INK GUN BLUES

ALIAS DOCTOR DOS

    It is a strange tale I tell, nigh on the eve of CORFLU 9, as
I sit in my accustomed place in San Francisco's Cafe La Boheme
(also the scene of a mythical meeting between cartoonist Dori Seda
and rock critic Lester Bangs in a world that should have been).

    As I scrawl these lines, a battered Gene Wolfe paperback
before me on the table, I struggle to free myself of Wolfe's
magnetic prose style. Discovering Wolfe's four-and-one volume New
Sun series was one of the highlights of last year for me -- a year
spent mostly in the absence of fanac of any kind. (Most of my 1991-
1992 was consumed in the flickering glow of spinning Winchester
cylinders -- referred to as "hard disks" in the common
vernacular.) Little did I know, when I stepped up to spin my first
platinum platter, that the Winchester device would metamorphosize
into a flashing wheel of fortune, rotating over my life like a
ship full of Severian's hierodules.

    It's been slow for me in terms of life, love and adventure,
but to while away the hours of George Bush's New World Order, I
seem to have adopted a new identity. It started small -- a free-
lance review here, or a user group meeting there to cadge a free
piece of computer software -- but gradually, it took over my life.
No TV, few movies, endless series of reboots. Like a huge,
acrostic puzzle, the Byzantine world of Microsoft Corporation's
perverted operating system came to haunt me. My struggles with it
evolved into a compulsive "beat the system" metaphor. Like a
boilerplate Jack Vance wizard, I began to master the ineffable,
until finally a hole opened in my mailbox and Sandestins began
pouring forth gold.

    I learned to command the demons who guard the Upper Memory
Blocks, and launch buffers into the High Memory Area -- where most
people prefer amnesia. So commenced my dual life as Lenny Bailes,
cheap shirt wearing, aging hippie, and Doctor DOS -- nerd rescuer,
hooky player and journalist. This career shift has culminated in
my commitment to a book contract, which, in turn, has committed me
to days on end tending dyslexic computer mysteries in my bedroom.

The up side of this has been the possibility of earning a decent income by providing information to people who want it, rather than dodging paper airplanes thrown by malcontent junior high school students. The down side of it is that it can get slightly weird, as you may have gathered from the preceding paragraphs. Not mine, the wisdom of sages like Robert Lichtman, who know how to pub their ish, switch off the power and go watch Fernwood Tonight. Instead, the nagging wish to find a segment of reality with predictable consequences has propelled me into a gnomic milieu that both baffles and nurtures American businessmen.

GENIE

The main thing about computers is they increase the ease of information distribution to others willing to let the pod creatures into their lives. One manifestation of this is the growth of on-line science fiction/fan discussion groups. While I haven't had the stamina in the last year to fold paper, lick stamps and mail, I've found that it costs very little effort to dial up and connect to an electronic fountain that produces daily correspondence from Damon Knight, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Tom Perry, and a whole new cast of discussion-hacks with modems. The Science Fiction and Fantasy RoundTable of General Electric's GEnie teems with role-players, StarTrek fans and Dr. Who nuts, just like other segments of the universe, but it also allows its subscribers to filter and select for the 25 to 50 interesting fans and pro sf writers who're looking for a place to unwind. Occasional participation by fans like Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Tom Weber, Debbie Notkin, Bhob Stewart, Larry Stark, Don D'Ammassa, Don Keller, David Bratman, Mike Ward, Bill Warren, and Rich Mann (the founder of APA 45, remember?) adds a kind of timeless fandom of all ages quality to the experience. The other aspect of note is that GEnie has created a subfandom of science fiction pros, reminiscent of the better aspects of the Futurians, Vanguard Amateur Press Association, or Frank Lunney's Beobehema circle of the late 1960s. The medium preserves some of the time-honored tradition of nitpicking and feuding (called "flaming", here) but contrary to what you find in publications like Short Form, SFWA Forum, etc., it's mostly not the pros who indulge in this -- in fact, there is such an atmosphere of bonhomie and community in the pro circle on SFRT that it's a bit incestuous. Most of them are reluctant to voice criticisms of other on-line writers. Instead, the conversation tends to be mostly personal natter, whimsy, and speculation.

A lot of the SFRT is dominated not by pros, or paper sf fans, but by a bulletin board culture that is in the process of discovering its own identity. One advantage this seems to have over paper fanzine fandom at present is that literate, intelligent outsiders are stumbling into the science fiction community through SFRT and becoming assimilated. Many of the denizens of the bulletin board were extremely interested last year when Tom Perry & Teresa Nielsen Hayden started up a discussion of the legend of Claude Degler.

The drawback to SFRT, of course, is that a large number of good people who are part of the wit and wisdom of science fiction fandom don't get to see it. Although some people argue that computer access today is no more expensive than access to a mimeograph was in the '60s, there is a cultural and technological resistance to computers that stops many people from participating in the online experience. Paper and ink have roots in a populist literary culture, whereas computers are still perceived by many people as instruments of economic subjugation. (That this doesn't have to be so is obvious to anyone who has made the discovery personally, but not so obvious to those who use computers only at dayjobs for tasks that have no relevance to their personal lives.)

There is also a certain ambiance of Asimov's old "robotics" issue at play -- if electronic servants make the job so easy, do people lose the virtues of good, honest sweat? (The obvious progressive reply is that it's always better to have the power of choice -- you can sit at a loom to weave a rug if that's what turns you on, but it's good that we don't have to make slaves of people just want to get something to cover the floor.)

In my own experience, I think that without electronic bulletin boards, I would be more likely to do more personal essay writing, or poetry/song writing, but your mileage may vary.