship between that character and the only person they could perceive that could get that close to their hero / heroine.

Now though I see there is much, much more. For me it all seems tied to trust and safety being more important in a relationship than 'grand passion'. And there is also an element of empathy with a character's fear of being outcast being overturned by the sureness of love from their partner. And perhaps from my love of Celtic tragedy the element of bittersweet joy at the overcoming of seemingly insurmountable odds (otherwise why do I find it much more satisfactory to read about male-male bonding than male-female, is it just because the male characters in the series I like are the only ones that have a slightly less 2-D feel to them?)

— **Moir Shearman**
Extract from "Dragonesque"
TWP 76, November 1992

Well, when you're talking about Classic *Trek* and *The Man from Uncle*, perhaps yes. One interesting suggestion that came out of this article was a slash romance between Princesses Di and Fergie . . .

But in the end, however many bizarre ways fans discover to indulge sexual fantasies, weirder ways of relating to TV shows, stranger ways to put needles into their anatomies, the truth is that the consumer accessory most fans covet is not a customised vibrator but — you guessed it — a fully functional state of the art computer . . .

Fans Are Virtually Slans

OR
A Brief History of Computers in Post-Conspiracy Fandom

In these ante-millennial days when mundane periodicals like *Radio Times* and *Personnel Management Weekly* teem with mentions of the Internet, the World Wide Web, the information superhighway and the electronic frontier, it's hard to credit that back in the late seventies, computers largely meant two things to UK fandom: a source of employment (even then most conrunners moonlighted as systems analysts) and a source of amusement as a platform for what would now be seen as laughably primitive games Our first extract harks back to those days of untainted innocence, when all you needed for a good time was a BBC computer, a bad fantasy novel and a string-matching function:

The last bad attack of Language I had was due to intensively playing *The Hobbit* (computer game). The three of us who were battling our way through the disappearing Thorins, unhelpful elves and out-to-lunch Beorns, quickly acquired the habit of talking thus:

Sue to Graham: "Say to Graham, want coffee?"
 Graham to Sue: "Graham says yes"
 Margaret to no-one in particular: "Drat!"
 Graham to Margaret: "I cannot DRAT"
 Sue to nobody in particular: "You enter the kitchen. Possible exits are South. You see the kettle. The coffee. The Gandalf."
 Margaret and Graham, simultaneously: "KILL GANDALF!"
 Sue to nobody in particular: "Take kettle. Kill Gandalf with kettle."
 Graham to Sue: "With one well-placed blow, you cleave the kettle. You cannot make coffee now. You are dead. You have completed 12.5% of this game."

— Sue Thomason
 Letter to *Kamera Obskura* 5, 1989

A mere six years later, computer games have seemingly moved on from low grade orienteering exercises to the creation of virtual worlds. But does this make them more entertaining? **Simon Ounsley** explores the moral chasms opened up by intensive playing of *Civilisation*, addictive epitome of the genre of world creation games:

A desire to succeed

Civilisation is all-consuming. Five minutes into a game and I'm caught up entirely in the struggles of my tribe to survive and prosper. Founding a city, developing defences, researching the technology to develop iron, the wheel, the alphabet. Equipping my cities with a market-place, city walls, an aqueduct. Fending off attacks by barbarians and other civilisations. Exploring the world, looking for new territory in which to develop other cities, establishing trade links and diplomatic relations with other civilisations, picking out those who are weak enough to go to war against, defending myself against those who are stronger and better developed than I am. Weighing the relative merits of monarchy, democracy or communism as a form of government. Slowly moving forward, developing physics, chemistry, mass production, building factories, power plants, mass transit

systems. Financing Shakespeare's theatre, Michelangelo's Chapel, or Darwin's Voyage; the Hoover dam, the United Nations, a cure for cancer. Slowly edging forward to the point where space flight is possible. making sure that the infrastructure is in place to produce the space-ships as soon as I have the technology. Trying to beat my rivals to Alpha Centauri

It's only a game of course. But when I glance at the clock after what seems like only a short time after sitting down to play, I invariably find that hours have gone by. During that time, I haven't been thinking about reality at all. I've been locked into an alternative world in which the Zulus have developed genetic engineering, the English have built the pyramids, and the Aztecs have invented the automobile

This has all been very therapeutic on the days when I haven't been feeling very well, when it's been a relief to forget about reality for a while. But as a way of life . . . ? It worries me that I could quite happily spend all of my time playing this game, replacing not only the writing but also living my life. It's fun. It's engrossing. But of course, it's ultimately a futile activity. It achieves nothing outside of a small box with a micro-processor inside it. I play, I beat the opposition, but when I switch off the box it's all as though nothing has happened.

. . . Exit to DOS

A few weeks ago, I turned forty. I'd intended to have my mid-life crisis while I was ill and get it over with all neat and tidy. But obviously I didn't succeed. I feel it coming on me now.

The other day, I had a sudden nightmare vision of my life. I saw it in terms of a game of *Civilisation*.

I'd been listening to that radio programme I mentioned about the Henley Centre for Forecasting and they'd predicted — as we have been predicting for years — the onset of post-literate barbarism. What they actually said was that by the end of the decade, the business of reading books would be a lot less common than it is today, but that sounds like it amounts to very much the same sort of thing. And it suddenly brought it home to me that by the time I made it as a writer, if I ever did, books would have gone out of fashion anyway. And it occurred to me that it was quite likely my life would end in what could readily be perceived as failure.

After all, here I was — probably now beyond the halfway point in my life and what had I achieved? No family, no job, I haven't even managed to finish a novel yet. In other words, it was 1500 AD and I was still working on inventing the wheel. I was

standing there with my legions and my crude sailing vessels, watching the Aztecs sailing past in their battleships. I was working on building a market-place while they were building factories and hydro-electric plants. And the worst thing was: this wasn't a game, it was the real thing. I was stuck with it whether I liked it or not. I couldn't just grab hold of the mouse and drag the arrow over to the 'Exit to DOS' button. I couldn't just start all over again tomorrow. There is no such facility. We just have to stick with the game until we reach the end. What a lousy piece of programming.

Damn again.

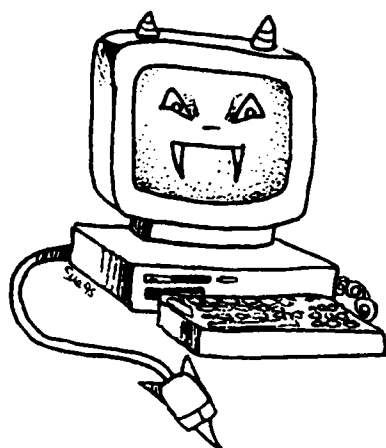
— *Simon Ounsley*
Lagoon 4, May 1993

But games, even good games like *Civilisation*, are not, sad to say, what most fans end up using computers for most the time. Every survey of this period revealed that 181% of employed male fans worked in the computer industry (the other 78% being librarians). This influence became overt in the conrunning business as committee meetings turned away from the old concerns of room rates and how many mushrooms for breakfast and increasingly focussed on the mysteries of milestones, Gant charts and deliverables. In 1995, it seems like no self-respecting Worldcon can afford to appear in public without its own handcrafted database program. Meanwhile, here's **Dave Langford** suffering the hazards of software delivery deadlines and describing a bad attack of Pascal syntax syndrome:

"Software," said Charles Platt in menacing tones, "is a *discase*. Never get into software, Dave."

I laughed. They laughed when I sat at the keyboard, but then I started to hack the operating system. There comes a turning point in life when with horror you find yourself thinking `If (DayOfWeek=Thursday) and (DayOfMonth in [15..21]) then DoBSFAMeeting; ...` with a semicolon.

It is a bad sign when you end sentences with a semicolon.



Sue Mason

The program counter clicked to the next instruction. `If BSFAMeeting and (Month=January) and FoolishPromiseToPaulKincaid[November] then OhShit;`

I was a featured speaker. I had been writing nothing but software for a solid month, and my brain was firmly embedded in one of those spaces that Bill Gibson writes about but never, never visits. I ported myself along a British Rail communications interface to the Paddington data terminal and . . . stop that . . . got to the celebrated BSFA pub. Buzzing fragments of indexing routines were milling behind my eyes before I'd so much as touched a drop, while before my eyes was Gamma, who had touched a drop.

"Accept data," this sf landmark seemed to say. "I am now Barrington J. Bayley's literary agent. Data entry terminates." He fell over.

Unreality error in central processor, I thought. Some ideas are too perfect and appropriate to be spoiled like this by coming true.

"What's happening tonight?" "I think it's a slide show."
"What?" "The barman said." "No, Langford's talking." "Oh, him." "What about?"

"Himself. As usual," interposed Greg Pickersgill.

Thinks: If I open my mouth, all that will come out is 64 kilobytes of hex core dump and error messages.

"Slide show . . . ?" "Gosh, they've arranged the chairs in rows for us. They never did that for the BoSFA before." "Langford's going to . . ."

"Who are you lot?" said the new arrival with the slide projector, before anyone could ask him to renew his membership.

"You didn't confirm your booking," added an implacable barman shortly afterwards, logic centres firmly locked against unauthorised tampering. Had he taken massive bribes from slide-show organisers? No, once again it seemed that a committee person had faithfully followed the traditional BSFA algorithm of `If AllSeemsWell then Repeat DoNothing until CockUp;`

Over the ensuing squabble came doomy Pickersgillian rumbles of "THIS IS SHABBY! THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE A NATIONAL ORGANISATION!"

I huddled in a corner, trying to scrape semicolons from the ends of my thoughts and wondering if I was going to be let off. But Gamma was slurring into a telephone with the resource and acumen which has made him what he is today (i.e. a man whose income is 10% of poverty-stricken Barry Bayley's). In mere minutes, powerful data compression routines had squeezed the entire meeting into the legendary Troy Club.

This, as will emerge, was all too appropriate. A venue resembling the Black Hole of Calcutta though less airy and wholesome, the Troy Club is best known as the site of innumerable launch parties for Brosnan / Kettle collaborations called things like *Spew* and *Secretions*.

"You should join," secreted Gamma, fondling a representative of the management. "All sorts of sf people are members. Terry Pratchett, and, er, me . . . and there's Terry Pratchett, and whatisname who write those *Discworld* books, and, and . . ."

system in naked terror mode, I conveyed. Unable to accept input.

Mr Kincaid had decided I was giving a talk after all. The eager BSFA crowd was pressed hard against my chest, making it something of a challenge to draw breath and hold them spellbound. I duly failed to hold them spellbound with the story of the unpublished *Guts!* — called by Ramsey Campbell "The first horror novel I don't even dare to read!" — which had become the first horror novel that even Grafton Books don't dare publish.

(They accepted and paid for it in 1987; by the week of that BSFA meeting they'd just licked their way into breach of contract for non-publication. Over the last year the authors have fielded upwards of eight hundred enquiries about publication date — six of them not from Neil Gaiman — by advising that seekers after truth write to Grafton editor Nick Austin and bother him. Nick himself dives under tables and out of windows when he sees me coming.)

Better to draw a veil over my reading from the *Guts!* chapters tastefully called "The Chyme of Midnight" and "The Lights Are Going Out", which probably went `Repeat ReadWordNotLoudEnough; If EndOfSentence then PauseNotLongEnough; until End OfMS; ...` Like that but less terse and exciting. My audience seemed to be many echoing miles distant, a neat trick in a bar scarcely larger than a British Rail toilet.

Eventually firm hands were pressing beer on me, too late to lubricate thoughts still all tangled in algorithms and program loops. Abi Frost and Avedon Carol united to claim the existence of deep structural flaws in the programming of my outmoded hairstyle. I tried to explain to Owen Whiteoak that he'd taken and quoted with ghastly seriousness a remark ("Do we all have to gafiate now?") which I'd made with cheerful irony. He looked blank, as so frequently he does. I failed to convince Paul Kincaid that important parts of me seemed to have been left behind in random-access memory. Gamma gave an impressive demonstration of how much spittle he could balance in his beard before falling over again. Greg Pickersgill probably said something. I probably misheard it.

Next morning, eyes still not quite in focus (which had been routine for two weeks), I toyed with the idea, glimpsed dimly at the BSFA thrash, of writing some science fiction. But the programming work was calling and there was no time. Charles Platt was right, you know.

If (Software=Disease)

If (Blood=PriceOfAdmiralty)

Question := (ToBe) or (Not ToBe)

Is anyone out there well-informed on the cold turkey cure?

— Dave Langford
"Jetbuff Ltd"
Pulp 12, Apr 1989

For example, some of the work I'm doing now involves software that generates reports and monitors warehouse stock levels just so that supervisors and middle-management boneheads can do their paperwork more effectively. (They now get reams of information they previously didn't know they needed. Bully for them.) The women packing crates of industrial-strength lardburgers and the men loading the crates onto lorries don't benefit much from it. Their jobs *could* be done by computer-controlled machines but people are a lot cheaper. An accounts clerk can be replaced by a computer costing about one tenth of a clerk's salary, but a machine that can pack eggs or pluck chickens would cost at least ten times what an egg-packer or chicken-plucker gets paid. It's a bit of a bad joke — but something I'm surprised never to have seen in print before — that the worse paid a person is the more expensive it would be to replace them by a machine. Take an office cleaner. How much would it cost to develop a machine that could move around an entire office block, scrubbing, polishing and hoovering all the appropriate surfaces (with the appropriate tools and chemicals), cleaning desks and putting all the papers and clutter back where it was afterwards, replacing toilet rolls in the bathrooms, filling soap dispensers, unblocking urinals, etc. etc. More than £2.50 an hour, or whatever office cleaners get paid. And inversely, most of the guys you find at board level could be replaced by a second-hand Amstrad PCW.

Or the box it came in.

— Nigel Richardson
"Giant Brains in Jars"
Slubberdegullion 7, August 1993

Langford's piece, written in 1989, pre-dates of course the Great Media Discovery of the Internet (only five years after fandom and academe had already netsurfed themselves rigid). Nigel Richardson describes poignantly the disillusionment of discovering that working in a Leeds software company is not all Web-crawling and mirror shades:

But enough of all this downmarket disaffection. Working with computers may be (whisper it) dull but what about all that zingy Internet stuff then, the World Wide Web, gopher,archie, Netscape, Usenet, Charles Stross and all the rest? Simon Bisson fills us in:

Giant Brains in Jars

One of the things that pisses me off working in IT is that I'm genuinely fascinated by the social and creative uses (and misuses) of information technology, interactive multi-media gadgets, and other high-tech gizmos — and I hate seeing it used for boring shit such as monitoring the movement of tins of corned beef into and out of warehouses. I mean, if I'm going to be a computer-nerd I want to be a nerd on the cutting edge: on-line, real-time, interfacing with giant brains in jars, flexing my data-glove and morphing through a 3-D fractal landscape, blah, blah, blah. But there's nothing resembling virtual reality where I'm working — there's hardly any *ordinary* reality either. The fax machine on the secretary's desk is the most hi-tech device in the office. I feel cheated — no babes and no modems. (What have I let myself in for?) C'mon guys, how am I supposed to hang out with my pals on the Net or download those curious GIF images from that BBS in Milan?

I suppose this is what I get for reading stuff like *Mondo 2000**, *Wired* and *Intertek*, which all tend to give the impression that working in Information Technology is a cool thing for hip grown-ups to do, when really it's still a world of white males with stunted social skills stuck in the dreariest of corporate backwaters, producing software that rarely makes life easier or more interesting for anyone. (Maybe things are different in California where a computer that isn't on-line is only half a computer, and even Bill Gates is getting laid these days.)

Once upon a time the idea was that computers would take care of all the shitwork, letting us all live meaningful lives in splendid luxury. Nice idea. Unfortunately, in most businesses, computers are used strictly for administration and accounting, stringently keeping track of manual, unskilled and low-paid employees and their workrate rather than doing anything to make their jobs more satisfying for them.

 The scene: a rented room in a parish hall.

The cast: assorted folk, of all ages, sexes, professions. Somewhere a laptop PC bleeps quietly. The person sat in the nearest seat glares at the machine's user, and they shut the machine down guiltily.

It's a meeting of the Net-surfers Anonymous. A young man in a Suicide Squid T-shirt stands up.

"Hello. My name is Simon Bisson, and, and . . . I'm an Internet user."

Brief applause.

"I've been a net user for 8 years now. It started out with a little casual student hacking, a bit of DOS, a bit of UNIX, exploring e-mail. Then I found it. Usenet. Back when the net was flat Those two little letters 'm' that opened out into a whole wide world. There must have been, oh, a hundred newsgroups. I was happy to read for a while, but soon the urge came upon me: I had to post"

The speaker looks down at his hands.

"So I wrote my first article. Something about the roots of cyberpunk for the old rec.sf-lovers. But I couldn't post . . . I didn't have permission So I asked for a one off privilege, and got it. But it wasn't a one off, I could do it again, and again, and again All those little words vanishing off into cyberspace, my deepest thoughts, my most casual follow-ups But it wasn't to last, I couldn't be a student forever, I had to get a job, I had to lose net-access.

"But the gods smiled on me. Within two years I was back at University, and this time, this time they were paying me. I found myself an account on the University computer as soon as possible. This time things were different. The net wasn't flat anymore, strange hierarchies, alt groups, flame wars . . . I flatter myself in with a vengeance. Thirty newsgroups and more a day, dipping in to everything that sat in my .newsrc.

"It was that summer that I found alt.callahans. 'Callahan's Bar for puns and fellowship' say the net-guides today. Back then it was still starting to make its mark, only six months old, a small quiet gathering of friends. I picked a virtual persona, a cartoon mouse based on George Herriman's Ignatz, and began to take part. I soon felt at home. I helped organise RealSpaces, when I put faces to the ASCII. The net was becoming an important part of my life. I started wearing the uniform of a net user, the identifying traits of the news groups I read: strange T-shirts, mountain boots

"Soon after that JANet joined the Internet completely. Now I could mainline: using IRC, telnet and ftp. Before the term was invented I was a net-surfer, following the trails of Usenet postings to sites all over the world, hunting text, programs, images. It was exhilarating, the world at my fingertips. I sported a customised PC, running the latest shareware, keeping ahead of the technology

"I met her in alt.callahans. Me, in a net.romance. That could never happen. But it did. Not as complex as some, for Mary lived in the same town as me"

He smiles.

"But again I had to lose the net. The money ran out, and I had to find my way to another job. Horror of horrors. No net-access, just e-mail. What would I do? The withdrawal symptoms were hard, the fingers trembled, my eyes ached, I needed a fix, I needed a net-connection. At work I kept reading how the net would revolutionise the world. I knew *that* already. I wanted it now

"Mary kept me up to date with alt.callahans, little packets of laser print dropping through the letter-box every week. Meanwhile I began to save for my own Internet connection, no longer trusting in the whims of employers. It took me 6 months. With the help of a friend on holiday in America I purchased an Apple PowerBook from Shreveport, Louisiana. Buying by phone from the States is easier than I thought. Just fax a photocopy of a credit card over the satellite links, and a machine is yours All you need to do is name it. Remembering an important childhood influence, I called it 'The Iron Chicken'.

"With a quick net-surf from work I was able to buy more memory and storage for The Iron Chicken. E-mail to the States, and a copy of *The Mac Internet Starter Kit*, a book and the software needed to connect a Mac to the Internet. The home net connection was almost there. Now I needed a modem. The yearly AppleExpo was the stalking ground for a modem hunt, with its myriad trade stands and boxshifters. I came back from Olympia with blistered feet, and a Zoom modem in my carrier bag. Another phone call was needed, this time to Finchley, where Demon Internet Services offer a net connection for their famous 'tenner a month'.

"So there I was, 'simon@fehen.demon.co.uk', a Mac, a modem, an Internet site. News, ftp, telnet, IRC, gopher: all pumped down the phone lines to my machine. I was a net.nomad with an Internet site in my backpack, just waiting for a phone line to be free. But I needed more: more power, more access, more information.

"A friend whispered to me the magic word 'Mosaic': a megabyte of interaction, a page of text and pictures that was a window into cyberspace. With just a click of a mouse button on a highlighted word (1) I could be anywhere. Text, sound, stills, video, files, programs: all linked on the World Wide Web. Hypertext the way Ted Nelson imagined when he wrote *Dream Machines* back in the 70s: information on tap, an intelligence amplifier pulling us up, up into the Singularity

"It's all there, all at your fingertips. And it's free! The interface of choice to the Internet, and no money changes hands. The National Centre For Supercomputer Applications in the US provides Mosaic for Macs, for X-systems, and, even, for Windows PCs. Copies available for anonymous ftp at src.doc.ic.ac.uk"

There's a rustle of coats, a scraping of chairs. The hall is emptying.

"What did I say?"

The last man out turns at the door.

"Meeting closed. We're off to log on and net-surf for Mosaic"

"Hey, wait for me."

He picks up the bag at his feet, hefts it to his shoulder, and runs off to catch up with the man.

"I know this really neat URL"

— Simon Bisson
"Confessions of a Net Junkie"
Etranger 11, 1994

And this fanthology isn't even appearing in multimedia format on CD-ROM, let alone have a Web site. Well, give it a few months.

Of course even the Internet has its dark side if you look hard. Fast forward to a slightly older and wiser Langford, discovering in 1995 the perils as well as pleasures of ever more ubiquitous fanfash access to electronic mail:

When fans muttered of electronic mail and quoted irritating little 'net addresses' with @signs swarming in them like horrid bacteria, I used to be reminded of Larry Niven's *The Integral Trees*. There's this vast breathable free-fall environment (typical late-period Niven: mindboggling research, shame about the plot) in which generations of human colonists have been having fun while their spaceship's artificial intelligence broods outside to a refrain of "What were they doing in there?" 'I don't need to send you stamped addressed envelopes,' sniffed Lilian Edwards. 'I can get *Ansible* off the net'. What was she *doing* in there?

That vile sf gossip-sheet *Ansible* was on the net thanks to Charles Stross, who mysteriously requested each issue on disk and did something arcane with it. I asked him to tell me more and unfortunately, he told me: yards of technobabble beginning with firm instructions to throw away my IBM PC clone and get a Unix workstation like what real men and Charles Stross used. When he said "my novel" I made an excuse and left. He faxed me later ("Just testing my zippy new faxmodem!") and I saw the net address on his letterhead: charlie@antipope.demon.co.uk. I'd be hard put to say why this made me cringe so much.

Surely there'd be no harm in merely testing the water with a cautious toe. The British CIX net was reputedly the cheapest; after mystic rituals involving credit cards and crappy old modem discarded in fear and loathing by technophobe John Clute, I suddenly became ansible@cix.compulink.co.uk. (And loftily initiated, after mere days' experience, cpriest and jclute to the same network.) When I shyly slipped this uncouth address into *Ansible* 77, a swift letter on real paper from Don Herron mourned my likely departure into the electronic void. It had, he said, been nice knowing me.

I began to see his point when I found the world net swarming with fans who had joined the evolutionarily advance ranks of Online Man and never, except in direst emergency, communicated in any other way. Remember Tom Perry? Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden? Charles Platt? Ben Yalow? Ahrvid Engholm? Bruce Pelz? Neil Gaiman? Arthur Hlavaty? Martin Easterbrook? Joyce Scrivener? Alun Harries? Bernie Peek? Tim Illingworth (no, no Langford, get a grip on yourself). It was dead exciting when the first unexpected e-mail arrived from Australia: Lucy Sussex beat Leigh Edmonds to it by mere hours. It was exciting in another way to discover our very own Andy Sawyer lurking in another corner of the net, tirelessly promoting the SF Foundation.

The trouble with universal net access is that any cretin can access it. Once the (often horribly complicated) communications kit is all set up, chaps who never quite seemed to master the intricate

manoeuvre of addressing an envelope and licking a stamp find no difficulty in splattering their literary ineptitude all over cyberspace. I've been told to think of it as being not so much a gigantic APA as a magnified conversation in the Novacon bar, complete with monosyllabic interjections, grunts, nods and wordless grins.

— *Dave Langford*
 "What are they doing in there?"
Rastus Johnson's Cakewalk 4, 1995

Steve Brewster made some similar discoveries about the worldwide hierarchy of electronic newsgroups, the Usenet:

In 1993 I discovered Usenet. Those of you lucky enough to have avoided this aberration might appreciate a short 'Know Your Enemy' resume. Usenet consists of several thousand newsgroups, each of which deals with a certain topic. A few examples: **sci.math** is for mathematical discussions, **soc.culture.celtic** is for discussion of matters Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish. I don't know what **alt.sex.bondage** is for; strangely, we don't seem to get that group at Bristol.

These ones get propagated all over the world, and anyone anywhere can read or respond to what anyone else anywhere else has said, which makes for fabulously fatuous discussions about Northern Ireland on **soc.culture.celtic**. There are also local hierarchies, which include groups like **uk.misc** (miscellaneous UK discussions) or **ubris.dept.maths.misc** (rather like **alt.sex.bondage**). Usenet should not be confused with the Internet, which is more or less the infrastructure for Usenet (and e-mail and other things): the Internet is the sewer, Usenet is the sewage, and I'm . . . well, I spent far too much of my life reading Usenet.

So far so dull.

I said above that I don't have a television; this marks me out as strange among the British at large, though not among British fandom. (Then again, one has to be pretty bloody strange to outweird British fandom.) I explain this asceticism to whoever inadvisedly asks about it by reciting the usual litany: TV is moving wallpaper, mental pap, you're far better off reading improving literature, and so on. When some sod asks me to name an item of improving literature I've read recently I have to explain, of course, that I've been ever so busy what with going to the pub and writing a fanzine and occasionally doing some work, just to keep my hand in; I mean, I'm a Fan, I'll do anything for sf except read the stuff.

I'm no good at organising my life: as if by immutable law, I waste at least 2 or 3 hours every day. 'Waste' here doesn't include time spent in the pub — unless it's with insufferable people; it doesn't include time spent doing a difficult piece of work, unless the 'difficulty' was that someone's done something daft with the laser printer and I have to spend two hours sorting it out. Nor does it include time spent reading — unless I was reading something really pointless such as Usenet.

Perhaps, I tell myself, I shouldn't get too excited about wasted time; it's like wasted money — if you don't blow a quid a week on the National Lottery you don't, as some dour old bores who once took a course in statistics claim, end up with a lovely stack of 52 pound coins at the end of the year; you end up having spent the pound coins on something else like beer or dreadful Sunday broadsheets.

But the annoyance remains. We all have our displacement activities for filling up bored minutes, half-hours or half-days, and I suppose there's a certain poignance in a displacement activity's being displaced by a different displacement activity, as in my experience reading Usenet displaced reading books; but hell, even when the books I was reading were pointless or shoddy or bad, I was still at least reading books and surely that counted for something?

And Usenet is tiring: it seems to sap whatever psychic energies one needs for more worthwhile recreation. Perhaps it's because

you read it from a computer screen; I don't know, but (to switch to a junk-food metaphor) it destroys appetite without supplying nutrition. Usenet is now my only displacement activity and when I'm stuck at home with nothing to do for three hours, I have several metres of unread books stacked against the wall and I don't feel one bit like reading them.

So how is all this going to affect fandom then? "Why should it have any effect at all?" I hear you chorus. The point is that the sad little story above, of my desultory glassy-eyed tapping of the space bar as I page my way through hundreds of postings, is nothing unusual. A large fraction of the people at Confabulation do just the same in their spare time. They, like me, read rather less than they used to. They are changing their writing habits from fanzine-style to net-style: net-style likes to think that it's cut-and-thrust, but actually it's more like prod-and-poke and the short life (< 1 week) of articles on newsgroups doesn't help; you can flush your article down the toilet for all the difference it'll make to anyone's opinion. There seem to be two viewpoints doing the rounds: the one that fanzine fandom survived a world war and television and GCSE English so it can survive anything, and the Strossian Hypothesis that the Internet is heading towards a global information hegemony and we'll just have to jump aboard or perish. Neither of these feels quite right but beyond that I've got few ideas of what lies in store. Meanwhile Usenet continues to bring out precisely those bad features of human nature that home computing and amateur radio did: the twin conceits that technical competence marks you out as morally superior to the local yokels who don't even know Ohm's law, and that 'our' technocracy (of computer people, or communications people, or in Usenet's case both) is, though despised and ridiculed by the lumpenproletariat, really the most important club in the world because *it has the power!*

— *Steve Brewster*
 From "A Usenet Rant"
Dr Becching's Cold Fusion Tramway, Easter 1995

Steve raises the pertinent question of what effect the Internet is going to have on fandom. At a fairly mundane level, a cursory search of newszines like *Matrix* and *Critical Wave* shows pretty conclusively that a significant percentage of fannish and sf activity is already happening on the Internet. For example, since 1992 on it has become usual for stories nominated for Hugo and other awards to be posted on the Net so that voters — well, some voters — can freely access them. In the fanzine world, electronic zines are accumulating, although at the moment none really challenges the hierarchy of conventional hard copy zines. That unofficial clearinghouse of the small press scene, *Factsheet Five*, went on-line as an economy measure in January 1993, bemoaning as it did so the fact that only 10% of producers and 35% of consumers of zines had access to the Net. (What would the figures be in 1995?) All this has created a self-perceived underclass of the electronically dispossessed, whose slogan should perhaps be "no representation without modemisation". The Internet party response is that lack of net access is a transient problem set to disappear as having Net access becomes as commonplace as owning a phone. Fandom however will no doubt always find a way to milk new technology for entertaining controversy. **Simon Ounsley**, for example, has already deived in with his trademark confused expression (qv above) to the whole idea of electronic fanzines:

It now becomes clear why Chris O'Shea has *really* been present — not, as we thought, to rub down Steve with a wet sponge between rounds or even to sit and look reasonable until Caroline could get there. No. He has really been waiting until we're all off our guard to slip in the all-important question, the question to rival "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" and "Why did the chicken cross the road?" (or even "Why do all these riddles have chickens in them?"): "Do you think that electronic fanzines should qualify for the Hugo Award?"

At first, it seems like such an innocent thing for somebody to ask, so I click my brain into gear and let it whirr for a while and come up with some sort of half-baked answer about availability. Linda Krawecka, who is also present, makes the same sort of response but more stridently. She and other impoverished or non-computer-literate fans do not have the means to access such fanzines so clearly they cannot be judged to be eligible for awards.

"Ah yes," I reply, "but what if the editors are also willing to make hard copy available on demand? Surely they would then become acceptable?"

It now becomes clear that Linda has other, more deep-seated objections to electronic fanzines. They are, she argues, a different beast entirely. Surely most of the stuff on the bulletin boards could not be called fanzines in any case. They are, as she understands it, more like scraps of conversations. They are not *edited*, in the same way that real fanzines are.

Now we are getting into deeper waters. Chris O'Shea, I notice, is smiling at this point. He has the look about him of a man who knows he has thrown a logistical grenade into the air and has run for cover and is now waiting to see where it lands.

"But," he says, "some of them *are* edited. They are a collection of articles and letters put together by an editor, just like an ordinary fanzine. Surely *those* should be eligible?"

"As long as hard copies are also available," I interject conscientiously.

Chris concedes this point.

Linda is being pressed hard now. She still has the fire about her of a woman who knows that right is on her side but she is now having to resort to more abstract terminology to try to win the argument.

"Electronic fanzines are a different phenomenon," she says. "They have a different ethos, a different texture . . ."

Chris O'Shea nods as though he can see what she is getting at, and yet . . .

I suppose I really should have kept quiet.

But I didn't.

"But what about the latest *Stubberdegullion*?" I ask. "Nigel sent me it on disc so that I could make a large print copy and actually read the thing. So does that make it an electronic fanzine?"

Linda looks aghast.

"Aaaagh!" she says. "Why do you have to make it so complicated, Simon?"

She has to put her hands to her head. There is a suggestion that her perception of the room has suddenly received the ministrations of a spin doctor.

"Ah," she says, grasping dazedly and pathetically at the first stray thought that comes to hand. "But you got it printed, didn't you Simon? So now it's a *real* fanzine again!"

I suppose that, once again, I should really have kept quiet.

But I didn't.

"No," I say, "I haven't printed it out yet."

That does it. Linda looks as though a vast hole has suddenly opened up in the ground beneath her feet and she can see all sorts of things crawling around down there. Things with far too many legs . . .

I must admit that I'm feeling a bit concerned myself. "So does that make Nigel a fake fan?" I ask. "Are we going to have to hound him out of the Leeds Group?"

Linda is far too upset to reply.

Chris O'Shea, meanwhile, is already up and running with a new grenade.

"So when does a fanzine come into being?" he asks. "Is it when you write it or when you press the 'Print' button?"

Boom! Bang! Sound of breaking glass.

I'll leave you to think about that one for a while . . .

The next day, in the interval of *Jamais Vu*, I notice that Chris is sitting behind me and I give him a copy of *Lagoon 4*. Then the guy sitting next to him, someone called Marcus Streets, asks for one so I give him a copy as well.

Will I accept email locs, Chris asks me. I tell him that I don't have an email address. Well, will I accept locs on disc then? Of course. What size? Now I have to strain to think a bit. All this high tech . . . I actually have a three and a half inch *and* a five and a quarter inch disc drive but under the pressure of the moment I forget this. "Three and a half inch," I say. Chris nods. Now Marcus Streets joins in. "High density or double density?" "Er, erm, high density . . ." "What format?" "Er, er . . ." "PC? PS/1?" I'm so busy trying to give the impression that I know what I'm doing in this new high tech fandom that I never stop to ask them if they're really serious about sending me a loc on a computer disc rather than doing what is surely simpler and printing it out and sending that. I shall send a copy of this fanzine to Chris — and Marcus too if he responds — so maybe they can tell me. Were they thinking of my eyesight problem? Marcus certainly wouldn't have been aware of that. So were they taking the piss? Or trying to test my technical knowledge? Or were they really serious after all?

Perhaps Chris was thinking back to the earlier conversation about the moment when a fanzine comes into being. Perhaps he thought it was prudent to send a loc through the post in its embryonic state and let the editor deal with the messy business of actually pressing the "Print" button. After all, he'd read somewhere that you could pick up diseases that way. It was surely better to practise safe correspondence and send it on disc.

— Simon Ounsley
From *Lagoon 5*, September 1993

One final question — what effect will computerisation have on fandom's lovelife? What kinds of romance will flourish in an era of on-line dating, virtual sex, electronic porn and anonymous Valentine emails? Perhaps the authors of the *Geek's Guide* (itself widely distributed on the Internet, natch) can give us some idea:

So, your crush on the bass player from Vibrating Sandbox has finally died a whimpering death and you're wondering where to go from here. All the sinister dudes are either dating a series of interchangeable high-school riot girls in baby doll dresses and an overdose of manic panic, or permanently shackled up with some bitter old lady who pays all the bills. Which will it be, a wifely prison or a humiliating one night stand? Into this void of potential mates comes a man you may not have considered before, a man of substance, quietude and stability, a cerebral creature with a culture all his own. In short, a geek.

Where The Geek Dude Lurks

While they are often into alternative music, geek dudes tend not to go to shows too often. Instead you'll find them hanging out with their friends, discussing the latest hardware revolution or perfecting their Bill Gates impressions. You know how some people wear t-shirts with their favorite bands on them, thus showing that they went to certain shows? Well, geek dudes wear t-shirts with the logos of different software companies on them, thus showing that they are up on the latest, um, releases. A small, though convivial, rivalry may be detected here amongst the geek dudes. Try wearing one yourself and see if he strikes up a conversation.

Of course the best way to meet a geek dude is through the Internet. All geeks harbor a secret fantasy about meeting some girl in cyberspace, carrying on an e-mail romance in which he has the chance to combine an activity he is comfortable with, computing, with one he is very uncomfortable with, socializing. To many geek dudes, cyberdating is just an advanced form of some kind of video game, but they are frustrated by a lack of players. Their lack is your strength.

The Trek factor

If you're not up on your *Star Trek*, you can forget about getting or keeping a geek dude. And I'm not just talking vintage-era Captain Kirk and Spock either. You've got to be up on your *The Next Generation*, your *Deep Space Nine*, your *Babylon 5*. Armed with your own knowledge of Federation policies, you can better gauge when and how to act. The sexual politics of *Star Trek* are pretty blunt: the men run the technology and the ship, and the women are caretakers (a doctor and a counselor). Note the sexual tensions on the bridge of the Enterprise: the women, in skin tight uniforms, and with luxuriant, flowing hair. The men, often balding, and sporting some sort of permanently attached computer auxiliary. This world metaphorizes the fantasies of the geek dude, who sees himself in the geeky-but-heroic male officers and who secretly desires a sexy, smart, Deanna or Bev to come along and deferentially accept him for who he is. If you are willing to accept that this is his starting point for reality, you are ready for a geek relationship.

Geek Lifestyle

The geek dude has long work habits and tends to bring his work home with him. He seems permanently connected to his

hard disk. You must at least appear interested in his work. Generally, a solid understanding of the computer is a must; if you cannot master this, you should at least be able to talk the talk. Remember most geeks are anal and they get stressed about details which appear insignificant. Be understanding, put on your best Deanna Troi face (see above) and empathize.

To relax, geeks love to play the latest computer games. Let him play *Myst* or Chuck Yeager's *Air Combat* for hours if he wants to. Act concerned if he's stuck or has just been ambushed by three MiGs. My geek loves to try to help people on the Internet who say that they are stuck in *Myst*. He comes up with clever riddles instead of directing them point blank. Geeks also like to go to sci-fi and Japanese animated movies, again, a basically harmless vent for your man.

One Last Thing

Because they have been so abused and ignored by society, many geeks have gone underground. You may actually know some and just haven't noticed them. They often feel resentful, and misunderstood, and it is important to realize this as you grow closer to them. Don't ever try to force the issue, or make crazy demands that he choose between his computer and you. Remember, his computer has been there for him his whole life; you are a new interloper he hasn't quite grasped yet.

Geek dudes thrive on mystery and love challenges and intellectual puzzles. Don't you consider yourself one? Wouldn't you like a little intellectual stimulation or your own? We thought so.

— Mikki Halpin and Victoria Maat
Extract from "A Girl's Guide to Geek Guys"
Bunnyhop 5

Klingon ding-dong over Bible Babel

Mark Tran in New York

A WAR of words between linguists translating the Bible into Klingon means there will be two versions of the Good Book for the once-evil warriors in *Star Trek*.

In one of the odder offshoots of the popular series, a cult has grown up around the long-haired, furrowed-forehead Klingons, once mortal enemies of Captain Kirk, but now among the friendlies in the new version of *Star Trek*.

There are Klingon newsletters, Klingon conversations on the Internet computer network and audio cassettes with titles like *Conversa-*

tional Klingon and Power Klingon. Next month, the annual *Interstellar Language* event in Minnesota will include a festival of Klingon poetry readings. Weddings have even been conducted in Klingon.

The official Klingon language was created for *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* in 1984 by Marc Okrand, a student of Native American, Chinese and South-east Asian languages. Now ten scholars at the Klingon Language Institute which materialised at Flourtown, Pennsylvania three years ago, are producing the Klingon version of the Bible.

The institute is also working on Klingon translations

of all Shakespeare's works.

Although the warrior-like Klingon vocabulary has only 2,000 words, schisms quickly surfaced in the Bible project and one of the group, Professor Glen Proechel, resigned to work on his own translation. Prof Proechel says the group's literal approach makes little sense because it is describing things that do not exist in Klingon culture.

Take the line from Mark: "We have five loaves and two fishes." Klingon lacks words for loaves and fishes. The literal camp uses the Klingon *tlrSoj*, which means "grain food", and *blQH'a'Dibah*, or "water animal". Prof Proechel has opted for a more liberal approach using notions

more familiar to Klingons. His translation reads *vagh 'TWchab cha' ghargh wIghaj*, meaning "We have five blood pies and two serpent worms."


Another dispute rose over the word lamb. No such word exists in Klingon. Prof Proechel opted for *targh*, a vicious, ugly pig-like animal. "It is the most important to the Klingons, so it gets the message across," he argues.

Not so, says Kevin Wilson, the editor of the Klingon Language Institute Bible project. "A *targh* bears as much resemblance to a lamb as a charging rhino does," he asserts.

The group expects to beam up its translation in five years' time.

Putting Science Fiction Back in Fanzines Where It Belongs

All this talk of *Star Trek*, computers and unread novels leads us however tentatively to the great unmentionable (at least in fannish circles): science fiction itself. "Why is there nothing about science fiction in fanzines?" is the oft repeated query of bewildered newcomers. Fans don't normally bother to answer, figuring that if people aren't interested in what they do at parties, then it isn't worth explaining. Yet behind the scenes, fans not only read sf, but write about it in the form of reviews, articles, editorials etc for *Foundation*, *Vector*, *Interzone*. The question remains, can they write about it fannishly? And the answer, by and large, is no. (With perhaps some honourable exceptions in *Acnestis*, the science fiction discussion apa.) When fans do put on their science fiction critic's hat (as opposed to their beanie), they treat it seriously, even learnedly. It is their passion, their corner of expertise in a fragmented world. Or else, they are scared, because after all, there are a lot of people around fandom who know an awful lot on the subject and might just tell them that what they're writing is bollocks. In the end it seems it is the writers and critics, the professionals who live and breath science fiction who paradoxically write about it the most fannishly. Here, for example, Colin Greenland, uses his career as a new writer with the publishing company Allen & Unwin to illustrate some of the changes that have happened in sf since the first Mexican:

 The Mexican ethic was, if you like, the Unwin ethic. Literary seen in opposition to commercial — a line that had only hardened with the failure of the New Wave to wash away the Old Rubbish. Genre was a dirty word, encapsulating all that sf had to reject if it was to be any good. Lionel Fanthorpe was the name of an archdemon then, not of fandoms favourite vicar. Very few genre authors (Alfred Bester; Harry Harrison, maybe; Fritz Leiber) were admitted to be good fun. In any case, fun was not the point. The point for the f&sf author in Britain in those days, was to be serious and purposeful, and to shun at all costs the heritage of pulp sf, that gaudy, mindless expansiveness. Christopher Evans's *The Insider* was characteristic; Michael Scott Rohan's *Run to the Stars* was not. There was much talk of standards and of subtexts. One should write, if one wrote at all, about issues: alienation; sexual inequality; the nuclear threat. Those were the days of Doris Lessing's austere righteous Canopean Archives; of Brian Aldiss's Hardy-esque Helliconian Cycle. J. G. Ballard had rediscovered himself in Shanghai; Michael Moorcock had given up sword and sorcery again. Brian Stableford had given up fiction altogether.

It was important in those days to attack bad writers vehemently, accusing them of laziness, cynicism, commercialism. Feuds were rife in all quarters of sf. The only bad writers we didn't like to attack were bad writers published by the Womens Press. Sf was the literature of change, wasn't it? So, here were some sf writers who were straining for change, social, moral and political, with every fibre of their fiction. Some of them might be weak, on plot, characterization and style, but they were at least trying to raise the consciousness of the genre and nurture a better world.

The eighties wore on, and we did get change, social, moral and political. For the worse. The publishing industry changed out of all recognition. Allen & Unwin got "merged" by a richer outfit, Bell & Hyman. Later Rupert Murdoch opened his mouth and swallowed the lot.

Those of us who were lucky or skilful or responsive enough to ride that mighty tide continued to be published. Others went under; are still going under, and will continue to. The numbers

of titles being published continues to rise; the life of each continues to shrink. You get, if you are lucky, if your previous sales are strong enough, if your covers strong enough, if the publicity department is working for you, your week in the front of W. H. Smiths. Then you recede to the category shelves, where copies disappear, either because people buy them, in which case Smith's reorder and you survive, or because they don't, in which case they're swept off the shelf and returned hostages to a warehouse stock control program, or simply, more conveniently, dumped, shredded, pulped. If the specialist booksellers don't re-order either, end of book.

Ten years ago, at Allen & Unwin, our sales weren't strong. Our covers were variable, with much fiddling and rethinking of brand names, imprints, formats, company livery. Publicity was stronger every year inside fandom (another good Allen & Unwin idea), negligible anywhere else. At Liverpool Street station one Friday afternoon I saw six copies of *Daybreak* in Smiths. Returning from wherever it was on Sunday afternoon I saw none, and none ever after. But there was still the possibility of word of mouth. Of a publisher who would give you time to grow up the old way, year by year, book by book, finding your audience and earning your reputation, rather than being launched on a raft of hype and then abandoned next season, like a rap artist or a pair of trainers.

Still thinking centripetally, shunning the conventional, I followed *Daybreak* with two more fantasies. One of them, *Other Voices*, may be the best thing I've ever done. But they were both deliberately less generic, less readily recognizable — and therefore less popular — than even *Daybreak*. Then, just before Unwin Hyman finally disappeared into the enormous corporate atrium of Harper Collins, I came up with this peculiar space opera thing called *Take Back Plenty*.

Several things had happened in the interim. The first thing that had happened was *Neuromancer*. *Neuromancer* was published ten years ago, as everybody keeps reminding us. Sometimes you wish people would shut up about *Neuromancer*. Other times you're grateful for all the fuss and nonsense, because it means *Neuromancer* is like *Alice In Wonderland* or *Casablanca*, it

will go on forever, and people will love it, and treasure it as the beautiful and powerful thing that it is, a strange, romantic distorting mirror of our broken-hearted times. *Neuromancer* gave us a whole new metaphor for the human mind in the age of tech, even if all we thought we wanted was its cargo of silicon and chrome accessories. I want to say only one thing about *Neuromancer*, and that is: Look how much heartland it reclaimed. Talking computers, space palaces, shoot-outs in the overcrowded future. An elderly fan in my City Lit sf evening class once raised his hand and said, Excuse my ignorance, but what exactly is cyberpunk? Everyone else groaned, which was mean of them, but bit by bit, or rather all talking at once, probably, they and I contrived to describe the distinctive features of this semi-new semi-genre to him. It was about adventures in a complex, lurid, mutated future society where human identity had been compromised by technological change and — Ah, the fan said, sagely. You mean science fiction.

Some of the other things that happened to culture in the eighties: the rebirth of superheroes in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*; the resurgence of Pop out of Rock, by way of Punk (though with Suede doing seven-minute concept singles you begin to wonder); the rediscovery by Steven Spielberg *et al.* of what movies can do that TV can't, of the virtues of spectacle. Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett taught us to laugh at the genre without sneering at it. And somewhere along the line, by asking Why isn't science fiction more like this, or like that, or like anything else except science fiction? we hit upon the answer, which was that, in a word, it was fun. The *Star Wars* movies were fun, however (pace Joseph Campbell) mindless. They satisfied something in us. Shiny spaceships and talking robots, and magic swords and ferocious dragons, existed because they pleased people, and because they meant something to people, and that intricate nexus of pleasure and significance didn't go away just because you turned your back on it.

Ten years ago, space opera was not a commercial proposition, even in the movies George Lucas had decided to go for the short-term money with Ewok movies and merchandise while Lorimar Universal were subliminally admitting defeat with the title of their bland new release, *The Last Starfighter*. So undertaking to write *Take Back Plenty*, in 1987, was not exactly a commercial decision. It was simply an act of faith that space opera was fun and didn't have to be mindless. It was an affirmation of genre.

Michael Moorcock was the first person who made me understand the principle. There is neither vice nor virtue, he always says, in genre. Any genre is only as good or bad as the person writing it. In fact, if you really face up to the genre and accept it and go deep into it, you can actually write it better than anybody has ever imagined. For the ambitious writer, going deep into genre doesn't necessarily involve compromise. Only hard work. Writers as different as Tim Powers and Dan Simmons have shown what's possible with energy and hard work all across the atlas of fantastic genres.

During ten years of increasing pressure to produce the accessible, the conventional, the marketable, in one way at least British sf has got better. Better at being sf. Serious purpose is still in evidence, if less nakedly. Racism is an issue, bio-engineering is an issue. We are still capable of an *Ammonite* or a *White Queen*. But we have learned at last that entertainment is an honourable purpose too; and that has been liberating. There is a new brio, a new vitality and panache abroad. Paul McAuley has moved from *Four Hundred Billion Stars* to *Red Dust* and *Pasquale's Angel*. Mary Gentle has moved from *Golden Witchbreed* to *The Architecture of Desire* and *Grunts*. These are the days of Iain M. Banks, of Ian McDonald and Kim Newman. British sf is now the thinking person's fun.

The problem is where do we go from here? Genres need refreshing continually from outside if they are not to become insipid and inbred. Sometimes I recall the old idealistic Mexican-Unwin ethic and wonder. Have we gone too far the

other way? Maybe we are too professional now, too ready to produce the perfect package, with nothing very much inside. How much contemporary sf is really confectionery; glossily wrapped, toothsome coated, but full of whipped designer pulp? Not mindless pulp, no, as Norman Spinrad points out in slightly puzzled but perfectly accurate feature on the British Renaissance in April's IASFM: intelligent, sensitive, humane and not badly written either — but still pulp. Sometimes I pick up some big, gorgeous, highly touted new book and wonder. What's this for? And the answer is, obviously and entirely sufficiently, it's for a market. It's for sale. And however pressing the commercial imperative, it was never supposed to be the whole point.

— Colin Greenland

"How we learned to stop worrying and love science fiction"

Mexicon a Decade, May 1994

If fans tended not to write *about* science fiction, there was no doubt that they *wrote* it. Whether on an amateur level within APAs, or more seriously in the pages of the proliferating number of shared world anthologies brought out under the aegis of Midnight Rose or the Warhammer fighting fantasy stories — which earned a modicum of temporary respectability through the involvement of *Interzone* editor Dave Pringle — and the ability of such writers as Nicola Griffiths to subvert the genre sufficiently to write stories with lesbian protagonists. **Charles Stross**, possibly fandom's most notorious wannabe sf writer stopped taking his trilogies to conventions, but remained a keen commentator of the cyberpunk scene, which by the early 90s had turned into a mere backdrop for a multitude of banal action adventure stories.

It's a shame that the computer-as-icon has been taken up as central to cyberpunk, because it isn't. Science fiction has always tended to reflect contemporary attitudes and concerns, and cyberpunk is no exception. This is a sub-genre obsessed with style and insecurity. Style and design were two buzz-words for the 1980s which may well be remembered long after all other memories of the decade have faded; insecurity was another. Cyberpunk reflected these neuroses by snapping up the trendy accoutrements of the design magazines and splashing them across a broad canvas of contemporary human concerns. We read about television advertising as a form of art; brand-name implants; Japanese multinationals buying up everything in sight; and the omnipresent awareness of corruption and pollution in the background, like a *danse macabre* with dioxin. These are magnifications of today, projected onto the screen of the future. Computers, the burgeoning new technology of the 80s, were obviously part and parcel of this projection: and so it's no surprise that they feature prominently in books like *Neuromancer* and *Ambient*.

Being projections of the present day, the heroes and heroines of cyberpunk fiction aren't the classic Campbellian/Heinleinian 'competent man', gung-ho in a space suit. These people are products of the anomie of the 80s, suffering the insecurity and alienation in the face of rapid change that is so typical of the period. The protagonists are generally either losers or company (wo)men — and hence, not directly responsible for their own circumstances — for in such an angst-extrapolation all our insecurity rises up to assault us and the only way to survive our fears is to evade them, typically by placing responsibility in the hands of a larger corporate identity.

Because cyberpunk seems so contemporary, it offers a mirror which the 80's sf community has used in order to scrutinise its own preoccupations to an incestuous degree. Unfortunately, this has led to certain problems of definition. Pinning down cyberpunk is like nailing jelly to a tree; it tends to slip and slide, and gets into places where it shouldn't. For example, some reviewers tried to lump Storm Constantine and Connie Willis in

MAKE BECOME A: BIG CYBERPUNK MONEY! WRITER (IN YOUR HOME)



Tom Cardy

with the likes of Tom Maddox and John Shirley, perhaps because they weren't depicting 50's, 60's or even 70's people in their fiction. Both Willis and Constantine have aimed for striking levels of contemporaneity in their characterisations, but neither of them are writing in that curiously stunted vision of the future wherein *everyone* is a hustler. These two deal with human beings who are neither straitjacketed with the simplistic formulae of escapist wish-fulfilment nor manacled to the ball-and-chain of suburban angst; their protagonists are complex, contradictory, and thoroughly *modern*. But cyberpunk, whatever else it may be, is not a blanket label for modernity: hence the element of confusion.

At the same time as the initial cyberpunk explosion, other writers were discovering the 80s. Some of these didn't particularly like where the Movement was going, or where it said it was going, or even where it appeared to be coming from. Whatever the cause, the effect has been obvious; acrimonious dispute. Cyberpunk was frequently misunderstood, disliked intensely by those who just wanted another dose of their favourite literary tranquilliser, and in the end the authors who originally promoted it moved on to newer pastures. The field has since been cannibalised by younger, less original writers (whom I once referred to as "Technogoths" in recognition of the fact that they adopted the gaudy clothing of their predecessors' punks without paying enough attention to the controversial contents).

One question remained unasked (and thus unanswered): given that sf uses the future to reflect today's preoccupations, why did the appearance of a major new technology evoke such a trivial response? Because the use of computers in cyberpunk is

trivial. This technology, today, evolving so rapidly that it is possible to look at a machine built only ten years ago and describe it in terms of archaeology. Current research in virtual environments and nanotechnology is threatening to render reality itself obsolescent within a time scale of two to five decades. The possibility of creating a true artificial intelligence remains questionable, but the question is still fundamentally an open one. Surely the cyberpunks with their position somewhere between the poles of rigorous techno-extrapolation and humanist self-scrutiny, should have been able to identify and address these questions.

— Charles Stross
"Myths, Computers and Cyberpunk"
Vector 158, January 1991

Whilst cyberpunk imagery had penetrated to most sections of society, writers and critics were becoming increasingly disenchanted with its literary form. When William Gibson's own latest take on the subject, *Virtual Light*, appeared in 1993, Vector editor **Catie Cary** was able to join in the cry of "Cyberpunk is dead . . ."

Cyberpunk, like the PC explosion, was a phenomenon of the 1980s. Its initial practitioners fused an intense streetwise style with dizzying extrapolations of the possibilities for the fusion of man and machine, machine as drug, the electronic path to the gates of heaven or hell. Cyberpunk ransacked popular culture for structure and material, often utilising the hard-boiled detective style of American thrillers, and borrowing images from music, film and drug cultures. As is the way of revolution, the original works

offered a genuine new vision and a cutting edge thrill that ensured a popular acceptance beyond that of the ghetto readership. The influence has spread widely, reflecting back into the movies and popular music, and inspiring a vast number of second generation writers to imitate the Cyberpunk style. And style is the operative word, since this second generation Cyberpunk tends to pile on the pace and the violence, without deepening the extrapolation or widening the vision. Such work is unambitious and fails to satisfy.

William Gibson is one of the founding fathers of Cyberpunk, and has been much quoted on his disillusion with the genre, so it is perhaps to be expected that when he revisits the territory he will have a new purpose in mind. In his early works Gibson, a self-confessed technical ignoramus, romanticised computer technology and glamourised the lives of the people who employed it, more concerned with machine as metaphor and gateway to altered states than with any attempt at realism. In *Virtual Light*, however, the hackers are presented as nerds ("Buddy had a haircut that wasn't quite skin, some kind of gadget in his mouth to straighten his teeth, and an Adam's apple about a third the size of his head.") and losers, sometimes malicious but always unimportant. The technological Nirvana has failed the ordinary person; technology is seen as serving the corporations, fuelling their growth and acting, as always, as a pacifier for the increasingly dislocated masses. Gibson's dream has turned to nightmare, but he is not so much patterning the future as exposing his revulsion at the here and now.

— *Catie Cary*
 "Cyberpunk is dead"
Vector 177, February / March 1994

Science fiction as a genre might have grown bored with cyberpunk, but for writers outside the field, the subject was still fresh with potential, and capable of development beyond its glitzy style and cheap thriller tropes. When mainstream feminist American writer Marge Piercy's Jewish AI cyberromance *Body of Glass* won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 1993, controversy broke out over the decision. John Clute, the chief dissenter, felt impelled to write a special guest editorial in *Vector* on the subject. Here's an extract:

As I'm going to claim that a mistake has been made, and because hindsight is a cheap shot, perhaps I should make it clear right off that I had read and reviewed Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* long before it won the 1993 Arthur C. Clarke Award, and that I knew what I thought of the book long before finding out what the panel had decided: I certainly never dreamed it would be a serious contender for the prize. My immediate reaction when it won — that the decision was so bad my ears must have deceived me — came from the heart. My subsequent reactions — which I expressed aloud after the announcement — welled up from an already-formed matrix of assumptions and convictions about this year's shortlist, about the nature of sf publishing in the UK, about the history and present state and future health of the Arthur C. Clarke Award as an institution and about the nature of sf as a genre.

Let me attempt to be methodical.

1) The book itself was a good though slightly po-faced read in Piercy's usual style; but as sf it reeked of the second-hand in a manner which made it clear its author did not know she was reworking old material. It was, in my view, an inherent non-winner of any prize (and as far as I know, the Arthur C. Clarke Award is the only recognition the book has received, either within or without the genre).

2) Several of the other books shortlisted* are centrally important texts in the sf of the 1990s. This is not the place for me to go on for hours about my feeling that traditional (or agenda) sf is in a state of crisis, and that books like those by Fowler, Robinson,

* Other books shortlisted in 1993 were Ian McDonald's *Hearts, Hands and Voices*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide*, Lisa Tuttle's *Lost Futures* and Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book*. And Karen Joy Fowler's sf novel, *Sarah Canury*, was deemed to be "ineligible" by the panel.

Arthur C. Clarke Awards

1987

Margaret Atwood
The Handmaid's Tale

1988

George Turner
The Sea and Summer
 (variant title *Drowning Towers*)

1989

Rachel Pollack
Unquenchable Fire

1990

Geoff Ryman
The Child Garden

1991

Colin Greenland
Take Back Plenty

1992

Pat Cadigan
Synnors

1993

Marge Piercy
Body of Glass

1994

Jeff Noon
Vurt

1995

Pat Cadigan
Fools

Swanwick and Willis represent a significant creative response to that state of crisis. What I can argue is that — whatever you think about the condition of sf at the moment — it is surely clear that these novels show *something is happening*. Each of them is full of stuff and energy and pertinence, and, like all the best sf novels, each of them is Janus-faced about sf; they gaze backwards knowingly at the web of genre, and they stare outwards, too.

I think that the panel of experts should have noticed this.

3) Market and publishing realities. We are in a time of financial constraints. It cost the sf publishers and estimated £3-4,000 to supply to the members of the panel of the Arthur C. Clarke Awards copies of the large number of books which were read last year. In doing so, these sf publishers assumed they were contributing to a process that would generate an award that was relevant to the sf world, relevant to sf authors, relevant to sf publishing and marketing, and relevant to the audience gathered to hear the announcement. This audience included senior representatives of those publishers seriously involved in sf publishing, but no representative from Marge Piercy's house, Michael Joseph; her prize was accepted by a representative of Penguin Books, which owns Michael Joseph.

What happened on the night was registered by the senior editors of the sf publishing houses of the UK as a slap in their face, and a slap in the face of sf as a mature communal endeavour.

They clearly felt they'd had their money taken, and their time wasted, under false pretences. They felt that good writers had been insulted, they felt that the event was a sham, a public relationships flop. They felt — rightly — that the Award itself would be treated with very moderate respect by Penguin Books, who do not market Marge Piercy as an sf writer. They made it clear their feelings that — *whatever* the motives of the panel might have been — it would *look* to the world as though the Clarke had been given to Marge Piercy because she seemed upmarket.

So the sf publishers' money was wasted, as far as they're concerned; and Arthur C. Clarke's own thousand pounds went to a writer whose publisher think that if she wishes to associate with the man, she had better sup with a long spoon; and half a dozen genuine sf books of high calibre (each of them better as literature than *Body of Glass*) are set aside. The publishers will probably divvy up next year (but there is a strong sense that this may very well be under duress); it would be presumptuous to guess at what Arthur C. Clarke thought of the award (but see below); and sf writers continue at their precarious task, regardless.

— *John Clute*

Excerpt from "On the Arthur C. Clarke Award 1993"
Vector 173, July 1993

Fortunately, the Arthur C. Clarke award survived this particular kick in the teeth, and the Marge Piercy book continued to have its supporters, perhaps for the very element that John Clute decried, its non-sf approach.

It was not only the incursions by mainstream writers (notably P. D. James with *Children of Men*) that were resented by science fiction fans, but the usurpation of shelf space for fantasy novels which were criticised variously for having no rules, displaying funny elves on their covers, and, like busses, only coming in threes. Ritualistically deconstructing the absurdity of certain fantasy works had long been a favourite pursuit of fandom in general and Cambridge fandom in particular, but for one Cambridge fan at least, there was a more sinister subtext to the persistent dismissal of fantasy.

Kari considers the development of this trend:

Put it this way: we're all in a ghetto, here in our sf network, following the flag of a renegade genre, marching (out of step) to that different drum. And like every ghetto, we have our under-class. And like many ghettos, that under-class is predominantly female.

Think about it. Listen to the language we use, those of us who admit to being predominantly fantasy fans. "Oh, I just read fantasy." "I haven't read much lately, only fantasy." Now count the books. How many of those fantasy writers are women, especially among the more recently published? Most of them. How many of those women are best sellers, or critically admired? Not so many. The leading lights, in the eyes of the accountants and commentators, among the fantasy writers, are mostly men. Tad Williams, Guy Gavriel Kay, David Gemmell, Pratchett, Tolkien, Garner, even my particular favourite, Stephen Brust. They make the money, and reap the praise.

And some of them really aren't very good, both in comparison with the better women writers (Tanith Lee, Diane Duane, Ellen Kushner — I could go on) and on their own merit (Kay is a particular offender, in my book, at least).

No, don't interrupt just yet. There are indeed some successful women writers in the genre. But think about it. Most of these women whom the critics — and I mean the ghetto's own self-appointed critics, here, not those working in the

mainstream — deign to praise are classified as sf writers, not fantasy, even when their work is clearly closer to the latter. Sheri Tepper, say, or great swathes of C. J. Cherryh, or Patricia Geary, or R. A. McAvoy, or Storm Constantine.

Is the tacit acceptance within fandom of the inferiority of fantasy just another way of suppressing women's writing, to quote Joanna Russ? I tend to think it is. The very language used — 'good' sf vs the fantasy 'slush-pile'; 'only fantasy'; 'fantasy has no rules' — is the language women use of themselves: "I'm only a girl"; "I speak a little French", "I'm not very scientifically-minded" . . . and so on, and on, and on. *Interzone*, everyone's favourite sf mag, calling itself the magazine of sf and fantasy, publishes no fantasy (unless it's by Tanith Lee, whom they can't ignore) and relegates almost all fantasy novels received to relatively low status fantasy review column. Feature articles and long reviews are for the sf (boys) writers. (And think about the sex of that reviewer, too.) Last time I looked closely at *Foundation*, it also tended to down-play pure fantasy, despite a relatively good record on promoting women as writers of fact and fiction.)

It's time to question the sub-ghetto. It's time to start asking why some of those who ought to be helping with that are instead collaborating with the other side, and adding to the height of the walls.

— *Kari*

"Here it is, and there it is"
TWP 85, November 1993

Grumbling about fantasy was only one of many sports. There was also the on-going correspondence and controversy over David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* sf series, the debate over whether Robert Jordan was god, or merely an over-prolific writer of formulaic fantasy, the death and revival of Ringpull press. In the end, the one point that seems to have the agreement of all concerned is that too much commercial pressure whether for fantasy, sf or cyberpunk is leading to a field full of Hollywood style adventure books without much depth or substance, leaving writers like Geoff Ryman and Ian McDonald as rather rare exceptions.

While Kari and others were quite legitimately concerned about the implicit sexism in the dismissal of fantasy, other commentators continued to complain about the stifling effects of maintaining political correctness at all time. **Ros Calverley** finishes this section with a list of fantasy tropes and how a light-hearted application of PC terminology might transform them, viz.:

Werewolf:

Transformationally Alternatively-Abled Individual

Ghost:

Involuntarily Otherly-Corporeal Being

Vampire:

Nutritionally-Haematologically Challenged Individual

Wicked Stepmother:

Step-Parent Requiring Additional Emotional and Societal Support

Orc:

Individual of Other Species Challenged in Physical Appearance and of Alternative Moral Inclination

Super-intelligent shade of the Colour Blue:

Alternative Embodied Individual of Other Chromatic Appearance

— *Ros Calverley*

Extract from "The politically correct guide to horror and fantasy fiction"
TWP

Hairdressers In Space

or
The Great SF TV Revival

Excess of political correctness was also a charge frequently laid against *Star Trek The Next Generation*, though not often as vehemently as expressed here by **Mike Siddall**:

Which brings us round to the subject of politics, or rather Political Correctness. And it's in this field that *ST:TNG* lays a really beautiful, roc-sized egg. It's not true (nearly, but not quite) to say that you can't make something that's both P.C. and entertaining; the *Alien* series of films managed to pull it off for example. You can entertain with P.C. or without it. What you can't do, as *ST:TNG* so spectacularly demonstrates, is prose on about how P.C. you are while actually being nothing of the sort.

I wouldn't be the first to point out that the Enterprise doesn't have a single woman in line of command, i.e. where the real power is. And non-whites are really well represented aren't they?

But worst of all was one episode involving Data, the ship's android. Some mad scientist wanted to disassemble him, and Starfleet was going to let him. I mean, come on, this is supposed to be a free and fair society? Data was an officer, he'd saved all their lives umpteen times, he'd even had sex with one of the crew for God's sake. Yet they still had to go to court, and only just win, to stop someone scooping out his brain just to see how it worked? If this is the Federation's idea of a sentient being's inalienable rights, then give me Stalin's Russia any day.

You might say this is carping, nit-picking but it's not. P.C. is at the heart of *ST:TNG*; their conviction of their own moral superiority underlies the dreadfully smug attitude they display towards everyone else. Look at how they define their enemies. The worst, the very worst, about the Ferenghi (however the hell you spell it), is that they keep their females as naked, second-class citizens. Ooh, you bad aliens you.

If I was a woman I'd sooner have the Ferenghi. At least you'd know where you stood with them, shoot the bastards on sight and you'd be fine. At least the Ferenghi wouldn't pretend you were equal, while in reality your career options boiled down to,

- (i) Medicine,
- (ii) Simpering idiotically at the 1st Officer, and coming over all emotional at the slightest provocation,
- (iii) Getting in LOC as Security Officer, only to be killed off as soon as possible,
- (iv) Being an agony-aunt barmaid.

Wow, really thrilling, beats me why the entire female population of the Federation doesn't defect to the Romulans.

Well, it looks like that was Tasha Yar's approach.

— **Mike Siddall**
Drivel & Drool 1

One of the best descriptions yet of the current *Star Trek* ethos came from **Deb Marwaha** in *TWP*:

The Enterprise these days is like a giant floating Selfridges, with such people as schoolteachers, hairdressers and manicurist aboard, not to mention cute kids. And all these people get an equal chance of being blown to bits when the ship enters a combat situation, which hardly seems fair unless they really belong to highly-trained hairdresser combat teams, ready to give their lives for the Federation at a moment's notice.

— **Deb Marwaha**
"Some thoughts on exiles"
TWP 79, February 1993

This new, slightly effete, *Star Trek the Next Generation* took some time to capture the imagination of a British public which still bemoaned the lack of action adventure in the old OTT Kirk style, and, of course, the even more important lack of mini-skirts.

Instead, fandom, and the nation at large, became obsessed by David Lynch's cult series *Twin Peaks*. The secret diary of Laura Palmer sold by the million in mainstream bookstores, Julie Cruise built a career on her *Twin Peaks* music. Everybody went around talking about "Damn fine coffee" and casting nostalgic glances at cherry pie in the freezer section of Sainsburys. More importantly, *Twin Peaks* brought weirdness back into fashion.

Suddenly it was cool to be strange, and into odd cultish stuff rather than fast cars and even faster computers. Also, the bizarre events of the series admitted to endless interpretation and post-modernist dissection. Was it any wonder that fans loved it? But even the staunchest admirers of the series had to admit that by the last episode Lynch had either outrun inspiration or gone seriously off the rails. The *Guardian* review of the time expressed some of the confusion:

A last slice of cherry pie

Yes, yes . . . but what about poor old Leo, the human vegetable, last seen attached by his tonsils to a length of string leading inexorably to a cage of tarantulas? Or, I am open to correction, something of the sort with eight legs and hair where they can't reach to shave. Is it possible that, in the cataclysmic final episode of *Twin Peaks* (BBC2), the little matter of the human veg. and the hairy spiders was overlooked? I confess I warm to Leo,

in spite of his homicidal tendencies and limited range of grunts, because he so clearly doesn't understand what is going on either.

Twin Peaks was the sort of town where tarantulas have to stand in line. "Have any of you had contact recently with anyone who struck you as peculiar, personable or just plain puzzling?" Agent Cooper asked the three peachlike girls who frequented the cherry pie diner. Their perfect jaws fell. Peculiar, personable or just plain puzzling describes absolutely everybody in Twin Peaks.

"What" as Arthur Daley used to ask "is occurring?" Well, first of all Annie, the failed nun, won the Miss Twin Peaks Beauty Contest with a telling speech on ecology — how grateful one is, Monica, that the idea has not yet occurred to Eric Morley and his lovely wife, Julia — and was instantly kidnapped and taken away to the woods by Windom Erle, the wickedest man in the world. Agent Cooper's "He's got Annie!" was touchingly reminiscent of Bulldog Drummond's "The swine have got Phyllis again!" Mrs Drummond was almost incessantly kidnapped.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Ben Horne had his skull cracked by kindly old Doc Hayward, Nadine was struck with a sandbag and the Twin Peaks Savings and Loans Bank blew up, disposing, at a blow, of Pete, Andrew, Mr Mibbler (one of David Lynch's extravagantly old men, as detached from the world as balloons) and Little Audrey, who has chained herself to the vault door in the interest of a finer, purer environment and less deforestation.

And Agent Cooper, the whitest man I know, entered the Black Lodge in the woods looking for his Eurydice. Like the Great Grimpen Mire, the Black Lodge is a name that makes everyone tremble. Bob, a devil as near as dammit lives there.

Hell turns out to be heavily into scarlet drapes, stereoscopic lino, strobing lights and pallid busts of Pallas. Like the House of Lords, it is full of people you thought you had seen the back of, all trading under different names and talking in a toneless quavering way. You discover with merely minimal surprise that David Lynch had the characters speak their lines backwards and then reversed the soundtrack.

Hell is back to front. People are inside out. Here is the dancing dwarf and the doleful giant who may be the same person. The spirits of murdered girls drift in and out of each other's bodies, the right voice coming out of the wrong mouth.

Like Twin Peaks, people come in pairs. Before you can say double, double, toil and trouble, Agent Cooper is chasing an identical Agent Cooper through these disorientating rooms.

And, oh Monica, that is the frightful thing. *The wrong Agent Cooper gets out*. When he is safely back from the woods, with Sheriff Truman hovering over him like a concerned moose, Cooper looks in the mirror and laughs madly. Bob is looking back. Coop with his licorice hair fitting so tidily, Coop as clean as a peeled banana, Coop only man alive to play a love scene wearing a sensible vest with the label sticking up . . . Coop is now one of them.

A more telling argument for deforestation I never heard.

So we say farewell to *Twin Peaks*, whose population of 51,201 has been so dramatically reduced overnight. Farewell Harry, Hawk and Farewell Twin Peaks finest. I will never now be able to disentangle Lara Flynn Boyle from Sherilyn Fenn. Farewell the production team chosen surely for mellifluous names: Randy Nowell, B. Grossman, Du Pont, Rick Drapking, It Katz, Elaine J Huzzar, Debby Trutnik, Rickio Woods and Tulli-Mitchell, the writer's assistant. Why can't I have a writer's assistant? How do you assist a writer?

And farewell, a long farewell to darling Bambi Sickafoose. Why do I see you as a fawn with foot and mouth disease?

— Nancy Banks Smith
The Guardian

After wide-spread initial rejection, *STNG* did begin to make some inroads into the affections of the British viewing public. By the time the BBC in its wisdom stopped showing *Next Gen*, taking a break of a year or so to sprint through classic *Trek* yet again, fans began to get withdrawal symptoms. One remedy was to invest in a satellite dish or cable connection and see the newer series on Sky TV. Along with *Next Gen* came its spin-off series, the perennially unpopular (unless you happened to have a perverse affection for the Ferengi) *Deep Space Nine*.

More importantly, *DS9* was to act as a spoiler for the rival production, Michael Straczynski's *Babylon Five*. When this series hit Channel Four, not long after its debut in the States, many general viewers took a long time to be convinced that *Babylon 5* was not some kind of rip-off of *Deep Space Nine*, or worse still, a revamp of the widely ridiculed *Battlestar Galatica* series of the 80s. Those who made it through the anti-hype, though, were soon hooked. People began to enthuse about TV SF for the first time in years. In fact, so popular was *Babylon Five* in fandom that the panel discussion on it packed out the main programme room at Confabulation and previously cynical fans could be heard raving about its plotting and commenting on its potential literary antecedents. One of the favourite influences, as season two drew to a close, and more was revealed about the identity of the Vorlon in the encounter suit, was *The Lord of the Rings*. One letter writer to *TV Zone* decided to work out all the details:

□ Firstly, Babylon 5 itself equates directly to Minas Tirith, a central city which is the sole defender of the rest of world from the 'Shadow'. Secondly, we have Sauron / Morder in the form of the Ancient Enemy, returning from the distant past and gathering his forces once more. This enemy is known to the elder races but not the humans. Thirdly, the Minbari are directly related to the elves. Like Tolkien's elves, they live a long time, are the custodians of ancient lore, and sometimes feel a force drawing them to the sea / the Sea of Stars. The Narn (technologically advanced) are roughly equated to the dwarves, and the Centauri are looking as if they might end up as orcs. Fourthly, we have the White Council, an enlightened group which represents the various races. One member of that council, Londo, has been corrupted by the Enemy in the same manner as Saruman. Indeed, he is gaining power while appearing to be on the side of the good guys. Fifthly, the Rangers, which is even a name from *The Lord of the Rings*. They know what is going on, but they operate in secret. They are being directed by Sinclair who is currently living with the Minbari, gathering information about the Shadow and opposing its works. Next we have Delenn who has become half-human or, to put it another way, half-elven, as is Elrond in Tolkien.

— Andrew S Rafferty
Letter in *TV Zone* 67, 1995

Alternatively, a far more popular theory about the identity of Ambassador Kosh is doing the rounds, propagated by among others Steve Green. Kosh said that if he took off his encounter suit everyone would recognise him. Who else could he be, but Elvis?

The other cult TV series to gain universal interest from the SF community at this time was *The X-Files*. Following in the footsteps of Agent Cooper, come FBI agents Mulder and Scully, out there investigating paranormal phenomena. Joseph Nicholas reports on his fascination with this series:

□ Taken at face value, the premise of the series is ridiculous — secret cloning experiments conducted by the US government, crashed UFOs kept for research purposes by the Air Force, mutants who can slither through pipes and hibernate for fifty years at a time, bodies in cryogenic storage sending telepathic messages to their former colleagues, sentient computers taking over buildings and killing their designers . . . scenarios common, in other words, to the pulpier

sort of science fiction: the kind of thing we might have enthused over when we first encountered the genre, but are now too embarrassed to put on the same shelves with our Ballards and Priests.

One of the great strengths of *The X-Files*, however, is its refusal to sensationalise its material. On the contrary, everything is always underplayed, presented in an austere "so what" manner which contributes immensely to the suspension of disbelief so necessary to each story. The script, the acting, the dull colour of the clothes the characters wear, the moody lighting (particularly the moody lighting — the designer is probably a big fan of Orson Welles's *The Third Man*), the humdrum sets (and especially the fact that all the outdoor scenes seem to take place just after a rainstorm): all are deliberately downbeat, establishing a strong sense of naturalness which makes the odd events investigated by Mulder and Scully appear more credible — indeed, a sense of naturalness which makes these odd events seem even more intrusive, even more threatening. As in all the best detective stories, it is Mulder's and Scully's task to blunt their threat and restore the natural order they disrupt.

This leads to one of the other great strengths of the series: the fact that very little is resolved. The plot of each episode may appear self-contained, with a beginning, a middle and an end, but there is always a sense of a larger world beyond, of a different set of characters with their own priorities and questions which may be (and often are) inimical to Mulder's and Scully's attempts to understand the phenomena which confront them. This is never more so than in those episodes which involve UFOs, where everyone seems to be conspiring against everyone else and the level of paranoia verges on the completely delirious. Which is probably the real reason why the series is so successful. No matter how crucial the naturalness of its setting and the non-resolution of its stories, *The X-Files* has to be read off sociologically if it is to be properly understood.

The series springs directly from the isolationism of which the USA is often accused. [This isolationist tendency] inevitably engenders suspicion about the rest of the world — and the stronger the isolationist trend, as it has been since the effective end of the Cold War in 1991, the shorter the step from suspicion to paranoia.

All the UFO episodes partake of this paranoia — the feeling that the government is lying about its contacts with aliens, that there are things it wishes to conceal, that there is a secret government within the public government which really orchestrates the nation's affairs; that while truth can set you free, there are people in power who will do anything they can to keep it from you.

— Joseph Nicholas
"X-Rated"
Matrix 115, June/July 1995

Over the last few years, science fiction has also become the mainstay of video racks in 'trendy' outlets like Virgin Records. Given that most of *Dr Who* (apart from what the Beeb in its wisdom recorded over) is available for sale, *Star Trek* in all its incarnations and *Babylon 5*, it is quite remarkable that it's still possible to buy music in record shops any more. On a less mainstream level, anime (fantasy animation from Japan) has been gaining in popularity in the UK. *Matrix* runs a regular column featuring the latest videos, with plot summaries that show that there's more to anime than big robots. For example *Urusei Yatsura* is described by Geoff Cowie as: "a vast romantic sf comedy spanning comic books, TV episodes and six movies in which a lecherous youth, Ataru Moroboshi, and his friends suffer the visitations of various annoying aliens, mostly cute and female, and especially the delicious Lum, a green-haired alien girl who wear either school uniform or tiger-skin bikini." Then there's the one about the boy who changes sex every time he's exposed to water, and much more that you would be unlikely to find perhaps on British or even American TV.

Comic book origins might account for some of the strangeness of anime, though this does not always follow: cf. the very mainstream romantic comedy *Lois and Clark* that has come out of the Superman comics (and achieved matching mainstream success). Comics in the late '80s were a changed breed. They had broken out of or at least found extra room in their culturally imposed strait-jacket of superheroes and stories for kids, and with such titles as *Watchmen*, *Dark Knight* and *Love and Rockets* gained a new audience among more mature readers. The great early '80s British brain drain to the States courtesy of DC comics had spawned surreal alternatives such as Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* (the only comic book ever to integrate superheroes, alchemy and the principles of dada) and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, the comic that launched a thousand graphic novel collections. Meanwhile, the traditional (ie Marvel) titles continued to fight back using the *Star Trek* principle, ie. saturate the market with spin-offs of all your most popular titles. In the end, though, this could prove counter-productive. John Richards explains how he came to give up *The X-Men* comics:

I have finally given up the *X-Men*. The relief is enormous. The sort of thing that can only be understood by the near hopeless collector. It should be easy to simply stop buying something that you don't enjoy and certainly don't need; but somehow you find yourself picking the ghastly things up off the shelf and carrying them over to those unsympathetic creatures who lurk behind the counters of shops and take away any money you happen to have on you.

The last time I gave up buying the *X-Men* was during the *X-tinction Agenda* cross-over, or was it the *X-ecutioner's Song* (who gives a toss). I quite often give up titles during cross-overs, after all I give the bastards enough money buying the titles I select without them making me buy extra ones. However this time the residual enjoyment I have had from reading past issues has been sufficiently diluted for me to be confident that I will not be reverting to type once the dust has settled down.

It isn't that I have got tired of the continual misspellings — although this one does bring up the level of one's despair at one's own weakness in buying the things in the first place up to fever pitch. The simple fact is that after more than 20 years of reading about this team of mutant misfits I have come to the point where I just do not give a monkey's about any of them. It is not that the stories have become difficult to follow — incomprehensible is a more accurate description — after all Chris Claremont (the writer who re-introduced the title in the 70s after a few years of re-prints) could spend years in finishing off sub-plots. The real annoyance is that no matter how many of the bloody titles you buy the important information will be revealed in a different one, the new mini-series or the spin-off starring the most boring character in the team by which you are least interested. And anyway — as I said above — I don't care about any of them any more.

The X-Men was the title that did most to introduce the style of super-hero soap operatics. The impression that Claremont gave was that the important issues were not whether Manhattan island would be towed outside the twelve mile limit and taken over by a super-evolved seaweed man but whether Kitty Pryde would wear the red or the green sweater on her date with Doug Ramsey. For a while it worked — hell, for ten years it worked — but it worked because Claremont knew enough about his characters to develop them in a reasonable manner (and because occasionally Manhattan island did go missing).

Scot Lobell does not have Claremont's touch. He does not have Claremont's feel for the characters and he does not understand the difference between sensible and self-destructive character development. (He also refuses to accept that since both Banshee and his daughter Syren fly on sonic waves they produce by screaming, no I did not make this up, they cannot talk without plunging out of the sky.)

— John Richards
"The Last of the X-Men"
Cyberspace No 30, September/November 1994

Fans Can't Dance

Fans and music has always been an ambiguous area. Some fans flinch at the mere mention of a disco, and would sooner have their house trashed than put on music at a party. Others reach for their guitars and retreat to a secluded room to make their own music in company with like-minded souls. But somewhere out there is the sense that music is a sister culture, running along in parallel to science fiction. That music with its fanzines and alternative styles and fashions, with its immediacy and energy, with its overlap of audience, is linked to what we here in fandom are doing. It may only be a subtext, an occasional reference to music played whilst writing, a nod in the direction of current heroes, an exchange of tapes, but it is there as an undercurrent that occasionally makes fandom a richer place to be.

One of the people to write consistently about his musical interests over his years in fandom has been **Nigel Richardson**, who here consider his resistance, and eventual conversion to the CD explosion.

Born to Consume

I used to be extremely anti-Compact Disc. Back when they first came out they were being acclaimed for all the wrong reasons, usually by people who didn't really like music but liked all the supposedly sophisticated aspects of the new medium. Dire Straits were the perfect CD group, bastardised pop with all the essential danger, sex, thrills, vigour and irresponsibility removed; aural pap for those who wanted something to fill their ears but not to tamper with their minds or souls. CDs seemed to be an admission of defeat, that you no longer wanted to hear anything new, let alone challenging, just the same familiar old stuff without the clicks and scratches, with any rough edges it might have had removed. For a long time you could be pretty sure that anyone who owned a CD player was a dope with more money than sense, desperate to appear on the cutting edge of technology and style whilst still listening to tedious old duds like Paul Simon and Eric Clapton.

I'm not sure when things changed, but by the time my cheapo turntable gave up the ghost in 1989, replacing it with a CD player no longer seemed such a wanky thing to do. And switching from rock to jazz and classical music seemed to go hand in hand with getting a CD player. I was in my thirties after all and the rock music that we thirtysomethings were supposed to go for just didn't appeal to me one little bit. I've ranted on about this before, but it cannot be repeated often enough. *Short version:* thirtysomething rock is a contrived mixture of "My Way" and Barry Manilow, formulaic anthems of self-righteous, sentimental reassurance to tell you that while the world might think you've sold out your dreams for the stolid responsibilities of adulthood, those who matter know you're still a rebel at heart. And a rebel with a nice stereo system too, thank you very much. Yeah. Rock on. Of course, only an utter swine would suggest (a) you were never really a rebel in the first place, (b) your dreams weren't worth holding on to, and (c) the world couldn't give a toss what you listened to as long as you paid £13.99 a time and didn't play it too loudly

I bought a few token rock CDs, such as the first two Velvet Underground albums, a couple of those neat Beach Boys reissues that gather together two LPs and a bunch of singles and out-takes for about £8.99, and Madonna's *Immaculate Conception*, but on the whole I was able to do very well for

about three years without current rock music. Besides, it seemed an apt time to stop listening; things had stopped being exciting. Sonic Youth followed the awesome *Sister* with the overindulgent *Daydream Nation* and sloppy *Goo*, REM had turned into pompous prats after *Document*, Bob Mold produced two of the most turgid and depressing records ever heard, the Meat Puppets became heavy metal nonentities, and John Peel's radio show was shifted to the graveyard shift so I missed out on anything new and worthwhile that might be coming along. It seemed reasonable to call it a day and catch up on seven decades of jazz and eight centuries of classical music instead.

I don't know why I started listening to rock music again recently. I suppose the idea of denying myself certain kinds of music because of my advancing age suddenly struck me as ridiculous. Or maybe I felt obliged to feel young again, surrounded as I am by so many young people acting like decrepit old farts. I'd started buying a few rock CDs that had been recommended as suitably noisy and life-affirming in the *Guardian* or *Independent on Sunday* (whew, rawk 'n' roll lifestyle!) such as Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Sugar's *Cooper Blue*, the Orb's *U. F. Orb* and Frank Black's *Frank Black* over the last year or so, but in the last few months I've really gone back to my old ways again and have bought a dozen CDs by loud and noisy American groups such as Pavement, Come, Smashing Pumpkins, Sebadoh, Royal Trux, Superchunk, and Trumans Water.

It suddenly feels right to be listening to thrashing guitars and sore-throat vocals again. And it fits in neatly with everything else I listen to; I still love classical music and jazz but sometimes only Trumans Water thrashing and shrieking their way through *Spasm Smash XXXOXXOX Ox and Ass* will do.

They said our youth was dead How could they know?
We're stinking in our beds We're lying low

Indeed, indeed. Maybe I should be working harder at becoming a real thirtysomething. It would be financially advantageous to limit my consumption to the stuff that we thirtysomethings are meant to like, and only buy CDs if they get a full window display at Our Price and five stars in Q. Don't think I haven't tried; I've been forcing myself to listen to Virgin's 1215AM radio station recently which is supposedly aimed at my age group, but it truly is the epitome of aural shite, and makes Radio 1 sound adventurous and wild in comparison. The static and interference you get trying to find the station is far more

BALLOONS OVER BRISTOL

Probably
number 7 (ish)

**Sting
and
Bono
don't
jet in
for
Bristol
Sound
City 95**

**The
Sex,
Drugs
& ROCK
'n' Roll
issue**

**Suede,
Sleeper,
Elastica,
Gene,
Bluetones,
Pulp,
JAMC,
John Peel.**

**Joining
The
Kiddies
At The
Radio
One FM
Roadshow**

**NO....
Portisham, Massi
Tricky OR ABBA
.....probably.....**

Music Timeline

- 24th Apr 1987
Duran Duran final guests on *The Tube*
- 16th Nov 1987
T'Pau's
"China in your hand"
Britain's 600th no. 1
- 11th Jun 1988
Mandela's 70th birthday party at Wembley
- 7th Jul 1991
Bryan Adams's
"(Everything I do) I do it all for you"
starts 16th week at no. 1
- 24th Nov 1991
Freddie Mercury dies
- 14th Aug 1991
Nirvana release *Nevermind*
- 30th Apr 1993
Virgin Radio launched
- 18th Oct 1993
George Michael sues Sony
- 23rd Aug 1993
Michael Jackson accused of child abuse
- 8th Apr 1994
Kurt Cobain of Nirvana commits suicide
- July 1995
10th Anniversary of Live Aid

entertaining than the dreary "classic rock" and the smug dullard DJs. I really don't know why they bother; the archetypal 1215AM listener will already have all the stuff they play (on the original LP, compilation LP, CD reissue of the original LP and boxed set collector-scum compilation CD with bonus track), and can listen to it in perfect, reassuring noise-free stereo whenever he or she wants, without the mindlessly smug DJs, building society advertisements and Radio Albania breaking in.

To sum up: you're never too old to spend all your money on loud, discordant, antisocial music. (And I'm the same age as Madonna, *actually* . . .)

— Nigel Richardson
"Born to Consume"
Slubberdegullion 7, 1993

And finally on to our last piece which proves that fans can still write well and differently about publically shared events. This article also shows something of the nexus between public events and personal decisions that shape our lives. None of us, even those who live entirely in fandom, exist in isolation from the events of the world around us. Fan activity occurs against this backdrop whether we like it or not. Some of these events we blank out, some seep through to inform our conversations and attitudes, and a few hit us so unexpectedly and directly, that we are never quite the same again. This concerns one of the latter, and as such, seems an appropriate place to end this collection of writings about this sensual world (K. Bush, 1989) and its intersections with fandom since 1987.



Give Me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld So I Can Sigh Eternally Alison Freebairn

"What else should I be?"

When the news that Nirvana's singer and songwriter had decided to end his life with a shotgun broke, on Friday April 8, I was at home. I avoid newspapers, TV and radio at the weekend so I knew nothing about it. On Saturday night, I left to go to the Cathouse — a club in Glasgow that caters for mainly rock fans — and was puzzled by a piece of graffiti in the loos that said "Kurt Cobain RIP 1967-1994". I assumed it had been written by a pessimistic fan after the Rome coma incident. I eventually found out what had happened at around 1am. "Heart Shaped Box" was playing.

"What else should I say?"

To be honest, I was unfazed at the time. I just felt slightly hollow.

"What else should I write?"

On Monday, I was angry. I re-read an interview with his wife Courtney Love, an occasional hero of mine, talking about their two-year-old child Frances Bean. When she was on her death bed, she said, she'd be thinking of her babies and husband, nothing else. I went into work in a bad mood due to extreme muscle pain, and rattled out a stinging leader article on the suicide. Anger makes me articulate.

"I wish I was like you; easily amused"

I kept thinking back to the people at the Cathouse that night. They were dismissive. One of the DJs dedicated Arrested Development's "Bullet in Your Head" to the singer.

"Everything is my fault; I'll take all the blame"

Now that he's dead, everyone still wants a piece of Kurt Cobain. For a man who claimed to hate the whole rock 'n' roll mythos, he chose a stupid, pointless and selfish way to end it all. Cursed with a crippling spine deformity and intestinal problems, his was a life of pain and he believed heroin and ultimately suicide was the only way out of it, but to leave a little daughter behind?

It took me a week before I felt calm enough to play Nirvana once more, to hear that raw voice and feel that crushing wave of empathy. Driving from Irvine to Kilmacollm a week after he died, with the brilliant sunshine dappling the trees and with snow-capped Ben Lomond in the distance, I shrank from the despair that would make one leave this world by one's own hand. I played "All Apologies" over and over again and sang until I could taste blood in my mouth. I never met the man. I love his music. I feel hurt and angry.

"What else should I be? All apologies . . ."

Kurt shot himself. So what? Your hero is dead, children, and nobody gives a f**k.

Well, I do. Buddy Holly, Ian Curtis, Janis Joplin and Judy Garland are all very dead but I still listen to them. The difference is that — with the exception of Ian Curtis, who died when I was ten — they were people and stories and music that I discovered long after the fact. The death of Cobain is a defining moment in both musical and cultural history that happened in the full glare of the world's media.

However, it seems destined to be swept under the carpet in the rush to distance The Spokesperson For A Generation from the reality — the sad, despairing drug addict. The urge to defend the innocents, to save them from the frankly unsavoury aspects of everyday life, will result in Cobain being forgotten or sanitised beyond all recognition.

The guy was a loser. He didn't have anything inside to feel proud of. He totally lost it, sank deep into drugs, brought a child into the world and then ran out on her.

So why is he important? He wrote bloody good songs, and that will always be how I remember him. There's none of us through the world yet, and I've got too many bad habits to start getting sanctimonious about somebody I didn't even know.

Nirvana were never a band that I would kill for, but the music still matters to me. "Teen Spirit" still makes me smile and "Heart Shaped Box" still makes me cry; "On a Plane" still fills me with self-confidence and "Lithium" still sounds like my own heartbeat.

As his songs seemed to mirror aspects of my life that I often preferred to ignore, so his death raised worrying implications in my life at the time. I'm referring to Cobain's apparent belief that when his music ceased to matter to him, he ceased to matter as an individual.

That worried me. Is an individual's chosen profession so intrinsically tied up with their persona? I'm not talking about the man in the corner shop; the young soldier who joins the army because he can't get a job on Civvy Street, or the lawyer who sees his intelligence and flamboyance as a route to fame and fortune.

I'm talking about those of us who have never had a moment's doubt about what they would do when they grew up — like Kurt Cobain, like me, like millions of others born with a knack for doing only one thing well, and the pig-headed arrogance to see it through.

I used to condemn eager young reporters who regard news writing as some kind of vocation — some kind of calling. It's just a job, I argued. A denial, a denial . . . It must have been a calling for me. But what happens when you fall from true faith? When, like Kurt Cobain, you lose the drive and enthusiasm that you have felt since childhood? What happens when you wake up one morning and realise that *you don't want to do this anymore?*

The options are simple. You can either get out of the trade you are in or you can diversify. You may see something else you want to do, and are qualified to do. You may even be lucky enough to get the opportunity to prove that you are not a one-dimensional prima-donna.

Some of my friends have pointed out to me that producing a personal fanzine such as this is the epitome of narcissism, and have warned me that I could tie my persona so tightly to my writing that I may never be able to separate them.

I know where the boundaries lie, and only lament the need for them. If news writing — 'work' writing — no longer inspired me, I had to stop. To carry on would be to cheat myself and others. It took me a long time to come terms with this.

Kurt couldn't separate himself from his vocation and was unable to cope. He said that the worst crime he could think of was to fake it, to pretend he was having 100 per cent fun. But as Courtney said, while reading his suicide note at the public vigil in Seattle: "No, Kurt, the worst crime I can think of is for you to just continue being a rock star when you just f**king hated it. Just f**king stop."

So, that's just what I've done. I've just f**king stopped. As of November, I am an ex-newspaper journalist.

It was a long time coming, but I feel I've made the right decision. From a redundant reporter to a local newspaper editor in the space of a year, is it any wonder I feel I was pushed too far too fast? It killed any enthusiasm I may have had for news writing — which was never my favourite thing about the job.

The news side of the job has always left me cold. Features, yes. Music, yes. When my paper was bought over by a large company, the editor of my former rival took control of my paper. Far from being pissed off about that, I feel it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I was absorbed into the staff of the other paper as a sub-editor and columnist in May, and I've had a great time ever since — apart from one thing.

Since January I had been doing freelance work with the music magazine *Sun Zoom Spark*. My rôle with that magazine grew over the months until I was either at work, at a gig, or writing features at home. That is the reason for the delayed publication of this zine. It was not humanly possible to do more writing than I was already doing.

The magazine had hinted that they wanted me full-time in June of this year, and I spent months weighing the pros and cons, but there was no official offer of employment. The down side of my day job was made all the more unpalatable by the light at the end of the tunnel; every mild irritation enhanced by the knowledge that I didn't really have to put up with it.

By October I was seriously depressed. I was doing too much news writing again, finding it impossible to have any enthusiasm for it, and bone-weary. I hadn't had more than two days off in over a year and was constantly working, drinking too much on my infrequent nights off and reaching for my paste-up scalpel when things got too bleak, needing focus to draw myself away from the turmoil in my head, needing control, loath to take my pain out on anything other than myself.

Most evenings I was in another world, going to gigs and listening to music and doing what I knew I was born to do, and then I'd have to get up at 8am regardless and do news stories.

Early one morning, while I was giving various members of the The Moondials a lift home after they'd played a particularly good gig, I discussed this with drummer Gary Thom and guitarist Stevie Jackson. It's like the Sidhe, I said, we're being given a glimpse of what we really want to do, and then it's being snatched away from us in the cold light of morning. Tell us about it, they said. They are still waiting for their record deal, and they don't exactly have a barrel of laughs in their day jobs either.

I didn't realise just how deep I was getting until Jackie took me aside and told me I was scaring her. It was becoming obvious that something had to give, and I was left scared, shaking, hoping that it wouldn't be me.

After a particularly bad evening, I resigned myself to telephoning *Sun Zoom Spark* and telling them to get another 'star writer'. I couldn't afford to chuck in the day job, and SZS weren't paying me. I put it off, and put it off, because I knew that cutting off the one thing keeping me halfway sane would have been bloody stupid.

While I was wrestling with this problem, SZS phoned me and offered me a job.

I have no regrets. I hope I never have to live through another seven months like the last ones, but I had an obscene amount of fun in spite of it. I'd see Jackie and Ian, Alistair or Alan, or I'd go to see The Moondials and always come away with a smile on my face.

I managed to aquit myself well in the day job from 9 to 5 giving 100 per cent (99 per cent of the time) and giving 100 per cent to SZS from 5 to 9. Is it any wonder I nearly went doolally? I've always thought of myself as a lazy bitch, and I'm certainly not a workaholic. How did I end up in this situation? Could it be that I'm just a soft touch, just a girl who can't say no, and herself in a terrible fix? Or could I have fallen foul of my own motto, that if it feels good, do it, just don't do it by half measures?

What about Kurt Cobain? Well, as I write this, both *NME* and *Melody Maker* have devoted large areas of print to the release of the *Nirvana — Unplugged* album. One paper had a previously unpublished photo of Cobain on its cover, and has devoted its centre spread to a re-evaluation of the man's life and music. The deification process starts here, boys and girls. I compared the articles in this week's (October 26 1994) music press to the

April issue detailing the suicide. The sting of his death has faded, the recriminations are absent, and people are simply talking about the songs. That is how it should be. I can't help thinking that if he had waited slightly longer, if he had reached deep and found his own self-worth in the midst of his torment, we would be talking about his new songs instead of the *Unplugged* album. As it is, I've learned more about myself by his death than I could have learned from his life. And those songs will stand as the only memorial I need, a fitting testament to a gentle sould who simply wasn't strong enough to fight his own demons.

RIP, Kurt.

— *Alison Freebairn*
 "Give Me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld
 So I Can Sigh Eternally"
From the Kelpie Pool 2, November 1994

Fanzines And Editors

Fanzines cited in this fanthology together with their editors

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