

Through Darkest Psyche

with Gun and Camera:

The BOONDOGGLE in Retrospect

In Bob Lowndes' column, "Aufgenknopft", in WARHOON 21 he makes a very good point. Psychology is a very popularized subject these days and the catchwords and terms are floating all around, being used and abused by all and sundry. And one can carry this even further. There seems to be a natural tendency for fans to consider themselves Experts on any and every subject they are vaguely familiar with, but this tendency becomes accentuated beyond all reason when it comes to psychology. And become confused with each fan's individual views.

And of course Lowndes is not free from this himself. Obviously he has done wide reading in psychology. But it seems to me he has read psychology the same way I read philosophy. I read philosophy because I'm interested in individual philosophic concepts or insights. Some of these I may integrate with my personal philosophy. But I'm just not interested in the over-all philosophical system or how it's put together. So, although I've done a lot of reading in philosophy—including the complete works of some philosophers—I think it would be only accurate to say that I know very little about it.

I was also somewhat amused that although Lowndes was discussing the Breen scene in the light of psychology he never got around to discussing child molestation; instead he psychoanalyzed the people against it—which is a rather different thing. However, it's an interesting topic so I think I'll follow his example.

First though I want to take care of a legal point Lowndes brought up. He seemed to feel that the Pacificon committee was obviously acting out of malice and that we could be convicted of libel because "Truth is a defense against libel, providing you can prove it beyond reasonable doubt; however, you must also prove that there is no malice involved in stating this truth."

Up until now there has not been the slightest shred of proof that the committee even felt malice towards Breen, much less that malice influenced them. Several accusations have been made to the effect that we expelled Breen, etc. because we dislike him, but no one has even offered the flimsiest reason for that statement, much less any proof of it.

In any case there are several things wrong with Lowndes' statement. We would not have to prove the statements about Breen beyond any reasonable doubt, only by a fair preponderance of the evidence. And in most states malice is irrelevant if the defamation is true; and in states where it is relevant, the burden of proving actual malice is on the plaintiff, not the defendant.

I have some argument with almost all of the points Lowndes makes, but it would make this article far too long if I attempted to go into them, so I'll only pick a few high spots. He seems to share the typical layman's misunderstanding of and emotional reaction to the term psychopath. It's really a technical term and not all that dreadful, but it seems to conjure up visions of axe murderers or Bloch's "Psycho". Probably the simplest definition is "A psychopath is someone without a moral sense." This doesn't mean he's violent or dangerous or can't behave acceptably socially—out of sheer self-interest.

And Prentiss Choate gave a very good description—in describing Walter Breen in POST-MORTEM—of what makes a psychopath: "a part of his psyche got left behind in the growing-up process." But when I pointed this out to Prentiss he screamed that I was twisting his words. Evidently the term is a very loaded one indeed.

But the thing that puzzled the hell out of me was Lowndes' statement "the person who is compelled to seek out ('unnatural') impulses in himself and others and try to punish all wicked people who have such 'unnatural' impulses... is just as much of a 'sex criminal,' clinically speaking, as the opposite extremist who rapes, tortures, seduces and assaults children; the important difference in our society is that in most instances, the law is on the side of the negative sex extremist..." This sounds like it might be good theology. But it's not good psychology. The accepted psychological theory is along the slightly more reasonable lines that, say, a person who is violently anti-homosexual may well be so because he is afraid of homosexual impulses in himself.

But even if Lowndes' statement were 100% true, I don't see the relevance of it. Some anti-Breeners--including me--got pretty extreme. But nobody ever said anything about punishing him. Even those who wanted to run him out of fandom on a rail only wanted to get rid of him. And far from seeking Breen out we would have been most grateful had he not thrust himself upon our attention. I would also add that if anyone is seeking out "wicked people" who have "unnatural impulses" he is doing a damn poor job of looking.

It might be relevant to point out that Wetzel was driven out of fandom by essentially BOONDOGGLE-type tactics and on far less evidence than we have on Breen. But everyone was convinced that Wetzel was guilty and that he was dangerous. Most fans just don't think that Breen is all that dangerous.

To oversimplify a trifle, nearly everybody in fandom agrees that seducing children is wrong, but the opinions about the degree of wrongness vary. In general the anti-Breeners seem to feel that seducing children is in the same class with acid throwing; it's something that is utterly beyond the pale. And the pro-Breeners seem to feel that while it's wrong and sick, it's something permissible in human behavior; it's nothing to ostracize anyone for.

Actually our mores seem to be in a state of flux. Forty or fifty years ago the almost universal attitude would have been "Thumbs Down on Breen." Forty or fifty years hence we may be as permissive as the South Seas. At the present time in fandom we have examples of both of these attitudes and all shades in between. I think though that the attitude of most fans would fall in the middle ground. Most fans would say that seducing children is a Bad Thing, and they are going to protect theirs from it, but they feel little or no social responsibility about it. And someone who seduces children is sick and more to be pitied than censured. But on the other hand, since seducing children is bad, there isn't going to be too much condemnation of someone who does do something about it. The BOONDOGGLE was condemned quite heavily, but it's made little change in my social relationships, even with those who have condemned it most strongly.

But in any case there has been no sign or indication that the committee or anyone else in fandom wants to "try to punish all wicked people who have such 'unnatural' impulses." In fact we have been accused of hypocrisy by some on the grounds that we know about and/or let attend the convention other child molesters and homosexuals.

Well, there were several active homosexuals at the convention. So what? If anyone's really interested I had homosexual experiences myself when I was a boy. I don't see that they hurt me. I have homosexual friends now. And I'm not a homosexual because I think ---ing is more fun, not because I think there's anything wrong with being a homosexual.

But as far as I know there were no child molesters at the convention. And while I do know of three other fans who are reputed to be such, none of them were at the convention nor expected to appear. And of these other three, in one of the cases I know the guy fairly well and don't believe it; the other two are to the best of my knowledge reformed and in any case one of them has been gafia for years and the other is well known to old-time fans.

Well, so much for Lowndes. However, since I do know the subject fairly well—and that's a pun, son—let's see what I can figure out about my motives and all—using a minimum of psychological gobble-de-gook. And a minimum of rationalization. Which is more difficult.

Let's look at the BOONDOGGLE. It is an extraordinary document. And to me, rereading it now, the most extraordinary thing about it is the honesty of it. There isn't a quibble in it. It's an exact statement of what I did, thought and felt re the question of Walter Breen. This article may approach it's honesty because I'm trying, but I was highly emotional at the time—I'm not now—and in portraying those emotions accurately, a hell of a lot of other things came across. Also, I rewrote the BOONDOGGLE seven or eight times and I'm not about to do so to this.

And when writing the BOONDOGGLE I seem to have been in pretty full contact with my emotions too. I was repressing some guilt, but that showed up. Obviously I wouldn't have spent so much time trying to get down exactly how I felt—as if complete honesty could make up for everything—if I had been completely happy about it. Also, while I find Breen hilarious on occasion, I don't find him nearly as funny as I portrayed him. That was a pure defensive reaction. And evidently a fairly successful one. A couple of people with robust senses of humor have told me that the BOONDOGGLE is the funniest thing they have ever read, and I still—in spite of everything—find it funny myself.

Oddly enough I tried to be fair to Breen. Of course in one sense it wasn't fair to write and publish any of these details, but I tried to be fair in the sense of not exaggerating or shading. I also clearly separated what Breen did and what I thought about it. With each of the children involved I did use the worse known incident, but I strove to portray these accurately. And to date only one valid correction has been received for these: one child was followed into the bedroom, not into the bathroom. And even though in the BOONDOGGLE I said this incident was evidence only of an unhealthy interest in children, I have since been persuaded that even this was exaggerated. I took my account from his mother's story and reactions as she described them to me at the time. It later developed that her reaction was due to her knowledge of Breen's reputation, not anything overt that he did at the time. However, all the other incidents were at least as bad as described.

And naturally I discarded all incidents that I wasn't sure of, retaining only those that I had seen myself or had been described to me by a direct eyewitness or things substantiated by Breen's own admissions.

So, the BOONDOGGLE is a sincere, intensely felt, highly charged emotional document. Reactions to it were equally as intense. And each reader seemed to colloborate in writing his own BOONDOGGLE as it were. Most of the violent objectors to it have each had their own individual reasons for objecting. In many cases you'd hardly think they were talking about the same document.

Several people complained about "purple language" and "slanted prose" or whatnot. In most cases they turned out to be talking about a different passage and hadn't even noticed one someone else was talking about. Actually a dispassionate analysis will reveal that most of the language used is rather clinical and/or direct quotes. And any slanting is my unconscious bit about making it funny, not in intensifying the incidents. Obviously it would have been more effective if I hadn't done this.

I was also honest in giving my opinions about it all. Readers may recall that among other things I said (1) I wasn't all that convinced that sex with child was that dreadful. (2) I didn't really see the necessity for barring Breen from the convention.

I also said that I would like to perform a surgical operation separating Breen from fandom. I still think that fandom would be better off without him; however, various people have pointed out that it's no one's business or right to make a decision for someone else

about who he is going to associate with. This is a perfectly valid point. But as I keep pointing out in return, there's really no way to keep people from associating with someone either. No one can be surgically removed from fandom as long as fans are individually willing to associate with him.

Well it's pretty obvious that even apart from the ethics of it, publishing the BOONDOGGLE was a pretty stupid thing to do. And it's an obviously stupid thing to do, fugg-headed in fact. I'm not that dumb I assure you. The BOONDOGGLE seems designed to bring the wrath of fandom down on my head. And I think it was.

Why? To punish myself of course.

I think this may be the point to enter a disclaimer. In spite of the way this seems to be tending, I didn't take out after Walter Breen because I don't like him. No. I think I know myself reasonably well and would not be able to hide that at this point. Obviously I don't like Walter Breen. But there are a lot of people around who rile me more, but I'm still content to live and let live.

Nevertheless I think that personal animosity played a part in my motivation. Gordon Eklund put it rather well in his letter in MINAC. He said in effect that I wasn't doing this to Walter Breen because I disliked him, but I wouldn't be doing it if I liked him. That struck me with blinding effect even through all the rationalizing I was doing at the time. And it's not very nice either. But it's sure true.

But leave us return to the BOONDOGGLE. And remember it is an honest document and an accurate portrayal of my emotions and opinions. And remember I said that I wasn't all that convinced that sex with children was all that dreadful and that I didn't see the necessity for barring Breen from the convention.

However it's unfortunately only too obvious that to publish the BOONDOGGLE to even such a limited circulation as was originally planned for it, only makes sense if I had already decided--on some level anyhow--that Walter Breen was going to be barred and that fandom was going to be told Why.

It's probably relevant to say here that I was only one member of a committee. I'm only talking about my own reasons and motives. The other members have their own ethical convictions and ideas. Even if I had decided against it, it would not have stopped the exclusion. But things would have been done differently.

So, while I wasn't convinced of the necessity of barring Breen, I was convinced of its desirability. Why? Leave us return to the BOONDOGGLE wherein all my attitudes are found. There is one common thread running through my attitudes, one underlying reaction to Walter Breen. It isn't moral disapproval. It isn't even dislike. It's distaste. I'm afraid I objected more to the flagrant display and boasting of his quirks than I did to the quirks themselves. I found them and him embarrassing and distasteful.

Also mentioned in the BOONDOGGLE was the whole question of Responsibility that had been agitating me most severely the previous months. I had changed my views on a number of things and decided that one did owe responsibility to larger units than individuals. I still think that. But I think that somebody who had always had conservative ideas about responsibility would have goofed less badly than I did. Responsibility was a New Scene for me and I didn't quite know how to handle it. And while I didn't think seducing children was Evil, I did think it was Bad and that I had the responsibility to protect the convention members, etc. Whether they wanted to be protected or not.

And this mixed with my distaste to produce the attitude "There will be none of these Goings On at our convention." Or in other words I let power go to my head. And oddly enough this is one thing nobody seems to have accused me of.

I must admit that I never gave a damn about our legal liability and didn't even care very much whether Breen did anything at the convention. I knew he had made contacts at other conventions and assumed he would do the same at this one. And I felt responsible for that too. This is extending one's Moral Responsibility pretty far, but I really felt that way.

However, if it had been a question of the now-gafia child molester I would have done my damnedest to do this all without publicity. I liked him. Apart from his sexual sickness he was a nice guy.

And why the publicity about Breen? Let's return to the BOONDOGGLE. I said that I didn't see any reason for barring him from the convention if he were still able to continue his activities in fandom. Therefore, the publicity was not to explain our barring him, but to Warn Fandom about the Monster.

Obviously an Attack of Responsibility coming on fairly late in life is a pretty serious disease. One should get inoculations or something.

But being felled by an Attack of Responsibility and all didn't mean that I had suddenly become a different person. I still had my old standards and attitudes also. So naturally I had Guilt Feelings like all bloody hell. And equally naturally I repressed them. But they still operated. I arranged to punish myself as well as to Take Care of Walter Breen.

Obviously if the only idea were to Take Care of Walter Breen the smart thing to have done would have been to quietly expel him. Naturally he would have told his friends. And they would have screamed with outrage. When the screams reached the deafening level we could have presented our side of the case. And if it hadn't been for the BOONDOGGLE, that is most probably what would have happened.

Obviously I think my Telling All about Breen was unethical. But it's unethical only because I personally don't think seducing children is all that bad. If I did think so, I believe that revealing the facts about Breen would be a highly moral act. If someone is engaged in activities harmful to others, you warn others about him. At least I think so. But since I don't think Walter is all that dangerous I should have kept my mouth shut.

Of course once the BOONDOGGLE was published and we had expelled Breen and the attacks began to come I started rationalizing like mad. Even more so. It'd be an extremely peculiar person who wouldn't under those circumstances. And such odd rationalizations. Not only was excluding Walter Breen the True, the Good, the Beautiful, but it was also the politically-wise thing to do. I kept insisting so at Great Length. This was sort of asinine because if excluding Breen had ever had any political value at all, insisting that it did would destroy it.

Much praise has recently been devoted to the philosophy "Live and let live." And it must be admitted that it does have a great deal to say for it. It's a quite necessary approach to civilized living.

On the other hand that's exactly what all those people in Queens were doing when the girl was stabbed to death. They were minding their own business and living and let living. You have to draw the line somewhere. You can't just lie back and say "Anything Goes." If someone is damaging others--especially children--in your presence or with your knowledge I think it's highly ethical to do something about it or to warn others who can do something about it.

Acid throwing is nice and simple and clear cut. Everyone agrees that's bad. But seducing children is more complex. And I think that each individual has to make up his own mind what's ethical for him, whether to "Live and let live" or to do everything he can to stop it or to protect the person others are trying to stop. Obviously there's going to

be no consensus about it. Equally obviously what is ethical behavior for one person is going to be unethical for another. And my behavior was unethical for me: once my rationalizations are stripped away I don't think seducing children is all that bad.

However, I'm only one member of a committee. The other members of the committee—along with many other fans—think it is pretty bad. And they have massive support from psychologists for their attitude. Also, the other committee members were worried about their financial liability. So in any event I would most probably have been overruled and Breen would have been expelled.

But everything would have gone So Much Smoother if I hadn't had that Attack of Responsibility and all. And oddly enough the anti-Breeners have much more reason for a beef with me than the pro-Breeners whom I delivered plenty of ammunition to. Not to mention that the anti-Breeners have been put in the position of going along with something they don't approve of. (They don't like the BOONDOGGLE either.) I seemed to have ———ed up all around and messed everybody up.

But humility doesn't really become me so I'll close with this quote from Theodor Reik's "The Need to be Loved" which I'll try to live up to:

"One can feel sorry about something without feeling guilty. Feeling guilty is as useless as crying over spilled milk. One may regret having done something wrong without being emotionally crushed by it. Too deep grief would dishearten and humiliate the individual. A clear understanding of the significance of our misdeeds or wrong-doings is emotionally healthier than hopeless misery afterward. 'I have done this; it was wrong; it is done with,' is perhaps the better attitude."

Bill Donaho
April 1965