



The Balooobius

The Balooobius Wait, as in I don't believe I actually waited until July before publishing another Issue of this impromptu zine. The last issue was in February We all have decided that we're sick and tired the pandemic, so we're going to pretend it's over, even though people are still getting sick, and some dying. After all... Grandpa was old enough that we *won't* really miss him. I still hang my mask here at **245 Dunn Ave. Apt. 2111, Toronto Ontario, M6K 1S6, Can (416) 531-8974, Taral@bell.net**. I have a fair amount of old, second-rate material to print, that lacks there was no urgency to print. **KB&A #332** However, first we have this newly breaking news...

Black Box

“Death may not release us” But it has definitely put another of our more esteemed members, Robert Lichtman, on indefinite hold. The news is only a couple of days old as I type this, and *File 770* has already run a full obituary. I don't intent to wax fulsomely over Robert's memory, as I only knew him well for a relatively short time. Before then, he was only a name from a fandom well before my time, known to me only from old fanzines. But around the time of Mike Glicksohn's death, we became email correspondents. I don't recall too much of our correspondence, other than Robert's curiosity about Toronto fandom in the 1970's, particularly about Victoria Vayne and Mike Glicksohn. Then, for whatever reason, our correspondence trailed off, and I heard from Robert mainly in the letter columns of other fanzines. I remember that he wrote quite long, punctilious accounts of when he was a younger fan, that in fact tended to be a little long-winded. Well, they interests most readers, anyway. Robert was also rather opinionated, as I recall. He managed to seriously annoy Marc Schirmeister. I'm sure it was quite unintentional, but the artist was not pleased by Robert's apparent incomprehension of Schirm's artwork. What was there to understand, right? It was funny, right? Oh, well, funny is in the eye of the eye of the artist who pens it. The final contact I had with Robert was over Steve Stile's final article, published in *Trap Door*. (That's another who we most miss in fandom.) Steve wanted the article to have an illustration, and requested that I do the honours. Despite increasing disenchanted with doing fanart, I was happy for once for the assignment. I'm pretty sure that was the last words that we ever exchanged, unfortunately. We all knew that Robert was quite ill, however, and by then probably spent his words as wisely words as he did economically. “And that is the all I have to say on that subject,” as Forest Gump tells us.

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Lost and Found

Last February, I ordered a number of costly collectible coins from my favourite coin dealer. Robert Kokotailo gives me good deals, is very knowledgeable about the specimens he sells and is dependable. He guarantees his goods. If it turns out that he has sold a counterfeit coin, he will refund the full cost. Not that he is likely to make such mistakes. His knowledge of the subject of ancient coins is astonishing. I have been doing business with him now for quite a few years. Earlier this year, I bought a number of rather costly acquisitions. Since I don't have my own credit card, I made arrangements for the sale through a friend. He uses his card to pay Robert, then I pay my friend in cash. While we were still waiting for my arrangement to be finalized, Robert send the coins ahead, entirely on mutual trust. *Unfortunately*, the coins never arrived in my mail box. Since I had not yet okayed the transaction, Robert ate the entire \$1600 loss! Of course, he began a postal enquiry to see if the loss could be recovered. My part in the investigation involved going to my local substation, and asking the post master to check the computer. The records showed that Robert's package had been successfully delivered to the substation. From there, it would have been conveyed by truck to the drop box and then to the mail carrier ... but at that point there was no trace. I assumed that the carrier had put the coins in the wrong box in the mail room, not mine, and some other resident got my coins. This happens all the time when I get other people's mail! At that point, it could be only speculation, but odd were that the coins ended up in a pawn shop. Although my lucky neighbor may have no idea what they were worth, the coins had come with a handy invoice that would have made it *very* clear exactly what they were worth! In the end, we get a dead end, and gave up the chase. We were never going to see those coins again. So SOB was going to pocket his fifty bucks, and the pawn shop was going to slam the till closed on more than \$1600 of Robert's money.

But, we spoke too soon! Yesterday, the package was in my mailbox. This would have been in June, four months later. I checked the package, to see if the address was correct. It was. There was no sign of tampering, and everything inside and out was as it should be! No explanation. But the good news is that I've got my coins, and could send Robert the good news. I soon began to transfer the information to file cards, and start sketches to match the card to the actual coin, to avoid confusion when

handling them. For example, I have three Venetian silver Grossos from the 1200 and 1300s. Each is from the reign of a different Doge, but otherwise look remarkably alike. How could I tell them apart if ever I got them confused? That's where my thumbnail sketches come in handy. To bring the story to a happy conclusion, I finally have all ten coins indexed, drawn and stored. Robert has been paid, and – the next time I'm able to attend a coin show – I'll have a lot more money saved that I can spend still on even *more* old, old coins.

Getting That Old Time Religion

Neil Gaiman's American Gods

A few days ago, I ran up to the mall for this-and-that, and also just to get out of the house. While at Wal-Mart, I bought a copy of *American Gods*, the series based on Neil Gaiman's book. I had watched all of the episodes up to that point, but had only begun the third disk when I came to a bad one. I had already had trouble following the poor sound quality up to that point, but at this point it was intermittently inaudible. It would be fine for a while, and then suddenly it would be as though it were recorded with a piece of cardboard taped over a paper cup. I assumed, it was just a problem with my set of DVDs, and replacing the set would fix everything ... but then, I thought, I'd have to watch the first three disks *all over again* to be sure that *they* weren't bollixed! Then I realized that I didn't *want* to watch them over again! I'm of two minds about Ian McShane as Mr. Wednesday (Odin), who was wonderful far as it goes. *Most* of the actors were superb in their roles. But the story just *drags* ... and the cinematography is so unnecessarily artsy that sometimes I wasn't sure what the hell was even going on. The narrative did grow more clear as it developed, but I was not happy with this way of telling a story.

Most of all, I discovered that I was just fucking tired of so much pointless *sex* in the story. It may have been shocking and ground breaking once, but almost all of the sex in *American Gods* accomplished nothing – just takes up 10 minutes of time while people fucked other without in the same old way, neither advancing the plot nor developing character. For that matter, I've had the same impatience with other highly touted series that are needlessly padded with bodies groaning on top of each other. As human beings, are we such ordinary primates that we can be amused by simply watching each other fuck? Nuts... why do I even ask such questions...

Something else also bothered me with *American Gods*. I had trouble telling many of the younger characters apart. The older and more distinctive actors presented no problem. But almost everyone under the age 40 apparently aspires to look about the same. The white guys seemed to have short beards, short hair on the sides, long on top, and also look pretty much all the same. Younger black men seemed way too often to go for in for the unshaven, shaved skull, ripped look that I suppose that I suppose is the ideal black body type. But I often didn't know who was who, in the

story, what they had previously done or what they were likely to do next. Of course, a lot of my problem might have been the directors' obsession with shooting in darkened sets, poor sound recording and unexpected set-ups. The art of "cinema" seems to have increasingly taken precedence over the art of clear storytelling! And what is "cinema" if it isn't good story telling?

While long periods of *American Gods* were fascinating to watch, I decided not to replace the defective copy when I returned it. I will be watching something else instead ... maybe *Good Omens*, which by comparison I conspicuously enjoyed.

Pandaring to Taste

Today I brought home a new copy of *Turning Red*. I watched it later than evening without high expectations. Despite generally good reviews, and knowing that the film was explicitly set in my home town, Toronto, I ought to have been prepped to enjoy it. Yet I had bad vibes seem from the start. Trying to understand what was fueling my doubts, it might have simply been because I've learned to react badly to too many Japanese influences that have become thirty-year old clichés in popular culture, particularly animation. Perhaps too, *Turning Red* had instantly become a standard furry wet-dream, in which a young girl turns into a giant red panda.

Of all Chinese folk stories, red pandas could be among the most viewer friendly possible to Western sensibilities. Although one shouldn't confuse Japanese popular culture with Chinese, they share some common tropes. I went through a phase of following anime in the 1980's, so nine-tailed foxes and raccoons with magic genitals grew tiresome. A bit of cultural bias due is bound to creep into my remarks.

The protagonists in *Turning Red* are mainly young girls approaching puberty, and like many recent properties, male figures receded into the background while female characters occupy almost the entire foreground. Mei is the heroine. Her father is supportive, and not *quite* as submissive as he seems, but essentially a passive figure. A schoolyard bully plays major role also, driving one of the subplots in the background. A third is a Sikh school janitor (or security officer), who plays no role other than as comic relief. The fourth male character is an aged shaman who makes the magic work. But focus of the film is on Mei, her three friends, her mother, her grandmother and a host of female relatives. This is very much a film in which the women are on center stage.

How could it not be, since it is *Red* perfectly obvious that the story is about Mei having her first period. Even though there were no red spots shown in her knickers, you couldn't miss it. Mei inherits the generations old curse of her sex that releases her very physical inner beast, and she must come to grips with ... or *it* will control *her*. That's the premise, at least.

This is where I had problems with the premise. The initial conditions of the magic are repeatedly violated as the plot introduces new complications. Apparently, Mei's mother *hasn't* properly controlled her inner panda, and it is unleashed again, even though she must already have successfully completed the necessary ritual as a young woman. Next, *all* of Mei's female relatives *all* seem to have mastered their panda nature, not only those in a direct line. And have all have mastered their panda nature, by imprisoning it in a magic talisman. As well, for some reason they are all wearing one during Mei's ceremony. When Mei's mother succumbs to rage and flies out of control in her giant red panda form – and nearly destroys Toronto's SkyDome stadium – all the female relatives break their talismans to release *their* red pandas, in order to come to Mei's aid! At the end of the crisis, they meekly surrender their panda nature as though they always had the power to do so whenever they wanted. Their panda natures seem to vanish this time forever.

At the end, finally Mei decides NOT to surrender *her* panda nature. What? This was an option? No one said that was a choice! And why didn't Mei become an out-of-control emo-monster, as that was the whole idea of suppressing the red panda spirit in the first place! This movie made NO SENSE!

I had other issues with *Turning Red*, that had little to do with basic story. It comes down to my dislike of simple-minded Boy Bands. You know the sort, I suppose – sneering, pretty boys who have too-fastidiously cultivated images, who have names like Trevor or Fabio, who dance like robots in precision step and can be replaced by Justin or Damien without anyone missing a beat. They are forgettable nobodies whose careers last about a year before quietly slipping off the chart into oblivion. The plot of *Turning Red* revolves entirely around such a flash-in-the-pan band, and the need for Mei and her friends to see the local concert if it kills them. I suppose this is a side of the experience of young women that guys are not likely to be in touch with. There is a male equivalent, of course – I'm thinking of Brooke Shields – but Mei's infatuation is without the humour that would have made it bearable.

One of the things I was most curious about when I bought *Turning Red* was how it would depicted my home town, Toronto. For the most part, they had all the landmarks where they belonged and looking as they should. The focus was on a part of town close to the downtown core, usually called China Town for reasons not hard to guess. It is a BIG China Town, too. Probably bigger than Vancouver's famous neighborhood, and perhaps rivaling San Francisco's. While everything was more or less in its right place, I was surprised to discover that in the film there was a large gated compound enclosing a temple. It is not specified what sort of temple, which is a little odd, but it really didn't matter whether it was for the worship of Buddha, Confucius or Taoist gods. What *was* impossible in China Town was there was large enough for a block of land with traditional temple and gardens! If that much space had been cleared of the original Victorian buildings, a 12 story new Hong Kong bank

would have been erected on the site ... *not a temple!* Temples I know about are usually old renovated buildings repurposed, of no great size or magnificence. Oh, well ... chalk it up to narrative license.

But this is really what got me. I know that the summer sky over Toronto doesn't isn't the dazzling ultramarine that one finds over LA or Los Vegas, but it *really that pastel?* I'm sorry to say that just might be...

It's My *Friends* I Can't Stand!

Sometimes I don't think I like all the people I know very much. They often come to me to grouch about stuff that's happened to them, and they bend my ear mercilessly. It's never just to chat and see what's up with me, or to listen to *my* problems... I'm just a sounding board. Fortunately, not so often that I can't grim and bear it. They can be quite a handful, however, and sometimes I wonder how I got involved in their troubles, or why I put up with it.

Case in point, there's an artist friend of mine, who wouldn't appreciate being named. He introduced me to a second artist at a social event, years ago, as a crank and largely unsavory character. He *was* that! I expected to have a cheap laugh and probably never hear from this character again. Unfortunately, he turned up again and again, like a bad penny that kept turning up in the collection plate. Once I had been introduced to him, he became a fixture anytime I was in that part of country for a con or any other reason. It seemed we simply could not get rid of him!

The worst thing was that the man was not entirely stupid, and he would surprise me with things I had not imagined he knew anything about. But it was always twisted into something unwholesome. An interest in allied bombing of Germany, for instance, would only appeal to him because of the gruesome casualties inflicted by the RAF and USAAF on the city of Dresden. Or he would be more knowledgeable than I expected about secret experiments conducted by the Japanese on Chinese prisoners in the years leading up to the war. But not so much because he had a general knowledge of the Second World war, but because he was fascinated with those ghastly experiments conducted in the name of "science." He had been raised a Catholic, I learned, and so was also as intoxicated with Satan and Hell. Yet I wouldn't call him a violent man from anything I had ever witnessed. If anything, I would have called him a *schmo*.

In general, he was a rather amiable sort, so for some reason I never actually told him to go jump in the lake. In small amounts, he was even quite tolerable. Inevitably, however, he would say something stupid, dunderheaded and completely unacceptable. He claimed he was unable to understand why black people could call each other the N-word, but why *he* couldn't without causing horrible offense. He also saw not moral dilemma in flying to southeast Asia to hire an underage hooker. It was

legal *there*, so what wrong with what he wished he could do? Fortunately, he never had the sort of money for that sort of thing, or he might be in jail to this day...

We put up with him, and I admit that he was sometimes amusing.

But he also became a true-blue believer in the divine revelation of Donald Trump.

What pissed me off was that he phoned me long distance on election night to crow about the wonderful news, despite knowing full well that I despised Trump and that it was inconceivable that I would welcome this news. Why on Earth was he rubbing it in? I told him I had no further interest in this conversation, and to never call me again. He phoned minutes later, and this time I explained carefully that he had done this despite my making it perfectly clear that this would make me angry, and that he had repeated the offense a second time, and hung up again. I didn't speak to him for three years. Three, blissful years...

Unfortunately, he called again to tell me that a fan he felt close to had died unexpectedly. I knew the dead fan somewhat, and always thought he was such a prize jerk that I wasn't at all sorry to hear was dead. But as I listened to the guy at the other end of the phone, I felt sorry for him, and let him talk it out. That was a mistake, looking back on it, because he got into the habit of calling now and then, to rant and rage over Muslims, the Mexican invasion of the US, black riots that had burned Seattle to the ground and all sorts of other crazy shit. It only got worse over time. By the time Trump had been president for three years, I was listening to rubbish about replacement of White people, grooming of our children by teachers to turn them all queer, universities that were controlled by people who hated America, the destruction of Confederate statues that were the sacred emblems of our nationhood, and on and on ... and on.

Sometimes I would argue with him, attempting to pound some sense into his twisted brain. Other times I was able to change the subject, at least for a while, and persuade him to talk about something sensible. Even then, there wasn't much I could agree with.

Things might have remained in a sort of status regarding this trial of my patience, but I have to change the subject now to that first artist I mentioned, the one who introduced me to the idiot I've mainly been talking about up until now.

Things become complicated at this point, and I will need to arbitrarily designate the two artists as Rick and Morty. Why them? Why not? It is important that the names contain no clue to their identity. This artist first artist, who I'll call Rick, didn't like Morty one bit. Detested him strongly. But unfortunately, there was a third party who, as a longtime friend of Rick, he liked to see often. I'm tempted to call this third party Mr. Poopbutthole, (also from the cartoon), but I'll settle for Jerry. Jerry shared the same house with Morty, who, as I've said, Rick utterly detested. If there was every

any need to prove that the gods are perverse, it was the strange triumvirate. The levels of non-stop tension when all three were one place could be quite astonishing. Yet they seemed unable to break out of this mutually destructive relationship.

The events that followed have been verified by both Rick and Morty (though I haven't spoken to Jerry about it).

What I've learned is that Rick sent a bundle of drawings to Jerry to scan on his computer. When Rick drove down the house where Morty and Jerry live, Jerry said he hadn't seen the art. It had apparently never arrived in the mail. Later during Rick's visit, he strolled into Morty's studio to snoop, and said that he found the missing envelope of art in Rick's mail, where it had no right being. Rick flew into a rage, accusing Morty of stealing the art, and in a fit of pique, tore up his own artwork! After that act of destruction, Rick knocked over some pencils and other brick-a-brack that belonged to Morty. Then Rick stormed out of the house.

As Rick was leaving, Morty came charging after him, waving around a huge machete that usually hung in the studio!

Rick fended Morty off with a ladder of some sort that he found leaning against the wall of the house, and managed to climb into his car and drive away.

I repeat, I've heard this story from both sides, and their accounts hardly vary at all. The only differences that I wasn't able to resolve from the firsthand accounts was how much stuff Rick knocked over, whether the missing artwork was in the trash of just on the desk, and whether Morty meant to do anything with the machete or just wave it around excitedly! Those are the only differences of importance that I remember.

In the aftermath, I've had at least two conversations about the event with Morty, and one with Rick. Morty wanted me to act as a sort of go-between for him to apologize to Rick. But Rick said he didn't even want to hear the apology – he wasn't interested. Morty seemed genuinely sorry for everything, but, really... under what circumstances is it appropriate to threaten anyone with a machete?

It must also be said, I think, that there is a possibility that Morty wasn't trying to steal the artwork. He claims that a third roommate in Morty's house was in the habit of sometimes picking up the mail from the box out front, and just dumping the contents on Morty's desk, and Morty didn't realize the envelope was mixed in with his stuff. This actually sounds plausible ... but doesn't excuse the machete attack in the least.

This incident has been an ongoing state of affairs for years, and it is nearly a miracle that violence hasn't ensued long before this. Much of the blame can be laid on the shoulders of Jerry, however. Jerry was perfectly capable of making arrangements for him to meet Rick in a nearby mall, a convenient restaurant or some other neutral

space. Jerry preferred to sit on his big fat ass, however, and not have to leave his room! Obviously, this needs to change if Rick and Jerry are to stay friends.

I've talked with two or three people I'm close to, and they all had much the same comment to my narrative: "How old are these people? Twelve?" Fair question, I thought.

This is why I sometimes can't stand knowing the people I know.

[I was originally not going to publish this, and was willing only to allow selected readers limited access. One of the participants may rightly be nervous about being involved in such an awkward situation, even when he is not at all responsible for it. The real malefactor is indeed one of that tribe called a furry fan, and I am somewhat embarrassed to say that I have anything to do with him. But sometimes you know people without good reason, just as you may have relatives you wish you didn't know. So after some reflection, I decided to put the piece into print. The names are changed, after all, and I think it unlikely that anyone will be recognized. May gawd help me if I'm wrong! I just can't stand to let good writing go to waste ... or even indifferent writing, as may be the case.]

Locs for The Bilooopius

Hope Leibowitz, tiki@interlog.com, 12 Feb 2022

Wow. That was scary, and your toilet thing too. Never a dull moment. And that "doctor" shouldn't be one. Poor Steven!

Jerry Kaufman, JAKaufman@aol.com, 24 Feb 2022

My family, on my mother's side, tends to be long-lived. Mom, her sisters, and a few of her brothers lasted well into their eighties. My dad, on the other side, died at 51, and at least two of his brothers had heart problems. I'm pretty sure I take after my mother. I'm a few years older than you, and have similar thoughts.

Our overflowing toilet was fortunately not as messy as yours, but it dumped a lot of water before I got the water shut off. We had to do a lot of mopping and drying not only in the bathroom but in the basement below the bathroom. We stayed overnight with Andy Hooper and Carrie Root so we'd have a working toilet. We couldn't get a plumber that night from the companies that advertise 24 hour emergency service, despite the amazing rates they charge, but the next day we found a company that actually had both a plumber available and a rate half what the other services asked. We ended up paying more than we expected because we opted to get a new toilet. The one we replaced was old and had had similar issues in the past.

You got me curious about the celebrities slated to appear on the new and improved *Fraggle Rock*; the source I found talked about celebrity guest voices, so maybe there won't be any humans visiting the place? I did recognize most of the names, but I think I pay a little more attention to pop culture than you.

*[My folks were all over the longevity map. My mother died young, at 60, but **her** mother passed away years after her, at 92. My mom's brother survived to 81. My grandfather on my father's side died of diabetes and*

cardiac arrest in his '60s. My estranged dad drank and smoked, and last time I heard anything from him he was also in his' 60s. He devote much time to thought about shuffling off my mortal coil. One never knows. It could be in 60 seconds, if Kim Jung Il is in a peeve and launches his nukes.]

[Rob Jackson is publishing my 'Marty' spoof, and he seems to think it was suitable material for Inca, so the execution is likely what does the trick.]

[Since my last issue of The Baloobius, I've seen hacked copies of 6 shorts called Rock On, and also 13 episodes of Back to the Rock. No doubt most of the this issue I publish will be about the show, and then be done with it! All I'll say for now is that the guest stars were only in the 15 minute shorts, and their appearances made no sense at all in the context of things. When the show was green-lighted for 13 brand new episodes, the guest stars vanished from the show, hopefully not to return. TW]

Bob Jennings, fabfickbs@aol.com, 26 Feb 2022

Thanks

for sending along *The Baloobius*, no issue number that I could find. I would have zipped off an LOC sooner but things have been pretty busy around here, what with getting off another issue of my own zine *Fadeaway*, and the constant press of packing and mailing out merchandise from my mail order book biz.

[At the second line, right under The Baloobius, it says "A seventh-eleventh essay," a cute way of saying issue seven. Next issue might be number "Hate," if I can't think of anything better. TW]

So far as the COVID Plague goes, I think you have nailed it. This situation is not going to go away any time soon, and it could hang around in some form for another eight or ten years. Part of the problem is that we are dealing with a virus that is constantly mutating, so new and potentially more lethal variations of the crud pop up all the time. The new variation of omicron, the A.2, *[Now BA.5!]* appears to not only infect faster, but has far more serious effects than originally believed, and I'm sure that yet another mutation will be upon us come spring time (if warm weather ever arrives...sometimes I wonder about that too).

The other major part of this problem is all the jerks who refuse to get vaccinated. As a friend noted, stupidity kills, just not fast enough. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of deaths from the Plague are happening among the ranks of people who are not vaccinated, there are still legions of people who refuse to get the vaccine because of nut-case conspiracy theories, or who believe they are somehow showing political independence standing up against government manipulation.

Your comments about the sharp decline of letters of comment struck a respond me with. I've noticed a decline in the number of LOCs to my zine as well, and I have noticed the letter columns in other zines seem to have shrunk over the past year or so. I think your comment about fans aging out is part of the problem, but only part. Anther factor is that most fanzines these days are distributed in pixel format, not paper. A paper fanzine demands attention and some kind of answer far more than a publication flashed over the internet that is then viewed on a computer screen.

Because we have had free distribution of information and entertainment, including all manner of publications, over the internet for thirty years or so, people have become used to the idea of being endlessly bombarded by free material passed on to them with no sense of obligation whatsoever. Zillions of web pages ask only that the recipient read/view/listen to whatever the creator is producing, not that the reader/viewer/listener actually provide any kind of feedback. A large chunk of that info and entertainment feed doesn't offer a means of providing comments and feedback even if the recipient actually wanted to make any comments.

In this kind of environment, fanzines that do ask for comments and opinions hit the invisible wall of complicity and inertia bred by three decades of freebies. Most of the LOCs I get these days come from older fans who know what a letter of comment is and have an interest in expressing opinions. They are from the generations when it was expected that fanzines were a means of cross communication and shared experiences. I do get comments from new, younger people, but invariably those are the short two or three sentences varieties: "Loved the new issue! Keep up the good work!"

Wow! Bad deal indeed about your overflowing toilet problem. As bad as it was, I think you are lucky it didn't turn out even worse. If the two ladies hadn't come along to help with the cleanup you could have had your entire apartment flooded with sewage, with some possible severe structural damage. Was the problem confined to just your toilet, or did anyone else in your apartment complex have a similar situation? One has to wonder what kind of obstruction could have been large and solid enough to block up the entire main sewer line in the building. I am reminded of the old joke about some little kid flushing a toy duck or a stuffed animal down the toilet just to see what would happen. I guess you found out what would happen the hard way, and it wasn't even your fault.

Your friend's experience with the ill tempered doctor sound really bad. I've never had an experience that disagreeable, although the guy who did my knee replacements had the bedside manner of a viper. He only came around to visit at the hospital one time after the first operation, and his manner hadn't improved when I had to have the right leg done four years later either. He was a good surgeon, but having to deal with those patients face to face just wasn't for him.

I am not much of a *Fraggle Rock* fan, having seen only a half dozen or so of the original programs on VHS tape many years ago, but I don't think you should be surprised that any kind of re-launch of the show is going to be substantially different from the original. After all, as you yourself note, it's been 38 years since the original aired. Many of the original actors are dead, and so probably, are most of the original puppeteers, writers, and production people. The new production team needs to aim the product for the modern market, which automatically means there will be substantial changes in the show. You may cling to the original vision and version of the characters, but anything you say, or any fanfic you write is not going to change the way the new show is going to be presented. You may even find that after 38 years that most of the original dedicated core of *Fraggle Rock* fans also don't care. But, by all means, go for it anyway. Creative impulses should be exercised, not suppressed.

You keep saying you are not going to produce any more fanzines, and then you do, so thanks for sending this one along and I look forward to the next one, no matter what it may be titled.

[I never said I wasn't going to publish any more fanzines. Forgetting people seem incapable of reading my mind, I sometimes let them guess the obvious and get it entirely wrong! All I meant was that I expected to cease producing issues of The Balooobius. Unless I can think of another crummy pun, I'll cease with issue 9. Or maybe 10. We'll see what's left at the bottom of the barrel. TW]

Lloyd Penney, penneys@bell.net, 4 Mar 2022

Thank you for the 7th issue of The Balooobius, and you immediately hit on a topic we've been having fun with, of course ... age. More as I end the paragraph, and start a fresh one...

And, there. In a few months, I'll be turning 63. Still middle age for many, although to be honest, I have already had one nap on the couch today. This getting old is getting old, deciding what you want for breakfast and dinner each day, and being unable to tell the difference between the week and the weekend. I had to look to make sure this was Friday. This pandemic is about two years old now, and I am sure it's part of the reason I have trouble getting to sleep and then waking up.

We haven't had a toilet overflow, but we have had neighbours upstairs let their kitchen sink overflow a time or two, and leak down inside the walls of the kitchen. If we move, and with rents these days, that's a big if, we will probably be dinged with the repairs. Another good reason to not move. Help me, 6/49, you're my only hope.

Steven is more and more your guardian angel. He may have more time for you...our regular pubnite location on a Third Monday, Orwell's Pub at Islington and Bloor, has permanently shut down. So, until we find another pub to go to, which these days is not too likely, Steven will be at home a little more.

As we age, I check out the RIP section on Dave Langford's *Ansible*. (Used to do the same thing when *File 770* was a fanzine.) So many pros in the field are passing away. So many friends, too, and some are both of the above. Sometimes, I feel that it will be only me who's left. The idea of living forever intrigues me, but the idea of dying alone repulses me. That's why I am trying my best to make more friends younger than me. Should I kick the bucket, they may be a few people left who might mourn my passing.

I haven't seen a full episode of the new *Fraggle Rock*...would you call it a sequel or a remake? It would be easy to get the puppets out of storage to do it all again. We explore the most intricate universes and find something to appeal to us. Doesn't matter if some call them kids' shows or cartoons; for some they are fun comedies and dramas.

Time to go, gotta make some dinner. Stay well, and make another one of these zines, okay? See you then.

Bad as it is to age, we foolishly do our best to continue, right? I went through a period of making younger friends, and was fairly successful. But time is merciless, and those

younger friends are becoming middle-aged, and most have drifted away again. Now at 70, I haven't a clue how to make new friends. The seniors who live in the building have get-togethers in the activities room on the ground floor. I've been a few times – there is often free lunch or cake – but the sheer inanity of the conversation ended that hope. I'm better off alone. I get along better with the immigrant social workers who work in the building, and check up on me to see that I'm still alive.

*[The new Back to the Rock is both a re-launch and a continuation of the old series. It is mostly the same as it was in the early 1980s, but in numerous small ways I find it quite difference in tone and detail. Obviously, I'm going to have to go into this in **much** greater detail.]*

WAHF:

Alan White, podmogul@cox.net, 12 Feb, and

Rob Jackson, jacksonshambrook@uwclub.net, 12 Feb

BACK TO THE ROCK

A ROCKY RETURN?

Thanks to discreet connections, I've come into hi-rez copies of all 13 episodes of *Back to the Rock*, the new launch of my old favourite TV show, *Fraggle Rock*. I watched them with terrible doubts and tentative hope for the best. Then, before jumping to premature conclusions, I watched the 13 episodes for a *second* time. To say the least, my impressions, good and bad, have been mixed. While we have some of the original voice actors playing the parts of the Fraggles, two of the most important were missing. And that was only the beginning of the missteps and miscalculations that were made...

To begin a little earlier, a few 15-minute shorts called *Rock On* were announced on Apple cable TV. I had trouble seeing them, at first, until my connection came through and uploaded them to my drop-box for me. The shorts seemed to be all the same actors, but there were some odd changes in the format. One of them was the introduction of a Doozer invention that resembled an old-fashioned crystal set radio, that hung from springs on a frame as they did in 1930s radio studios. Employing the "Doozertubes," as they were called, anyone in the Rock could contact anyone else. This was transparently to address the pandemic that had just emerged, and was to show how even Fraggles down in Fraggles Rock were doing their part to socially distance themselves. This is despite there was no way that Fraggles could know the least thing about Covid.

Worse, through various stratagems, the shorts introduced human guest singers. They had no idea that they were speak to Fraggles through the internet, and jamming, but it was a transparent way of shoehorning guests into the show to attract a younger audience. What infuriated me was that the producers had seemingly confused *Fraggle Rock* with the *Muppet Show*, which *did* have guests appearing on the bill every week. Humans had absolutely *no* business appearing in *Fraggle Rock*, however ... except in the very special case of Doc, who I will get to later. I made no sense for guests to sing along with the

Fraggles. To make matters worse, the guests were flash-in-the-pan media performers who I suspect will be forgotten before very long. This inability to distinguish between *The Muppets* and *Fraggle Rock* is likely due to fundamentally not understanding either.

To my relief, the human guest appearances were never seen again.

Rock On was apparently only testing the water, however, because it was followed by a full half-hour show about a year later. One thing in favour of the new *Fraggle Rock: Back to the Rock* were the larger and more lavish sets. Some of the changes were a little unsettling, but understandable. The original Fraggles Pool was about the size of a child's inflatable wading pool, and the new version is a more believably sized backyard swimming pool. The movable rocks and walls of the old show – that sometimes wobbled when Fraggles leaned on them – have been replaced by more formidable rock formations. The lighting is colourful and elaborate. But there are less welcome changes, as well.

The biggest changes involved the actors. While Karen Prell reprises her role as Red, and Dave Goelz returns as the voice of Boober, the other actors are freshly cast. This works surprisingly well for most, but not so well for the character of Mokey. She *sounds* right, but something has happened to her appearance! Suddenly, her long, silvery-lavender hair has become bright blue, and tied up in a top-knot like Woody Woodpecker! Naturally, a Fraggles has a right to make changes to her looks, of course, but now she has a look of shock or surprise, and her eyes red lined as though up all night from being wired on coffee – instead of the dreamy expression she has always had until now.

There are subtle changes to the Gorgs as well. The new “castle” is much the same as before, but the general appearance of shabbiness is gone, as well as the sense of past glories long since faded and mildewed. The new Gorg's castle is a rather a neat and tidy little cottage. The three Gorgs who inhabit the garden have not changed appearance at all. It's true that Junior Gorg is exactly the same amiable lummoX obsessed with “thumping” Fraggles that he has always been. But Paw has changed much for the worse. Although he remains a large, bad-tempered tyrant, the other sides of his character are missing. He has lost the lazy, boastful, blustering yet henpecked qualities that made it possible to like him. But this “new” Paw has so far only shown himself as *mean*. So far, Maw has not shown much distinguishing character at all.

The Doozers have not been spared revision. In the original *Fraggle Rock*, Doozers spend their time filling the Rock with elaborate constructions of “Doozer Sticks.” They resemble old-fashioned steel girder boxes, fashioned from clear sticks that the Doozers make from radishes, and glue together. They have a very mid-1950s look to them. The Doozers in *Return to the Rock* have suddenly upgraded their technical skills to include free-form skyscrapers, with skeletal hexagons in organic shapes that would not be out of place in modern Tokyo. The sense of rigid order that had been part of their character has been taken away, and replaced by something far too modern and whimsical for a Doozer.

Similarly, Doozer technology has leapt ahead by leaps and bounds since the original show aired. Not only have they introduced Doozertubes into general use, but have also installed overhead monorails throughout the cave, electric lights, and motorized vehicles of specialized types. At the current rate of change in Doozer technology, it cannot be long before they discover “Outer Space” – the outside world where we live – and begin colonizing Mars!

There are any number of other, small, changes. I’ll only mention a few. The transformation of Henchie, for instance, who is the assistant to the World’s Oldest Fraggles. He is a weak-willed toady, abused by the elder Fraggles, who bops him on the nose with his ceremonial staff. Apparently, this was no longer acceptable, not as too violent, but Henchie has been transformed into a *female* Fraggles. And, of course, you can’t have old men bopping women on the nose with a stick, can you? Conferred with a little authority and a costume to match, Henchie cannot be made fun of, of course, and has lost her comic side entirely. Henchie was only minor illustration of how gender politics made needless changes that actually *hinder* the show ... not make it better.

The single biggest sticking point in the effort re-launch *Fraggles Rock* is how the character of Doc was handled. Doc was vital to the show, despite appearing for only a few minutes in each episode. This retired, crackpot of an amateur inventor putters around in his workshop, oblivious to the fact that a hole in the wall is the entrance to an entire new world, and the home of the Fraggles. His sense of humour and his daft ideas are an unknowing match for fun-loving nature of the Fraggles on the other side of his wall. It isn’t until the last two episodes (of 96 produced) that Doc and the Fraggles mutually discover each other’s world for what it is, and they recognize that their similarities are much greater than their differences.

The actor who plays Doc, was Gerry Parkes. As an eccentric, he filled the role perfectly. Unfortunately, he died in 2014, and there was no obvious way he could ever be replaced. It was of prime to deal with the issue of Doc’s demise importance for the re-launch of the Fraggles Rock property. Had it been up to me, I would likely have followed the final episode with a new character. In the final episode, Doc and his friend Ned needed to move for Ned’s health. I think I would have created a friend, or a nephew perhaps, who took after Doc in some ways, and who had agreed to move into the old place as a caretaker. Perhaps he could send his nephew postcards, just like Uncle Traveling Matt’s cards send to his nephew Gobo? It was important that the new character also be comical. Just as important, Doc should simply **not** be written out of the story.

Of course, that’s *exactly* what the boneheads who wrote *Back to the Rock* did! This is a *new* Doc, and the old one never existed. Moreover, there is nothing funny about new Doc at all. She has been painted over with many coats of political correctness, turning her into a young, pretty, black woman, a graduate student with a mission to save the planet with research into plastic eating microbes! Her nickname is “Doc” because she’s so smart, she explains to her dog. I grant that she is good looking, amiable, even witty, but that is not the same thing as *funny*. She has no blemishes, no eccentricities, no character flaws. Even her

teeth are perfectly capped. And I hate her intensely for replacing a genuinely interesting character with one that is only a piece of plastic.

Easily as problematic was the replacement of Jim Henson himself, in the role of Cantus the Minstrel. He was as close to the spirit of the Rock as was possible, having given birth to the idea, nursed it through its birthing pangs, then set it free to find its own path. On four separate occasions Henson appeared as the wondering minstrel, Cantus, with a magic pipe who had enlightens the Rock with wisdom and inspiration. There really no way to replace the minstrel with a different character. Unfortunately, that didn't stop the producers of *Back to the Rock* from trying. They also did it conspicuously badly. They recreated the idea of a traveling musician and wonder maker and minstrels, changed his name from Cantus to *Jamdolin!* Jamdolin is still a wondering musician, but has no magic pipe, nor is he particularly a source of any kind of wisdom, just a traveling musician. He does pointlessly rhyme, and acts a little like a 70's disco star. There have only been 13 episodes – and might be no more – so it occurs to me that it would have been better if the character that Henson admitted he loved performing, had never been written into a story in such a half-assed way.

It's possible to go on, and find endless other small imperfections. Such as including Large Marvin on the Wise Council, or electing Wembley to their august number. Really? Large Marvin was among the dimmest bulbs in Fraggledom, distinguished only by his enormous bulk and appetite. And Wembley has hidden depths I don't deny, but I doubt his indecisiveness make's him an obvious choice for any sort of responsibility, even the sort of diminished responsibility you expect from Fraggles.

And then there is The Archivist, a Fraggles who largely displaces Story Teller Fraggles from her role. She is dressed a bit like a Bronx diva in robes and rhinestone glasses. Rather than living in The Rock, she arrives through the Gorg's Garden. But that's *impossible!* The Gorgs would try to thump her, for one thing, but where could other Fraggles have come from if not the Rock? Worse, the episode hinges on Boober's, which he discovers glows when he is excited. For some reason he went through life without know anything about this, and it turns out that The Archivist's tail *also* glows. That's bad enough, but at the end of the episode, the viewer can plainly see other Fraggles in The Great Hall also have tails that are glowing! Clearly, everyone would have to know that some Fraggles have glowing tails. But, there they are, in plain sight ... and yet Boober had never heard such an outrageous thing before. Who pays these writers?

All this is plain, bad writing, and I think that's what I most resent about this re-launch. It smothered the scripts with too much trendy topicality, as well, needlessly changed previously established background, and added nothing that didn't seem like a poor copy of a previous script. Much as I would have loved this *Back to the Rock* to have surprised me, but instead it only confirmed my worst expectations.

Please, *don't* produce more episodes! We need more like we need rocks in our head.