

# Dark Toys 77





*Issue 77 is a little late, but I made no promises that you can hold me to. Given some of the difficulties over the last little while, I'm almost surprised to still be here at 245 Dunn Avenue, Apartment 2111, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6K 1S6. I remain hopeful. Phone (416) 531-8974, or [Taral@bell.net](mailto:Taral@bell.net) – Kiddelidivee Books & Art 337. I notice that Nic is shilling the FAAns again this year. I've cast desultory votes in the past, but this year I see that I have almost no opinions on the fanzine scene, and have decided not to make an empty gesture by filling in a ballot concerning which I have no convictions. I think it is nearly foregone conclusion where most of the awards will go, as there are so few real alternatives. That is only my opinion of the state of fandom, of course, and perhaps the unthinkable **may** happen. There might be a Corflu Bid for Chengdu...*

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### Probable Contents of the March 2024 Issue:

Doing the Time Warp Again

Did I Miss Anything?

Atomic Age Idylls

Coffee Monster – Walt Wentz

Dark Matters (LoCs)

On the Barbie

The Word Begins Again

Life on Titan

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## Doing the Time Warp Again

Good Gawd! My last journal was in early October, and now there are only hours left in the last day of the year! I don't think I have ever skipped an update as long as this before. Why? I'll tell you why... I think.

I think mainly because so little has happened was worth reporting on. Sure, I've been somewhat active and done various kinds of work, but it seemed like nothing that would be of interest to anyone. Was it? Well, let's see if I can pretend it was.

Among other things, I made all the preparations needed before winter set in, so that I wouldn't have as much to worry about if it was going to be one snow storm after another, socking me in. I bought an insane amount of fresh coffee beans from the Farmers' Market so that they would last me through until March, imagining that fresh snow was inevitable. Unexpectedly, there hasn't been any snow to speak of in downtown Toronto – unusual for this time of year. Still, there is plenty of winter ahead to dump ten feet of snow on me, if Nature decides to do so. I also arranged to skip some regular doctors' appointments until the weather improves.

If you follow me on FaceBook or FurAffinity, you have seen the small amount of art that I've completed and posted. There are a couple of things in progress, but it has been slow going. I plead lack of strong motivation. I don't mind the work, but where are the crowds and applause of yesteryear? It seems that as the modern digital age goes on, the audience grows more apathetic, or perhaps just takes the artists for granted. After all ... do we really need artists anymore? Every day I log onto FaceBook and I see AI inspired "art" in my feed. Yes, it's great fun for all those non-artists out there, who can prompt their AI to "create" highly professional art for them, but for me it's just incentive to watch another YouTube video or another movie on DVD. My money these days is more on my writing.

Speaking of which, I am well past 10,000 words on my new story. I began it November, and have been working slowly but steadily. Progress has been slow for several reasons, including too many hours on YouTube, watching how WWII is playing out and how shitty superhero movies have gotten. Slow though my writing has become, the story has been unfolding in my mind as I work.

I had only a rough idea how "The World Begins Again" was to be told. It was a story that happened between the first of my Fraggles and one after Darl had become a Fraggles, but it occurred to me that I hadn't considered telling how his first day went. After all, Darl would be overwhelmed by new experiences, and would meet the other Fraggles for the first time. This seemed to me to be an important step in his transformation, and shouldn't be glossed over. The problem was that I had no plot. What was

I going to do without a plot, just have Darl say, “Hello Gobo, hello Wembley, hello you other guys”?

Not having a plot was a bit of a setback, but I started writing anyway. I worked through the opening scene, trusting that my imagination would come up with something worthy while I set the stage for the second scene. Fortunately, my genius didn’t fail me. I came up with a very serviceable plot, full of ideas and action and all that.

One of my friends wrote science fiction professionally. He he didn’t like talking about his work except in general way, such as, “Yes, it’s coming along well,” or “Hopefully the first draft will be done in a month.” I have rarely read any of his work until his books are in the stores. For some reason, I am an entirely different kind of writer, and have to resist the temptation to blab about it as though I expected to be struck by a twenty-three pound meteorite tomorrow. I think I’m actually fairly safe then, in not divulging any more of “The World Begins Again,” and sparing the world unnecessary exposition.

One final note – the line is from a song in the first episode of Fraggle Rock, and I plan it to be the very last line in the final Fraggle Rock story I write.

I should say that Santa has been good to me, but in all honesty, I can’t. My *friends* have been good to me, and gifted me handsomely. I especially appreciated the bottle of pricey apricot brandy, the collected first 12 issues of Hot Rod Magazine, a book about how Alberta is burning itself down, the paper Tie Fighter kit and the hardcover copy of Tim Horton’s life. Just the thing when I want a quiet donut out of the snow. But the rest had nothing to do with Santa.

I decided to treat myself in absentia, and gave Saara a fully articulated action figure of astronaut Dave Bowman from 2001, dressed in his orange EVA suit. I gave Tangel a little figure of the Cat Taxi from My Neighbor Totoro. And they have *me* a second vehicle from The Adventures of Tintin. This one was from a book set in New Deli, India, that depicts Tintin and Captain Haddock in a taxi driven by a Sikh. I wonder what we’ll all give each other *next* year for Christmas?

– *Journal*

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## Did I Miss Anything?

It seems so. My last journal was at the end of December, and here it is nearly the end of February, without much inclination to update. In the interim, there have been a couple of noteworthy losses to furry fandom. One was Mitch Biero, who left behind a besmirched legacy, and the other was Mark Merlino. Mark’s effect

on anime and furry fandoms is not without controversy, but solid. Mark was the organizer of ConFurence, and he invited me to CF 3 as one of the guests of honour. It was the first furry con I had attended. He also propositioned me, an honour I politely declined.

Also in the interim, I've been dealing with some personal problems, such as my telephone going off-line for no reason. I was paid up and my line had been free the night before, but next day it was dead. My internet provider was also Bell, and it was working fine. But it took a week or more before a friend could come over with his cell phone to hash it out with Bell and get service resumed. Thank the gods that I had the internet, or I would have been literally trapped in my apartment with no way for anything to be fixed. There was more, but frankly I'm tired of talking about my problems. They never end.

But this matter has to be addressed. About ten days ago I logged on the FurAffinity and discovered that I had been suspended for a week! I didn't figure out why until I tracked down the title of the art that I had posted. It was a commission from 2016, eight years ago, and no one paid in any attention until today, when whatever blue-nose objected to it. I asked why a My Little Pony character was a problem, and the answer was troubling. As far as I know, the ponies in MLP are grown-ups, who live in their own homes, and by any standard adult. But the answer I was given was that the character I had depicted had the \*appearance\* of being underage. The \*appearance.\* But any cartoon character – such as Wilma Flintstone or Lola Bunny – is arguably drawn in non-adult way. Then we come to cases like the Teen Titans, whose age is neither adult nor underage. It comes to one person making these kinds of choices for everyone. That's what I find dangerous about these “community standards” rules.

Once the decision was made for me, there was little I could do but shrug and forget about it. The suspension came and went, and when I checked in today I found that it had been lifted. Otherwise, nothing much had changed since December. I still haven't worked on my latest drawing for several days, and it will be lucking if it is done for my next journal. Most of my effort has gone into an article for my next fanzine. Hopefully that will be finished in early-or-mid March.

– *Journal*

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*For most of the last few months I've whined and whinged, so rather than do more of it, I thought I'd work on some serious woolgathering instead. I've written quite a lot about murky episodes from my past, recently for Rob Jackson's *Inca*. So I've written more in the same vein for this issue, to wit...*

# Atomic Age Idylls

When I was five or six, I discovered that I was living on a rural route somewhere between Stouffville and Gormley. For all intents and purposes, neither of them exist anymore, having been developed and the original inhabitants and structures erased by the passage of time. To be honest, I can't say much about either of these hamlets, having never seen either one. My stay on Rural Route One was confined to an old barn of a house, a few scattered farms along the dirt road, a four-room schoolhouse at one end and a general store at the other.

Don't laugh. This was *Green Acres* without the old pufferbelly of a train and the talking pig. When I began my new school it was literally was four classrooms, with two grades sharing each room. I remember little about it other than a kid named Danny who had a glass eye, and who would gleefully pop it out to show to the other kids. The kids were all gambling addicts at a young age, risking all to "cover" other cards, or for a "leaner." When the bell rang at the end of the day, I went home, turned on the TV and tried not to think about empty eye-sockets.

I spent more than a year in that spooky old house before thankfully moving back to Toronto. I wish I could say that I was been through with living on God's Green Acre once and for all, but that would be a lie. When I was nineteen I was once again moved to a different rural route that was just as isolated, and was just as unhappy about it as before ... but that is a story for another time.

My dad had landed a job – one of many that came and went during my early years – this latest one managing a kennel for a dog breeder. I was too young to know exactly what it was he did in this job. In fact, I think my mother did most of the work, while he lazed around being "man of the house." I don't have much memory of him doing much of anything, not even being around the house being fatherly. So what *was* he doing? Where was he all that time? I have only fuzzy memories of him eating meals and reading a newspaper. I do know that one day while I was I was playing, he lost his temper over something or other, shouted at me and threw a heavy metal tape measure that hit me right in the face. I think there is still a faint scar.

The house that we moved into was an old barn of a place, with a Dutch gable roof, a large front porch and walls smothered with ivy. In the back there was an old-fashioned kitchen, back porch and an unheated shed. Bathroom fixtures were behind the times, but at least we had electricity. There was an outside pump that was by then only a relic of by-gone times. All our plumbing was, fortunately, up-to-date. The owner of the house we lived in owned a television, which was not something everyone had in 1956-or-7, particularly not in a farm house on a dirt

road. Our choice of channels was limited to two of the three big American stations – the reception of ABC was minimal at best, so that only NBC and CBS came in strong. There was also the Canadian Broadcasting Company, broadcast from Toronto.

I used to watch a lot on the CBC, much of it being Canadian productions such as *The Friendly Giant* and *Razzle-Dazzle*. *Canonball* was about a pair of truckers who drove Highway 401 from one end of Ontario and back. Another popular show was *The Littlest Hobo*, the star of which was a German Shepherd that wandered from adventure to adventure, helping out those in need. *Tugboat Annie* was supposed to be set in New York City, but was actually filmed in Toronto Harbor. I knew a boy whose father had been one of the hands in the cast. *Hawkeye and The Last of the Mohicans* told the adventures of an American frontiersman, but it too was a Canadian production, and actually shot outside of Montreal. Chingachgook, Hawkeye's trusted partner, must have been one of Lon Chaney's last roles.

Many other programs that I watched were imported from the United States, Britain or even France. Richard Green's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* was a favourite of mine. Much less well-known was *Thierry la Fronde*, produced in France as a sort of knock-off of other popular medieval adventures. It recounted the exploits of a Robin Hood-like outlaw fighting against English invaders in 14<sup>th</sup> century France. The television also kept me glued to the set for *Sherry Lewis*, *Ruff and Reddy*, *Colonel Bleep*, *Sky King*, *Sea Hunt*, *The Bengal Lancers* and (of course) *The Three Stooges*.

Except when I was driven outside by my innate restlessness, I very much lived in front of that 14-inch, black-and-white TV.

Television took my mind off of other things... For instance, those scary stairs that led up to my bedroom. They were a steep, dark, twisty passage that turned around more corners than they had any right to have, and ended in a transverse hallway. One end led to my parents' bedroom, and the bathroom. The other end led to my room. Safety lay in reaching that hallway – but why running that gauntlet of stairs was so perilous, I never understood.

One source of my anxiety was due to odd things that happened when I tried to fall asleep. My bed was positioned so that I could see through the door and keep an eye on that ill-lit, haunted hall. But as I lay under my blankets, head snug on my pillow, I discovered that I couldn't take my eyes from that open door, nor from the flickering light beyond. As unnerving as this strange compulsion was, worse was to follow. It seemed that I was losing all sense of direction, with neither an up nor a down. My orientation in space had disappeared, and had anyone known what a psychedelic experience was in 1957, I would have assumed I had accidentally ingested a blotter of LSD. The disorientation only lasted about a minute, but then I

pulled myself together and it was over ... leaving no lasting effect. But it was spooky, no doubt, and I never did trust those stairs.

Perhaps I was merely drifting into sleep. But maybe there was heredity at play. My father was known for occasionally falling into what seemed to be a kind of fugue, in which he apparently stared motionlessly into space for a minute or two, before resuming his meal or his conversation. It might have been a form of *petit mal*. As I grew older, I realized that I was able to bring on a similar, but less intense, state of stasis if I wanted. As my teens progressed, I neglected my mind-trick and I doubt very much that I've had a repetition much after I turned twenty. The last time I remember was when I was in my 20s, while I was employed at Gestetner. The job was so mind-numbingly dull that I felt myself drifting into a similar disoriented state, which I actively encouraged.

This was by no means alarming to discern the difference between up or down, or actual distances. Momentarily living in an E.C. Escher space was a vast relief from another minute of that dreadful job. That was the last time that such an escape presented itself.

In memory, my room was neither large nor small, but neither did I have a superfluity of possessions that might have unduly cluttered it up. A single dormer window let in the light, and looked out on the yard. In fact, I remember having few toys or other things that weren't purely functional, such as shoes, toothbrush or my winter coat.

Not all was lost from memory, however. I built a Lindberg model kit very much like Werner von Braun's rotating space station. It was long ago broken and the pieces discarded, of course, but it has been re-issued several times, and the one I re-built years later, in the 1980s, is still gathering dust on a shelf to this day. I also had a number of bubble-gum cards that narrated the future history of space exploration in eighty-eight colourful pasteboard paintings. I lost the originals of those, probably having come to the egregious decision that I had outgrown them. I was lucky enough that I was able to replace them years later ... at a greater cost than was at all reasonable. I seem to recall owning a plastic Luger kit, with working action and harmless bullets. That is lost entirely, and I have no idea what company made it. In my six-year-old hands it felt like an elephant gun. Looking back on it now, I realize that a real Luger is a rather *compact* handgun, and not enormous at all. Perspective is everything as you grow older.

Mother often had a radio playing while she worked in the kitchen. I wasn't much for listening to Paul Anka or Frank Sinatra, but my mother must have had eclectic tastes ... or else she was too busy to change the station at every whim. Allowing the radio to mind itself while she worked, I was exposed to songs that I could never forget, such as this classic:



*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog  
Cryin' all the time  
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog  
Cryin' all the time  
You ain't never caught a rabbit  
And you ain't no friend of mine*

Or:

*I gave a letter to the postman  
He put it in his sack  
Bright early next morning  
He brought my letter back*

*Return to sender, address unknown  
No such number, no such zone*

The playlist included quite a few songs by a novel new pop singer whose name I didn't make note of at the time. You may have heard of him: Elvis Presley. I have to admit that I had only the foggiest notion what any of the words meant, but *hot mamma* it was catchy.

It was years before I realized that it was Elvis. The fact is, I don't like Elvis. But I became a teen *after* Elvis had turned into the master of Vegas Schlock that he became in the 1960s ... and the Elvis of the 1950s was a completely different cat. I eventually developed a taste for early Elvis, but not so for the fat, sneery Elvis in his starchy white Disco suit, who I *still* detest.

But I distinctly remember hearing Elvis on my mother's radio, no matter that I didn't *know* who Elvis was at the time. Why I remember this was because of a certain know-it-all, years later, who insisted that Toronto was too much of a backwater to have ever heard any such thing as rock and roll that early, and I myself – he insinuated – was too clueless to have known anything as cool as the early Elvis! My only response was to quote a Lonnie Donnegan song that I also had no right to remember:

*Does your chewing gum lose its flavor  
on the bedpost overnight?  
If your mother says don't chew it,  
Do you swallow it in spite?  
Can you catch it on your tonsils,  
Can you heave it left & right?  
Does your chewing gum lose its flavor  
on the bedpost overnight?*

The facts speak for themselves.

I spent much of my time out-of-doors. There wasn't much I could do, not having a bicycle and there being little around but trees, fields pocked with cows and farm houses set far back from the road. The split-rail fences said "no trespassing," and I

was an unadventurous soul who didn't have a desire to test limits. Fortunately, I had plenty of space to explore just around the house. To one side was an abandoned corn field that was overgrown with weeds, and to my mother's delight, wild asparagus that had someone survived the neglect. Me, I didn't like asparagus. I kept away from the vile green stalks, and searched the ground for other treasures. More to my interest were the lost objects that I occasionally found by scrabbling in the desiccated clods of barren earth. Most of it was broken junk, but I recall an *almost* intact Dinky Toy airplane. I'm not certain, but it might have been a Lockheed Shooting Star. It was painted silver and was sadly marred by rust.

Out back, someone had thoughtfully hung an old tire that was low enough for me to use as an impromptu swing. Inevitably, the stiff rubber rims grew too uncomfortable, but until then I would drift back and forth, contemplating the distant line of black-green trees until the sun set in a glorious blaze of red, orange and gold. A long, dolorous blast of a whistle from an unseen train reminded me that it was late, and was the signal to return to the house and go inside for the night.

I was rarely outside after dark. Apart from the bugs attracted to the house lights, there was nothing to see in the unfathomable darkness. No street lights, no lights from the distant city, no house lights from the surrounding farms. It was absolutely dark in a way that only someone who has lived in the country can know. The heavens, on the other hand, were alive with stars. The Milky Way arched from horizon to horizon on clear nights, and the stars seared the darkness so as put the watery twinkles in the city to shame. With such a spectacle on display with every clear night, who would notice the impenetrable darkness below?

One night my father pointed to one of the stars that was moving, but that *shouldn't* move.

The news had been all ablaze about an artificial satellite that the fearsome Soviet Union had launched into space, threatening the world with a future of communist global peace! I had listened to the rhythmic beep of the radio signal on the car radio the day before. This night we stood outside until we spotted the slowly moving light, whose inclination to the ecliptic declared its independence from the heavens. That was Sputnik. It might have been a paradigm altering experience, but it was chilly so we went inside.

That winter was a bitter one. As you would expect, it snowed in the city and to me, like any young child, it was a time of magical change. But we were not prepared for being snowed in after a few days until we noticed that our cupboards were as bare as old Mother Hubbard's. There was a car parked outside, but obviously it was of little use where snow plows are unlikely to appear any time soon. There was little choice but to bundle-up in our heaviest clothes, strap on boots and walk all the way

to the only general store. It must have been a mile away, through a landscape that had changed unimaginably. Snow not only covered everything in a blanket of white that hid its true nature, it was deep enough that we could nearly reach up to the telephone lines overhead. When the trek to the store was over, we saw that snow plows had at least begun work to clear the highway. Cars had been left parked before the snow began falling, burying them without trace. Days later, the giant blades uncovered cars that no one knew were there. On every roof was a tall chef's cap that was a full story high, a sight that never ceased to amaze me.

The car parked outside probably belonged to the house, and wasn't ours any more than the house was. It was an old model, likely dating to the late 40's, when "torpedo backs" were the rage. Today we call them fastbacks, but the 1960s were not the first time they had been fashionable. I recall taking in ride in it once, to take a pet skunk named Sniffy to the vet's for de-scenting. In my opinion, it served him right ... he was not friendly and would have been better called "Nippy." I don't know where he came from. We didn't have him long, either, but such matters were out of my control. While holding his cage in my lap for the trip to the vet's, I had to place my feet carefully on the more solid bits of the floorboards. The rest had rotted out, and I remember watching the road surface whizzing by less than a foot below.

The animal life around the farm house was varied. There were apparently quite a lot of cats, but they generally kept their distance from us, living in an abandoned shed of some sort a hundred yards from the house. I was warned to stay far away from it, and always an obedient (or at least fearful) child, I didn't tempt danger. But now and then I did glimpse the secret life of the feral felines. My dad came back from the shed with a basket of newly born kittens. Of course, what seven-year-old kid could resist a basket of mewling kittens? Unfortunately, they came to no happy ending, and I was traumatized while I watched dad hold them under water one by one until they were all drowned.

"They will only have more, and we can't look after them," was all he said.

No wonder the cats avoided us. The only other time I recall seeing one of their number was lying dead in box, where it would be shortly disposed of. Drivers on dirt roads don't slow down for anything, and Dad had recovered it from the road. It lay on its back almost as though inviting a belly rub, but rolled in blackened gore and with both eyes popped out like a carnival goo-goo doll. After a moment, Dad closed up the box.

Those boxes were heavy, sturdy, oiled to make them water resistant and stapled together to ensure that nothing leaked out. Inside, the contents were wrapped in the heaviest plastic wrap that I've ever seen, and inside was ... *Mink-o-Meat*.

Mink-o-Meat was what we fed the dogs that my parents looked after for their employer. It came in large slabs that looked gigantic to me at that age, and seemed to me to require superhuman strength to lift. The meat looked like hamburger but smelled much worse, alerting all the nearby flies. Naturally, we kept the stuff out on the mud-porch, where it was cooler and far from the kitchen. Once, out of curiosity, I tried tasting it. It tasted about the same way it smelled.

The meat came from a farm down the road. My folks took me there once, for-gawd-only-knows-what-reason, and I remember wandering along wire cages full of wild mink. They were as pitiful and dejected-looking as you would expect for creatures destined to be skinned, and their carcasses ground up for Mink-o-Meat. Fur coats aren't supposed to be environmentally friendly, but in a way they were. Rather than waste the unwanted bodies, they were recycled as dog and cat food. The mink made big sad eyes at me when I approached, but the owner of the farm pulled me back, warning, "Don't get too close, son. They may look cute, but they are vicious and will tear your face off in an instant." He banged a couple of cages, and then I didn't have any trouble believing him. Wouldn't you be dangerous if you thought you were going to become Mink-o-Meat?

The kennel my dad worked for was down the hill from the house, and I only went inside once. It was enough. There were rows of large cages, a few with dogs barking loudly and a yellow bulbs swinging overhead here and there to mitigate the dimness. Outside there was a short path that continued downhill a little farther, to end at a small pond. It wasn't a very large pond. You could have thrown a brick from one side to the other. Yet someone had thought it was worthwhile to construct a raft for it. It lay half-sunk in the swampy water, a rotted rope uselessly tying it to the shore. Dad told me not to go near the pond by myself, as I might fall in, and the bottom was full of quicksand.

I needed no encouragement to stay away. The barking dogs were bad enough, but the pond smelled as though it was the preferred means of disposal of dogs found dead in their cages in the morning. As well, it left a strange impression on my impressionable mind. I had dreams afterward about visiting mer-people who lived at the bottom of the pond in a sort of submarine kingdom ... even though it was hardly large enough for an underwater bus stop.

Quicksand was likely not a real danger. The sinister kennel and overgrown pond resembled an abandoned death camp, and I was never tempted to go near it a second time. My second winter in the country was approaching, however, and I would have far more to worry about than spooky old pond. In fact, one day I had every opportunity to freeze to death.

Both Mom and Dad needed to drive to the nearest town, and left me on my best behavior. I was likely playing with my toys, then for some reason I had the inspired notion that I needed something from the back porch. This was a larger, enclosed porch than where the Mink-o-Meat was kept, but *it too* was unheated. I blithely stepped outside in my P.J.s and slippers, and a moment later heard the door snick closed behind me.



Naturally, it was locked. Stunned by this development, I knew that I was in deep trouble. It was terribly cold, even relatively sheltered inside on the porch, and protected from the wind. But I knew that I couldn't stay there for long, and my parents would probably not be back for hours. What was I going to do?

The nearest house was probably a two-hundred-meter hike, across the abandoned corn field, and was in calf-deep snow all the way. I also didn't know if the neighbors were at home. But what choice did I have? As best I could, I plunged through the crisp, untrammelled snow in my shoddy slippers and pajamas, hoping for the best. Evidently, my fine Canadian arctic-adapted genes stood me in good stead, because I was pounding at the house next door before I became hypothermic. The woman who answered the knock must have been astonished to see me there in a barely presentable state. Until my parents returned, I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with her two children.

Much to my relief, my dad lost yet another job, and we no longer had to live in the back end of nowhere, somewhere on a rural route between Stouffville and Gormley that I had no reason to love. I would be going home, where the natural features were typically concrete sidewalks, paved roads, public transportation, suburban homes, junk food, storefronts and school had more than one classroom for every grade. I had survived the country and I was home!

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But still, they lead me back to the long and winding road  
You left me standing here a long, long time ago  
Don't keep me waiting here (Don't keep me waiting)  
Lead me to your door. – Paul McCartney

*Inspiration works in weird ways.*

*A few weeks ago, as is common in aged minds, a song overheard from my kids' sessions with "Sesame Street" popped into my head. Naturally, those kids have since grown up... but what if the Sesame Street puppet characters had also grown up? – Walt Wentz*

## THE MONSTER MATURES

Closeup of the Cookie Monster's blue, furry face, round eyes goggling at the audience:

"Hallo, kiddies, is your old pal, Cookie Monster! Only I not be Cookie Monster any more... Am now name for another "C" word... But you parents not allow you to have any dis "C", you too little an' young for dis "C" word... So you can't not have any, nonono... An' dat "C" word be... **COFFEEE!**"

Camera pulls back to reveal Coffee Monster behind a tablecloth covered in cups of all sizes and various coffee machines, including an old percolator bubbling, a steaming samovar, etc, as the Monster sings...

"Oh, C is for Coffee, dat's good enuf for me,  
C is for Coffee, dat's good enuf for me,  
C is for Coffee, dat's good enuf for me,  
Oh, Coffee Coffee Coffee start with C!"

Monster goggles at the nearest coffee machine, mumbles, "Dat coffee ready yet? No?"

Goggles back to the audience, pauses, goggles back at the machine, back at the audience...

"Hokay, while we waits for the coffee, I tells you a little about it, only you not get any, nonono,  
because you too little an' young..."

"Now we got all kinds Coffee, like Arab Bean Coffee, Colum Bean Coffee, De-Coffee-nated Coffee, (but dat jus silly, 'cause how can be De-Coffee-nated Coffee, if it still got Coffee in?)"

Goggles back at the machine, "Dat coffee ready yet? No?"

Monster props chin up on one hand, while drumming furry fingers on the tablecloth and goggling at the ceiling... a bell dings...

"Aha, no more talking, time for COFFEEEE!"

Monster grabs a cup from under spout of coffee machine, hunches over it, snuffling loudly, then pours it down his gullet, "GLARGLEGLARGLEGLARGLE! AH! COFFEEEE!"

Monster smacks the cup down, smiling and goggling at the audience. "Ah, dat hitted da spot! Coffee very good, but only for grownup monster like me, not you little kids, you know..." Coffee give us grownup monsters lotsa energys an' stuff..." Grabs more cups and fills them sloppily from the percolator, spilling over the tablecloth, gargles them noisily down his gullet, Starts to sing, "Oh, C is for Coffee..." Stops suddenly, goggling at the audience:

"What dat you say? You liking me better being Cookie Monster? Well... I not so much liking Cookie anymore, you know... Coffee much more better for monsters all grownup like me..."

"Well.. hokay... I admits grownups are still liking Cookie for one thing... Jus' one thing... I showing you, but you gots to remember, dis a grownups thing, not for little kiddies like you..."

Fills a very, very large cup with coffee, goggling intently at it, Then holds up a large cookie with his free hand:

"Now, you takes a Cookie in dis hand, see? Den you dips it into your Coffee like dis, see?" Goggling intently at the cookie as he dips it:

"A-one... a-two... a-tree..."

(He flings the sopping cookie back over his shoulder) "DEN YOU THROWS IT AWAY, 'COS WHO NEED A CRUMMY COOKIE WHEN YOU GOTTS **COFFEE!**"

(Grabs up the huge cup and guzzles it frantically down, spilling coffee down his front...) "GLARGLEGLARGLEGLARGLE! COFFEEEE!"

Camera pulls back to show the Monster with the huge cup cocked upside down on his head like a cap, the tablecloth littered with overturned cups and spattered coffee as he sings: "C is for Coffee, dat's good enuf for me, Oh, Coffee Coffee Coffee start with C..."

Fade out...

– Walt

# Dark Matters

## *Letters on Dark Toys 76*

Barry Kent Mackay, [mimus@sympatico.ca](mailto:mimus@sympatico.ca), 10 Oct 2023

I really appreciate your “take” on Christianity. There was a recent discussion on the topic by a born-again atheist in the Washington Post in which she articulated the absurdity of religion overall. Most letters to the editor in response (my own included) agreed, often expressing a “thank goodness someone has stated the obvious” tone to them ... which I find sad, so *far* has the country slipped into a theocracy whereby it is likely no politicians could win elections without claiming to be religious. But what really impressed, or depressed, me was the defence of Christianity based on “proof”, that being words written down thousands of years ago. I realize that for each person’s “standard of proof” varies, enormously ... and for so many professed Christians it seems to be very low, indeed. This is how conspiracy theories come into being, and no coincidence that they are rampant among Christian fundamentalists.

– Barry Kent MacKay

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Eric Mayer, 19 Oct 2023

Apologies for taking so long to get back to you. I very much enjoyed the new *Dark Toys*. The issue starts well with that excellent cover. I'm a sucker for sharp black and white contrasts. And there's even a very interesting loccol. Although I've always written locs just off the top of my head, even a carelessly composed loc requires more thought than a 280 character tweet or an instant reply to a Facebook post. Bob Jennings is right that a fanzine allows for more depth and detail than most Internet social media. Fanzines (even ezines) are a slow form of communication compared to most things on the Internet but the fact an editor does not feel pressed to be uploading new material constantly and readers know they have time to reflect before responding, without being left behind in some frantic online conversation, is to my mind, a good thing. So how's that for a complicated excuse for my slow reply?

Sorry to hear that the A/C horrors continue. At least you can put it out of your mind until spring. The pilot light on our furnace malfunctioned at the beginning of the summer and we put off having it fixed until a couple weeks ago when we began to need some heat. (Bad thermocouple) I swear – our appliances hate us. They're like slaves who keep rebelling. Before the furnace tried to freeze us the water heater decided to poach us when we showered. We had to get the thermostat fixed. Last year the kitchen sink drain attempted to flood us by clogging up and the well pump ceased functioning in an attempt to cut off our water supply. It never ends. What's truly terrifying about your A/C problem is that duct tape wouldn't fix it. You're really up shit's crick when duct tape won't do the job. Did you try WD-40?



I've always been hesitant to talk in fanzines about religion. I gather I am less skeptical and less contemptuous of religion than most fans. This is not to say I am an ardent believer of any sort, or that I do not hold US evangelicals in contempt for the way they distort Christianity for their own ends. However I do think that the scientific insistence that nothing exists beyond the material universe, while probably true, is still an assumption as unprovable as God. And also that Christianity, in its broad outlines, offers a good approach to living. Much better than what's actually going on in the world.

Yes, I know there are sentences here and there that reflect the prejudices of ancient times, but in essence Christianity says all human beings are of equal value and should love one another. Unfortunately throughout the ages there have been people who have used Christianity as an excuse to hate and kill and even to amass wealth, which the Bible also frowns upon. Look at the aforementioned evangelicals' who claim to follow a religion based on love but who are totally motivated by hatred. Sickening. But that's the human race for you. Isn't it a good thing to advance scientific knowledge? And yet discoveries about the atom are immediately turned into the atom bomb. There is a part of humanity that seems determined to turn anything into something evil. So I don't consider Christianity to be a bad thing because it has been misused any more than I consider nuclear physics a bad thing.

Honestly, I rather wish I could summon up belief in the existence of something beyond the horrors of this world. I wish I could point to an ultimate authority that would prove my feeling that some things are absolutely evil and others good. Such a belief would make it easier for me to deal with life. I realize that the general consensus is that only those who are stupid or gullible believe in religion because there is no evidence. Fans laugh at religion. But I would recommend a reading of William James' essay "The Will to Believe" in which he – a sceptic I might add – nevertheless defends the rationality of religious faith even lacking sufficient evidence.

It's a tightly reasoned philosophical essay that I wouldn't try to summarize beyond noting that James points out how we already are forced in the course of life to make many decisions, adopt many beliefs, without waiting for sufficient evidence.

I enjoyed Schirm's essay on *Mad Magazine* but it's been so long since I read *Mad* that I can't say much about it. I remember that as a kid I never "got" *Spy vs Spy*. Is "What me worry?" the basis for a religion?

I really didn't care for *Spy vs. Spy*, and *Spy vs. Spy vs. Spy* was even more repetitive and simplistic. I mark the appearance of that feature as the beginning of *Mad Magazine's* slow decline into the lowest common denominator. – TW

I certainly empathize with Brad Foster's thoughts on aging and slowing down. Indeed it isn't surprising that fandom has aged and become less enthusiastic, just as I have. It's still a shame though. I can't say I enjoy getting myself any more than I've enjoyed fandom getting old.

There's one aspect to past fandom which doesn't seem to be mentioned often – the editors who were mostly interested in publishing an amateur magazine. To me it seemed that they published stuff about science fiction and fans mostly because fandom provided an audience for their publishing efforts. Quite a few fanzines bragged about how little SF content they had and they were open to publishing a lot of things that had nothing to do with fans except that by definition someone writing for a fanzine was a fan. However, sf fanzines were not literary magazines with all the pretensions those kinds of amateur publications are prone to.

Rich Lynch describes how he writes for legacy reasons. I can't say I've ever had any expectation of my writing surviving me. I never even saved my fanzines. True, fanzine writing might be of interest to future generations interested in the lives and thoughts of average people, as opposed to celebrities or the powerful or professional authors. He says: "Assuming Bill Burns and the fanac.org people have made the proper arrangements for longevity of their fanzine archives." As far as I know eFanzines has no mirror site. Fanac.org I don't know. When I was writing computer text games the IFArchive (interactive fiction) had multiple mirrors and just as well when the original archive housed on a university server became unavailable.

Bob Jennings mentions that Mike Glycer once said it is a poor fanzine that doesn't win its own fan poll. Well, that stings. Back in the eighties when I was publishing *Groggy* I ran a fan poll and lost. I should have realized then that I'd never win any damn thing in fandom!

Oh, I didn't know enough about Mad to say anything useful about Schirm's article but I did enjoy it.

– Eric Mayer

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Brad Foster, 30 Oct 2023. [jabberwocky2000@hotmail.com](mailto:jabberwocky2000@hotmail.com)

Sorry about the AC woes. Agree that so often it becomes a coin flip between lower, but still expensive, repairs on a failing appliance to keep it moving along, or spending that bit extra for a new one ... which still has no guarantee these days of really being any better. Your thoughts on Jesus and such were interesting. Have you ever thought of joining any of the Facebook groups devoted to discussions about whether or not all this god stuff is true? You might have fun with some of the believers out there.

My friend Bob belongs to such a discussion group, and finds it very interesting. Like me, Bob is not a believer. Unlike me, I have no interest in listening to believers. I prefer

reading history, or even books on biblical study, but I've no interest in examining ideas that I long ago rejected as absurd. – TW

Marc's musing on *Mad*, and his move to *National Lampoon* reminded me of my own progression: *Mad*, then *National Lampoon*, then *Spy* magazine and then, well... nothing seems to have taken their place. I miss them all for different reasons. I guess now the only thing left is the occasional clever meme showing up online.

The loc column, full of long and thoughtful replies to topics in the last issue, just remind me of how puny my own locs have always been. Amazed fan editors continued to send me new issues considering the meager returns they got from me!

Speaking of meager returns, I had high hopes this year to get my lazy ass back to the drawing board more, but a quick look at my last burst of drawing is from way back at the end of March, for crying out loud! I've done a couple of random things since, but no real gonna-sit-here-and-create stuff for over half the year now. Maybe I can sneak in one more burst before it is all over in two more months? We'll see. Maybe I need to hide my password for Facebook for a while. Always someone who needs to be corrected there, and who else will volunteer to do it?

– Brad Foster

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Jerry Kaufman, [jakaufman@aol.com](mailto:jakaufman@aol.com), 30 Oct 2023

I got *This Here...* yesterday, and saw that Nic is arguing with stuff you and Bob Jennings said in #76, and realized I'd overlooked reading it. So before writing to Nic, it seems only proper to write to you first.

But he doesn't say anything about air conditioners. We have the same type you have, because our triple-pane windows have vinyl frames, which we understand would crack if we tried to drill into them to mount a window unit. Draining the reservoir is just as difficult as you describe it. But it's hard for me to imagine a conditioner that would get so cold as to form ice. A quick check in Google shows me that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy, or my experience with coolants. Thankfully, your ice-induced leakage has never happened to us.

My impulse when confronted with award ballots is to beg off, as I certainly don't read all, or even most, of the eligible publications for any given year. This applies to the Hugoes as much as it does to the FAANs. Yet Nic's begging and stating that (quasi-quoting) "one doesn't need to have read widely, just to vote for what one liked", does persuade me to vote and naturally I vote for the few zines I read and the writers and artists therein.

I don't think an AC unit should ice up unless it's cold outside... not in the 80s. So something must be quite wrong with the bloody thing. But I won't worry about that until the winter is over and summer is coming. – TW

But I think it would be more useful to ask those who don't vote what their reasons are, and tally the responses. I have speculated elsewhere what some of those reasons might

be, including feeling unqualified and feeling the voting is really a closed club. Either this would result in better persuasion, or would lead to the abandonment of the FAAN Awards.

I'll note also that current fandom is very much focused on current sf and fantasy. Look at the nominees in the fan categories for the Hugo. Speaking at least about the fanzine, fan writer, and fancast categories, I think you'll find that the "fanzines" and fancasts are all about genre fiction, and the fan writers all write about genre fiction. There's little or no personal writing or fan history there, and the personal writing tends to be about challenges the writer has to overcome to be involved in the sf community.

I suspect that's one reason I'm not reading many fanzines. I read almost no science fiction anymore, and my YouTube viewing is mostly film reviews. What could be more fun than The Critical Drunker trashing "Thor Love and Thunder?" A review of a book I'm never going to buy or read? Not so much. Of course, there are still "fannish" fanzines of the old school, and the FAANs, but that's an issue that Nic Farey will no doubt decide for us. – TW

Moving on to your comments about Jesus, I have to agree with much of what you've said. But I don't feel comfortable writing on this subject and will keep my chaotic thoughts in my head. – Jerry Kaufman

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David Redd, [dave\\_redd@hotmail.com](mailto:dave_redd@hotmail.com), 30 Oct 2023

Thank you for *Dark Toys 76* - nice cover! Issue 75 certainly generated some debate, and in issue 76 your "God is dead, etc" piece seems designed to generate some more. Forgive me for not responding in detail, but as one who attends a Christian church regularly I'm not likely to agree much with you. I'll just note that to me, the gospels include enough unflattering detail about Jesus Christ to make me class them as being from a fairly honest oral tradition. I accept that we should apply critical reason to Bible texts - since the actual documents we have were written down by fallible human scribes - but every person's reasoning will produce a slightly different interpretation, and no doubt your lettercol will reflect that. – David Redd

There certainly are a number of oddities about the four \*accepted\* gospels and this may argue for some sort of factional base. But it may also only argue for some factional base garbled with a lot of conflicting mythic construction. In the final analysis there is probably no way to separate fact from accretions. I should add that there are \*other\* gospels, not accepted by any Christian church, that are usually classed as apocryphal. All the same, they were just as real to the gnostics and other suppressed sects. – TW

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Bob Jennings, [fabficbks@aol.com](mailto:fabficbks@aol.com), 1 Nov 2023

Your commentary on Jesus and Christianity was interesting, but hardly groundbreaking. People have been questioning the reality of Jesus and the founding blocks of the Christian religion almost since the time he was believed to have walked the earth. You credit the reign of Constantine I and his sons as the reason Christianity spread so far and managed to upend the established gods of Rome and adjacent kingdoms.

when it comes the origins of Christianity, My observations are almost sacred text. But my thoughts were necessary background to my real interest – the role of Pilot, Or rather the lack of one. – TW

I think Constantine was an influential factor, but Christianity had been spreading rapidly well before Constantine came into the picture. Traditional religions were indeed uneasy with the idea that the Christians insisted on talking about one god only, not multiple gods as most of the religions of that time embraced, but the authorities were also damn upset with the whole concept of a religion that based a lot of its appeal on peaceful interaction with all peoples of all classes and social status, of equality between rich and poor in the eyes of their God.

It was also a religion that didn't believe in blood sacrifices to their God and their messiah, especially not human sacrifice, a core part of a great many religions of that period and onward thru the ages. Many religions of the period (and afterwards) viewed warfare, conquest, and the violent subjection of all enemies to be a perfectly reasonable and acceptable state of affairs. Sacrifice of their enemies to the glory of their assorted gods was an established reality. Christians were not only opposed to human sacrifice, they were devoted to their ideals of loving one another, and they were also blindly happy with their whacko creed, and persisted in holding to it even when being hounded and persecuted for their beliefs.

It has been noted by many that the view of Christians being sacrificed and slain in the Arenas in Rome, and the Roman provinces, singing praises to their god, and meeting death with brave confidence in the truth of their religion was more effective in spreading Christianity than anything the authorities ever did to suppress it.

A religion based on mutual self respect and peaceful coexistence has a lot going for it, since most people, especially people who are not part of a nation's power structure, are generally not interested in being slaughtered by invading armies, or fighting in their own country's wars of conquest or international quibbling.

No doubt you can raise objections to all these points. You are free to believe whatever you want to believe. But I will make one last point. Christianity has managed to spread rapidly in two thousand years, becoming the largest religion in the world today. 31% of the people on the planet today identify as Christians. If you happen believe in the

existence of some kind of supernatural religious reality, then this is pretty clear proof that whether Jesus actually existed or not, his religion has been supremely successful.

I think you have a romanticized view of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century created by the Christian church. It is true that Christianity had grown in popularity in those centuries, but so had a dozen other mystery religions, and there was no indication that Christianity would eventually replace them. By the time of Constantine, Christians had completely accepted all the vices of an imperial court, including gladiatorial games, a rigid class system and slavery. In fact, it is likely that Christianity's appeal to Constantine was that it lent itself so well to a static and well-ordered society. Nor is there any hint that the Christian church was peaceful or open to dissent of any sort. It is a truism that upon Christianity's coup against the pagan world, the faithful almost immediately turned against each other, and in the long run certainly burned and tortured more of their fellow Christians than the pagan emperors ever did. Does that count as "success?" Perhaps, then but so is Islam and Marxism a success. Perhaps religion is a matter of "survival of the fittest," and not spirituality at all? – TW

I appreciated Schirm's look at *Mad* Magazine. I gave up reading *Mad* on a regular basis in 1961. I think the situation is that *Mad* was consistently humorous, but it was also consistently adolescent. It always aimed at and appealed to the pre-21 age group. A lot of it was funny for a long, long time, but the focus after it changed from comic book to magazine format was not really aimed at the adult reader. Adults (well, adult males anyway), can cheerfully revert back to the mindset of their younger years, but age brings sophistication and a wider viewpoint, which means newer venues of humor often had more appeal. As others have also pointed out, *Mad* as a monthly magazine devoted to satire and commentary on the current state of affairs had an increasingly hard time keeping up with modern reality that changed so fast sometimes that even TV and the internet couldn't keep up with it. I regret that *Mad* is essentially gone, but as Shirm says, the good memories will always be there.

Since last time I had a chance to check out Captain Star. I read the collection of his comic strips including viewing the few episodes that are posted on YouTube, and I have to say I did not like it. I generally agree with your opinion about most animated cartoons (there are a few exceptions) but this thing just does nothing for me. The original comic strips are so strange that I am tempted to believe they were created when the author was under the direct influence of recreational drugs. Many of the lines and themes in the animated cartoons are drawn directly from the cartoons in the book anthology. In the original cartoons an underlying theme is that Capt Star is an insane person confined to a mental institution, and that his experiences are nothing more than the random fantasies of a broken mind. The incongruities of the animated cartoons seem to support that idea.

As to how the author ever got this bizarre concept accepted as a cartoon series in the first place, it seems that Steven Appleby has a long history of involvement in British

humor, including working as a play doctor, writing comedy skits for radio and TV, as well as contributing jokes and monologs to stand up comics in the UK. He is also apparently a very funny individual in person, but it is safe to say that the Captain Star animated series was not successful and there will not be any more made in the future.

Fair enough. From what I've seen of the comic strip, the animated art was slicker ... which is saying something. It's true that Captain Star is borderline demented, but I find that at core he is a decent person with a sense of duty that may be misplaced, but recognizes the limitations of his duty. This is an aspect of the animated show that I don't think exists in the comic strip, which makes Star into a mere prop. From what little I gathered about Appleby, the creator of Captain Star seemed rather full of herself and may have benefited more from her activism than from her talent. I likely jump to conclusions too quickly, however. – TW

Great line about it being hard to ignore a fan award given to the guy with the spinach stuck in his teeth. I immediately stole that and put it on my list of quotes that I apply to the end of my emails and suchlike places. I naturally give you full credit, whether you want it or not.

– Bob Jennings

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Garth Spencer, [outlook\\_0A35E3E23BA37CD6@outlook.com](mailto:0A35E3E23BA37CD6@outlook.com), 3 Nov 2023

I see that inadequate air conditioning was imposed on you, and presumably on others, by some authority in Toronto. I see that repairing the inadequate air conditioner is exorbitantly expensive for you. I wonder if there are enough similarly aggrieved people to make up a protest group?

I'm not active in tenant association business, but my understanding is that it was the decision of residents of Toronto Community Housing to make the asinine decision to mandate the replacement of every tenant's air conditioner. "For the children!" Blah, blah... – TW

Marc Schirmeister has supplied something I didn't know I needed, an overview of the life and death of *Mad* magazine. Food for thought.

Your description of the Aurora Awards deserves to be quoted, to the Canadian SF and Fantasy Association. At Pemmi-Con Murray Moore asked me, and I consented, to act as their secretary. They have another meeting coming up at the end of this month. To be fair, as I sometimes try to be, I don't suppose they're being clubby, not deliberately, nor realize anyone is in effect being ruled out of participation. It's just the usual Canadian thing, being out of touch and not knowing how to promote themselves – or to include people outside their horizon of communication – even with their best efforts at outreach. I am guilty of this syndrome, too.

The sad thing is that the Auroras were conceived in the first place as a way to spotlight Canadian SF and fantasy – with what results, we now know.

Of course I could say the same thing about the Canadian Unity Fan Fund, with which I am also involved. I keep trying to make these things work.

I'm afraid that I've already forgotten whatever it was that I said about the Aurora's ... as far as I'm concerned, they matter that little. The fund did its job, back in the day, but I don't think there's a coherent Canadian fandom to promote any more. – TW

A good deal of this issue revolves around differing versions of fandom. I defined fandom to myself as a subculture that grew up around science fiction and fantasy, including people with active minds who made a sort of geographically-dispersed community, out of their common interests and points of reference – and their frequent sense of alienation – and which passed through several phases. There were different themes at different times, such as emulating pulp magazines, or sercon list-making and statistics, or fannish fandom, displaying literacy, camaraderie, KTF reviews, and many forms of humour. I just don't see the common ground, the literacy, or the humour in contemporary fandom.

– **Garth Spencer**

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Lloyd Penney, [penneys@bell.net](mailto:penneys@bell.net), 6 Nov 2023

Took some time, but here I am with a letter of comment on Dark Toys 76. Great cover... I very much enjoyed the movie WALL-E, but what the space walker is doing with a hammer and saw, I cannot say.

Clearly, a tire jack would be of no use in space. – TW

Awards are wonderful, but in the long run, they are nice pieces of wood, plastic and resin that gather dust on the shelf. I might feel better about these awards if I felt I qualified for them. Perhaps at one time, but now, not so much. Maybe I need to start participating in them, like voting? As others in the local say, at the point I'm at, I will do that I do for the love of it, and just let all the disagreements and disappointments go. I have won two Auroras and a handful of FAAn Awards, and I am pleased with that.

I've repeatedly sworn off awards, and every time been tempted back into taking them seriously. I think that this time I've learned by leason, and don't want to explain chapter and verse yet again. It is probably best to sum it up as that I've had my day in the sun, and the story goes on without me. Bealizing that you have no further role to play can be a bitter realization, but it is one we all have to face, sooner or later ... along with our mortality. All the same, no one can view without regrets the ambitions that were never realized – such as even a single Aurora or FAAn award. I mean... what does it take? Bribery? Drugs? Sex? – TW

I remember *Mad* vaguely, mostly because where I grew up, few issues were available, and I had little money with which to get them. *National Lampoon*? I never heard of it until I saw vague references to it, here and there, in the local paper, and when the Web reared its ugly head. When I had some knowledge of both, and could access at least a little bit of them, I found the humour wasn't all that funny. Perhaps if I had been



American, I'd might get it a little more.

I saw National Lampoon in its first issues, and some articles were hilarious ... but I thought more were off the mark, appealing to some sensibility that I was missing, or were plain unfunny. Sometimes the humour did seem to depend on whether you were hip-deep in American politics or pop culture. I had the same problem with late Walt Kelly strips – what was so funny about Spiro Agnew, I wondered... – TW

Artwork is best in a zine, but so many are also using photos and clipart from the Internet. Makes me wonder if I am needed for a zine, either. There's zines out there with no letter column, which says to me that a zine is meant to present essays, and they are not interested in feedback. I still write to communicate, but maybe that's not wanted any more. I certainly don't respond to all zines available to me, but the ones I want to respond to, I do. I wish I could share more of what I write.

What do you see in fandom asks Heath Row? A community that appreciates what you do, understands what you do, and does it all with you. It appreciates you, too, but that might shift over time. My interests today are not all what they were 45 years ago, new stuff has come along, and old stuff has gone away, or is not as interesting as it once was.

Fandom is a nebulous term, and encompasses the fans of various pop culture properties. There are many properties, and some are so diverse, they may never know about the properties we like. I have gotten to know people in other areas of fandom, and they are all different, and they are all the same. So many express their appreciation of what they like, others are critical, and others are proprietary and protective, and try to shield their interest from all, even the creators.

– Lloyd Penney

The whole idea of a fanzine has changed. People are more likely to post their half-baked ideas as a videocast, gain real popularity online, and maybe even become so influential that they can turn it to financial gain. In comparison, fanzines in our day rarely made a few postage stamps from a handful of subscribers, and one or two hundred copies printed were spoken for by contributors, loccers and trades. I have no trouble seeing why fanzines as we knew them are dying out. This doesn't mean that some of the original impulse behind fandom as we know it is gone. It means that it has changed, and reflects the interests and expectations of younger fans, and they have scant interest in our values. They value the spoken word rather than the written one, and extroversion over introversion. They are excited with the possibility of internet fame and the monetization of their hobby. That I'm at odds with the new aesthetic is a sign that my chapter in the story in fandom is essentially over. – TW

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WAHF – **Garth Spencer**, [garth.van.spencer@gmail.com](mailto:garth.van.spencer@gmail.com) – “As to the reason you make the effort of writing fanfiction, or pubbing your ish - It is your nature to express yourself, graphically or verbally. It is my nature to express myself, writing compulsively whether there is a reader or not. We do what we are.” [Until gawd stops us. – TW]



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## ON THE BARBIE

many sales was going to soon oversaturate the market, and would then be found in the discount bin at WalMart. I was right.

When I discovered that copies of the DVD had been marked down significantly, I took a chance. I wasn't expecting much. Although I was led by some reviewers to be prepared for a militant expression of feminism for which only accolades were acceptable, I didn't want to be overly primed for bias, either. I would go into the movie with a mind as open as possible. But I *admit* that I had been skeptical about similar movies based on heavily advertised toys such as Mario Brothers, G.I. Joe, Transformers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles ... which, for the most, were part were manipulative trash.

In fact, *Barbie* wasn't at all what I was expecting. *Barbie* blatantly exploited the nostalgia of little girls who played with their Barbie dolls, but later grew up into grown women. But it wasn't really the feminist manifesto that some critics took it for. It is fair to say that it *was* satire, but exactly *what* it is a satire *of* is not so clear.

The world of Barbie was inhabited by real people, but it was a world without real-life experiences or consequences. Women ran the world, while the Kens stood around on the beach, with little to do but wait and hope that a Barbie noticed them. When a Barbie tired of a Ken, she turned away and the Ken reverted to little more than an animatronic figure at Disneyland – without role, purpose, or meaning.

The burning question in my life this winter was whether or not to watch the *Barbie* movie. There was a tremendous amount of reaction to the film, some of it exulting in praise, but most of it indignant over its man-hating political correctness. Naturally I was curious, and watched the reviews on YouTube. Again, some reviewers regarded the movie as a stroke of satirical genius, but more of them were insulted by the implication that men needed a come-uppance. I didn't want to succumb to the scare tactics of the naysayers ... but neither did I want to shell out good money to be told that I belong to an oppressor class. So what was I to do?

My answer was: wait. I figured that a movie with as many viewings and so

And in its perfection, Barbie Land is only an empty void – vapid, and lacking conviction. Every Barbie is beautiful in her own way. Every Barbie has a beautiful home and an expensive car, without the inconvenience of cleaning or upkeep. Consuming food is a ritual, for there is no milk in the bowl, nor cereal in the box. There was no need to point out that there is no flush toilet in the bathroom, either. If you are a Barbie and haven't the imagination to conceive of anything greater than Barbie Land, it is the best of all possible worlds.

That is, until the day when one Barbie woke up and discovered that her four-inch spike heels were no longer comfortable. When she sat down for breakfast, there was actual \*food\* in the bowl and she didn't know what to do with it. Her perky breasts fell! Things only go down-hill from there.

In Barbie's attempt to discover the meaning behind this, she leaves Barbie Land in search of the little girl who once "owned" her. If it seems hard to reconcile Barbie driving her pink 1956 Corvette out of the imaginary toy world and into our real world, things get even *stranger* when Ken appears from behind the back seat, where he had hidden. Ken also wants to see the real world!

The real world is an eye-opener to both of them. Barbie is unable to understand that she is not held in automatic respect *simply because she is a Barbie*. Worse, the men she meets on the street treat her as ... well, *as a Ken*. No one takes her seriously; in fact, only as a sex object. Ken, meanwhile, learns that he has entered a world designed entirely for men's needs, and he quickly expands into his greater role. He adopts a large cowboy hat bedecked with conches, a set of clothes to match his newfound machismo, and begins to behave like a classic male chauvinist pig. He is having the time of his life, in other words. Naturally, he wants to know why life can't be this way when he returns to Barbie Land. You have to admit – it's a good question.

Meanwhile, Barbie has found the headquarters of Mattell, and demands a confrontation with the executives of the company (played by an ineffectual Will Farrell). You might have expected them to be flummoxed when they learn that the Barbies are *real*, and don't live in an *imaginary* universe, but appear to be entirely aware that Barbie Land is also somehow real. Realizing that Barbie isn't where she should be, they attempt to coax her back into a life-size box ... although it is hard to see what this would accomplish, since she would still be in our real world.

While Barbie is attempting to escape from the boardroom office, she discovers a homey little kitchen where an old white-haired lady is waiting. She pauses to discuss the meaning of life or some such before the old lady directs Barbie to a convenient exit, leaving us to wonder who she really is. Is this actually Ruth Marriana Handler, the inventor of the Barbie doll ... or is it her spirit? The real RMH died in 2002, by the way. Back in the street, Barbie conveniently finds the little girl she had been

searching for all along. However, she discovers that the little girl had *grown up*, and put aside her old playthings. *Her* little girl is now of an age to play with dolls, but this pre-adult female belongs to cynical generation-Z, who is *far* too sophisticated to play with dolls. Instead, she wants to overthrow the patriarchy and destroy white privilege!

Through a few more twists in logic, Barbie convinces them all to return with her to Barbie Land in her pink Corvette. This will prove the validity of Barbie's make-believe world, and presumably fix Barbie's problem with her flat feet and droopy boobs. Unbeknownst to them, the executives have decided to follow them to Barbie Land also, anxious prevent damage to the brand that might follow if things are not set right.

And damage there was. Ken had returned to Barbie Land all by himself, and had quickly spread the word to all the other Kens about the patriarchy. When Barbie and company arrive, they find that the Barbies have all been brainwashed into becoming subservient bimbos, and the Kens have taken over their Dream Homes and exciting jobs as police chiefs, doctors or astronauts. This, of course, cannot be allowed to stand.

Don't say I didn't warn you ... this is where things get really strange.

Barbie begins deprogramming her friends, one by one, and once they are all free of the virus of the patriarchy, the Barbies provoke the Kens into fighting with each other, using the most obvious male weakness against them ... their innate bellicosity. In no time, the girls have seized control of Barbie Land again in a counter-coup, and the Kens are reduced to be hapless pawns once more.

This is the part where I have issues with the plot. The Barbies revel in their re-assertion of control, and see nothing unjust with treating the Kens as second-class citizens. At the end of the Kens' brief taste of power, the Barbies make a *very* conditional promise that *perhaps* the Kens might share in positions of real responsibility and authority *someday*. Anyone who can't see the injustice that had existed in Barbie Land before the revolt of the Kens is also likely to have no problem denying having once denied equal rights to black people.

It is perfectly plain that Barbie Land is a bigoted paradise based on inequality.

That's where the elaborate fantasy world of Barbie Land apparently breaks down ... again. After some mildly philosophic moments, it seems that the tone switches to satire again. Barbie Land is once again a made-believe world of living toys. As a creation of the mind, it is certainly no Middle Earth. It wasn't even Bedrock. That shifting of tone back and forth seems less than satisfying.

Eventually, I realized that none of that was particularly relevant in the *Barbie* movie. The inconsistencies between satire and political diatribe created a false dichotomy

that too many viewers saw either as girl-boss polemics or a just deserts to male chauvinism. In reality, the movie correctly represented neither view. Neither was the fulfillment of what little girls of the 1960s desired. Their expectations of Barbies have always unrealistic. They could *never have existed* in a world where they could effortlessly become pilots, bankers, presidents, race drivers or astronauts, and never face the competition of purely decorative Kens. Barbies are not created perfect and free of wrinkles, blemishes or a toilet that wasn't made to flush. Barbies are not handed everything they want simply because they wish for it.

This, it seems to me, is the entire point of *The Barbie Movie* – not the spurious gender politics or culture wars that the film has been seen as. Barbie chooses to leave the world of unattainable aspirations because *achieving* them is the only goal worthy of wanting. Being a Barbie in real life is impossible, and wanting to be one is not a viable goal for young women on the cusp of adulthood. Barbie is not a lie if you are only ten, of course – if you are older, it is a lie and a dangerous illusion.



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## The Word Begins Again

*How an unintended sequel began...*

After finishing “Magic Will Find You,” my first thoughts were not about writing something else. Certainly *not* what I was going to write next in my Fraggles saga. I knew what would come next, but there was no hurry to begin writing the remaining stories just yet. However, time has a way of reminding you of loose ends. They begin to gnaw away at your certainty of a job properly finished. So it was that after a month or so, I began to realize that “Magic” ends at a moment that begins the very next day, when Darl wakes for the first time in Fraggles Rock, and realizes the enormity of where he is, what he had done, and how he is to pursue the rest of his life. It is the story of a Silly Creature’s first day in an entirely new life.

When I began writing, I thought it would be a fairly short piece – perhaps 7-or-8 thousand words. Little did I know that it would bulk out at over 18,500! To be honest, I didn’t even know where it would go, only what ground I needed to cover in

the middle. How I would get there was also a bit of a mystery. So I just kept writing, dealing with unanswered questions when I came to them, and by some magic found the answers when I needed them.

Magic was the word. Magic was the McGuffin that organized all the points that that I needed to cover along the way, motivated the actions of my characters, and validated an ending that hopefully wasn't expected by the reader. (Although I clearly foreshadowed it.)

At issue in "The World Begins Again" is that the first story barely introduces Darl to Fraggles, and his first sight of other Fraggles (other than Kiki) was fleeting. The next story that I had written is set some weeks later, when Darl already knows Gobo and the others. How could I have overlooked Darl's proper introduction to new friends and a new world? The matter couldn't be resolved with a few "how'd ya dos." Darl knew absolutely nothing about The Rock, and had to be shown how to wash his feet when he came home and what things not to touch, or risk breaking out in itchy blotches. There was a long list of issues that I had to explain in a manner that wasn't too didactic, and those issues had to be covered in a way that wouldn't waste too many words. Nor could it end simply because I had no more to say. There had to be some point to all this - what had Darl learned and how had he adapted this new world?

It also had to be interesting, or who would read it?

As usual, I'm grateful to my friend Walt Wentz, who like any good soldier stood his ground by proofreading all 18,500 words of "The World Begins Again" in record time. More than correcting my abominable habits of sprinkling punctuation haphazardly around the text, he was also a source of useable suggestions. If he thought a little more description was desirable, or that clarification of an idea was needed, he was almost always correct, and I would steal the suggestion shamelessly. I rarely disregard his advice.

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## **Life on Titan!**

**Headline:** Life has been discovered on Titan, largest moon of Saturn! NASA has revealed that the shrouded, orange moon of Saturn is inhabited by intelligent life forms who have tried to communicate with us. Scientists world-wide have declared this to be the discovery of the century, and speculate that the knowledge of another sentient species in the universe will revolutionize our understanding of our own existence. In a surprise move, Republicans in the House have passed a bill to prevent the Titanians from entering the United States to take American jobs and bring drugs into the country. News at eleven...

-Endit-