

Susan Wood | *about and by*

THIS SMALL BOOKLET reprints two essays, one short, one reasonably long, that relate to the late Susan Wood and her career. It accompanies the display at MidAmeriCon II in Kansas City about Susan's influence on the science fiction community. Copyright of the material is retained by the original publishers.

In 1978, Susan was a Guest of Honor at the second WisCon, in Madison, Wisconsin. There were two biographical notes about her in the program book (which was published as an issue of the fanzine *Janus*), one by Richard Labonte, one of her oldest friends, and one by Eli Cohen. Here we've reprinted Richard's short, evocative essay.

In 1975, Susan was co-Fan Guest of Honor at Aussiecon, the first Australian worldcon, in Melbourne. Her lengthy and energetic convention report was originally written as the final installment of her "Clubhouse" column in *Amazing Science Fiction*, though after it got bumped from the 50th-anniversary issue, she offered it as the first installment of a new column for *Algol*, published by Andrew I. Porter. (Thanks to some unintentional confusion, the piece was also published in the *next* issue of *Amazing*, which annoyed everyone but gave the piece even more widely distribution.) It's reprinted here under its *Algol* title, "Propellor Beanie."

Richard Labonte | WisCon II GoH bio of Susan Wood
(from *Janus* 11)

WHAT IS BEST in my world is often what is constant; Susan Wood is one of those constants.

Ten years ago, Susan was fighting Ottawa's city government to have ice and snow cleared from steep steps leading from an overpass down to the Carleton University campus.

Last year, Susan and her neighbors were fighting builders abetted by the government of British Columbia in an attempt to take over low-cost housing near the University of British Columbia campus.

Like all of us, she is older. Like enough of us, she is wiser. Unlike many of us, she has not aged. Susan can still be impassioned.

In 1967, when we shared desk space and deadlines for Carleton's weekly student newspaper, Susan *cared*: about icy steps, about the quality of her education, about the vitality of Carleton's science fiction club, about – even then – her rights as a woman.

Now she is a university professor who frets about the quality of her students' education; a science fiction fan and scholar who cares to study and enthuse about the best of the field; an activist who has joined with other women and some men to bring a new sensitivity into science fiction and fandom.

To all these passions, Susan brings what surely must be the most highly-tuned sense of appropriate hysteria ever manifested on the North American continent.

It's also an effective hysteria.

Back at Carleton, it got the ice and snow cleared off those steps; it also got the Department of English thinking about

setting up science fiction courses – a trail of which Susan has scattered across Canada in her moves from university to university.

Susan was in town – in Ottawa, my town, her mom’s town – for the past Christmas. Her appropriate, effective hysteria was a tonic.

Two days after she arrived, we joined some old friends at a Christmas Bash, with live music supplied by Ottawa’s Great Sneazy Waters.

There was Elizabeth Kimmerly, a den mother dear to us all who introduced Susan to co-operative living a decade ago; Rosemary Ulyot, once and perhaps future chronicler of our fannish lives; Gina Clarke, whose husband Norm was on-stage making the music sweeter with his saxophone; and Susan: four women in all, and me.

I’m not much – though, lately, more – of a dancer; but Susan is, and Elizabeth is, and the music was irresistible. So Susan and Elizabeth, the former respectably divorced and the latter happily married, danced. Hysterically. Soon, I did too.

Susan has that ability: to make people do what’s good for them.

It’s her strength: non-stop talking and no-end writing and never-finished laments about career, classes, and cats are the surface Susan.

Luckily for us – and for me – there’s another Susan under the professor overworked, the administrator subverted, the scholar frustrated, the citizen betrayed.

Our Susan can still dance, and sweep us off our feet when she does.

[1978]

(from *Algol 26*; also in *Amazing Science Fiction*, June 1976)

“Why are you here?” asked Jan Sharpe, the elegant blonde from the Australia Broadcasting Commission.

“We’ve come for Aussiecon.”

“HERE” WAS the State Suite on the 15th floor of the Southern Cross Hotel, Melbourne, Australia, August 14, 1975. Robin Johnson, chairman of Aussiecon, had hauled me away from helping to register convention attendees to attend a press conference where he was introducing convention notables to each other and to assorted reporters.

The basic “why” translated as “What’s an Aussiecon?” with faint undertones of “Why *here*?” (Australians are so used to believing that everything important exists in the places where they’re tourists that they find it hard to believe North Americans would want to cross the Pacific and the dateline to see them, their wombats, and their Opera House. In fact, they’re most courteous, hospitable to visitors, and have an amazing country. This may be the first time *Algol* has given a rave review to a continent.)

Since 1939, we explained, and annually since 1946, science fiction fans have gathered at “world” conventions to talk; swap ideas and fanzines; sell each other old pulp magazines; look at masquerade balls, art shows, and, especially of late, movies; meet writers who are meeting editors; give each other awards; eat dinner together; and...anything two fans do together is fanac. This is the 33rd of these “world conventions.” Since it is supposed to be a “world” convention, it has been known to move out of North America, to

London and Heidelberg, and so an Australian named John Bangsund thought... Well, yes, of course, we hear writers give speeches, but it's not really like an academic conference. No, not like the sheepdip seller's sales meetings, or the American Legion reunions, either. It's been called a gathering of the tribes, and a family reunion...but they were puzzled already, these people come to interpret us.

Media coverage of science fiction conventions tends to be sensational. The first Torcon in 1948 earned headlines like "Zap! Zap! Atomic Ray is Passé with Fiends," and one of the sensational Melbourne tabloids proved nothing has changed – they concentrated on the scanty skirts of the hired models promoting the Wang computers, loaned to the convention for Star Trek games. "Sci-fi." Sigh.

Most reporters, though, listened with interest as Robin stressed the respectabilities of science fiction, the educational and cultural nature of the convention, the funds from the Literature Board of the Australian Council to run a writers' workshop before the con, the videotaping of the conventions for schools and libraries.

More important, Ursula K. Le Guin emanated, inspired, intelligent interest in this "Aussiecon."

"I have a question, a serious question to ask you.
What on earth are we here for?"

"Well, I think we have come to celebrate." – Ursula K. Le Guin, Guest of Honor speech, Aussiecon, August 14, 1975.

Reporters thought they could understand why Ursula Le Guin had come to Aussiecon: for professional reasons. The Guest of Honor was fittingly chosen: an acclaimed writer of science fiction and fantasy, winner of Hugo, Nebula, and National Book awards, author of the

Hugo-and-Nebula-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the Nebula-winning-and-Hugo-nominated *The Dispossessed*. She must have journeyed half round the world to accept the admiration of her fans.

Admiration, however, makes Ursula Le Guin nervous. She changes the subject. She was lured from Oregon, en route to London the long way, by the chance to lead a writing workshop for 20 aspiring SF writers. She remained after the workshop, not to lecture to fans, but to share with them her delights in SF: to “celebrate” SF.

“SF is pretty well grown up now. We’ve been through our illiterate stage, and our latent or non-sexual stage, and the stage where you can’t think of anything *but* sex, and the rest of them, and we really do seem to be on the verge of maturity now. When I say I’d like SF to be self-critical, I don’t mean pedantic or destructively perfectionist; I mean I’d like to see more SF readers judging soundly, dismissing the failures quietly, in order to praise the successes joyfully – and to go on from them, to build upon them. That is maturity, isn’t it? – a just assessment of your capacities, and the will to fulfill them. We have plenty to praise, you know, I do think SF during the past ten years has produced some books and stories that will last, that will be meaningful and beautiful many years from now.” (Ursula K. Le Guin, GoH speech, Aussiecon.)

Most of us responded enthusiastically; a few people wondered where the fun of reading forbidden trash would go; and the reporters took notes. But Ms. Le Guin had more to say:

“When I say the ghetto walls are down and it behooves us to step over them and be free, I don’t mean that the community of SF is breaking up, or should break up... The essential lunacy that unites us will continue to unite us. The one thing that’s changed is that we’re no longer *forced* together in

a mutually defensive posture – like a circle of muskoxen on the Arctic snow, attacked by wolves – by the contempt and arrogance of literary reactionaries. If we meet now and in the future, we writers and readers of SF, to give each other prizes and see each other’s faces and renew old feuds and discuss new books and hold our celebration, it will be in entire freedom – because we choose to do so – because, to put it simply, we like each other.”

I’m not altogether sure the reporters (and the attendees) fully understood the uniqueness of that liking.

Thursday, we had panels on “new directions in science fiction” and on science; Friday we talked about art and SF; Saturday found me moderating panels on teaching SF, and on children’s fantasy (featuring Ursula, and Peter Nicholls of England’s Science Fiction Foundation – I really enjoyed this one), followed by hard-working Ursula on a panel on myth in SF, then SF criticism, and finally Bob Silverberg reading his own work – a most serious, literary day this, ending with the Hugo banquet; and Sunday had panels on the media in SF, reading SF, and writing SF: it *looked* like a literary conference. (But what was that panel about “fanzines” – and this item, “The Role of Sheep in SF” – and all the announcements of the Test Match scores – and this “business session” where Orlando won the 1977 worldcon? What’s this “fandom”?)

So the reporters assumed they’d dropped into a literary gathering, where Ackerman, Bova, Foster, Le Guin, Silverberg, and Tucker had flown in to meet their Australian counterparts like Chandler, Harding, Turner, and Wilder, their critics like Nicholls and Foyster. Off they went to interview Captain Chandler (and report, with pride, the presentation of an Invisible Little Man award to him at the banquet): a gentleman dignified, courteous, proud of his craft, and as thrilled as any of us to be at Aussiecon. The papers and

the radio didn't report on that last trait. We call it Sense of Wonder. It knows no limits of age or distance; and it unites us.

“Why have you come to Aussiecon – from Perth, and Hobart, and Waiheke Island, N.Z.”?

“To meet science fiction writers, of course.”

Aussiecon *was*, first of all, a science fiction conference, for writers and readers. As such it attracted 604 attending members, some 500 of whom were Australians who had never heard of worldcons or fandom – who probably didn't understand why some 1,400 other fans, most of them North Americans, paid to become supporting members of a convention they couldn't attend. (Even with this support, Aussiecon may have financial problems, especially since Australian hotels, unlike most North American ones, charge for the use of the function space.)

These readers, like the reporters, soon learned that what Ursula Le Guin said held true: “We like each other.” The SF world tends *not* to split into an elite of Doers, sitting on platforms lecturing, and a supportive mass of Receivers or fans, sitting adulating. Convention: from the Latin, to come together: in order to share.

Chorus of voices: “And when I asked for an autograph, he/she *talked* to me! What a nice person!”

(And some are arrogant bastards, too, but they stayed home this time.)

“Why are you here?”

“Because the fans sent me to you.”

Bob Tucker, a First Fandomite, legend, Hugo-winning fan-writer, and admirer of Jim Beam and pretty ladies, is

also Wilson Tucker, Hugo-nominated SF writer. He flew to Aussiecon because a lot of us in the fan community love him; because a lady named Jackie Franke organized “The Tucker Bag,” a special fund which collected some \$2,500 from fans to pay his way. During his first panel, on SF writing, he sat silent and fidgeting under the spotlights, feeling that only a handful of us were responding. “They’re a cold audience,” he complained to me. Since I was to interview him the next day on the program, we considered the problem. The spotlights for videotaping panels were too bright, the hall too dark: speakers and audience were cut off. Easily remedied. Vital, though, since we wanted to establish the lack of barriers.

“Bob,” I said, “I remember my first worldcon. You were up on a stage trading one-liners about ‘Rosebud’ and ‘Courtney’s boat’ and picnic tables – and I walked out. People kept talking about fandom; I didn’t understand, and I was bored. We’ve got to introduce you properly – as Wilson the writer (Robin didn’t make it clear who you are) and Bob the fan, and talk about why you’re both.”

Introduce fandom-as-a-Tucker-creation in 50 minutes? We tried. Soon Merv Binns of Space Age Books was selling out of hardcover editions of *Ice and Iron* and *Year of the Quiet Sun*; the local bottle shops were selling out of Tucker’s elixir, Jim Beam; and Tucker was handing out Rosebud buttons and calling cards to bebies of femmefans. By Sunday, he had a hall full of people on their feet going “smooooth,” an arcane ritual you’ll only understand if you attend a con with Bob, Wilson, and Jim.

By Sunday, that is, Australia had a lot of people not only delighted to discover somebody else read “that stuff” (remember the thrill?) but also a lot of people happy to discover the subculture of fandom.

“Why are *you* here?”

“The fans sent me to keep an eye on Bob, there.”

Rusty Hevelin (who drinks milk) travelled with his “son” Bob as the Down Under Fan Fund winner. The Fund alternately sends Australians up to visit us, us down to them.

“Why are you here?”

“Because I’m half of the Fan Guest of Honor.”

At that press conference, and all through the convention, I was hyper-aware that few people would understand what role Mike Glicksohn and I were playing as “Fan” GoHs. What had we published? What did we mean, we’d published a fanzine called *Energumen* which won a Hugo, articles from me that won another, and letters from him that made him a legend (though the beard, boa constrictor, bheer, and Bill Bowers helped)? What’s a “fanzine”? Back to square one.

Mike and I figured that while Ursula represented the professional concerns, and he represented the fans (with a *duty* to sample local brews for them), I was an interface between SF and the subculture of fandom. After organizing a fanhistory display at the Toronto worldcon, I’d had some practice explaining fandom (especially to reporters, with Bob Tucker’s help!). Besides – as Robin Johnson and the program book kept pointing out – I had lovely respectable literary interests, having taught SF and finished off a PhD (now I can go back to reading fanzines). I was able to meet a lot of Australians through that “professional” interest in SF: librarians, teachers, students who wanted to set up SF courses – people like me who wanted to take SF seriously, but not to take the joy out of it. (I spent one panel on Sunday trying to have the best of both worlds!)

Yet when I introduced myself, I tried to talk about Susan the fan, about why fandom interests me as much as the SF which lured me into it.

“Why are you here?”

“To have dinner with my friends.”

I explained, at the opening ceremonies, that years before when I was a neofan, a friend lent me some amateur SF magazines: fanzines. Most contained discussions of SF, book reviews and such; yet one, *Rataplan*, consisted entirely of someone named Leigh Edmonds in Australia talking about having dinner with someone named John Bangsund, and... “Richard,” I complained, “what’s going on? This isn’t even about SF! Who cares?”

“Oh,” he replied. “That’s fannish. You’ll understand someday.”

So in 1975 I left Regina, Saskatchewan; and I arrived in Melbourne, Australia; and I met Ursula Le Guin at the Nova Mob meeting, and didn’t fall at her feet because she said she’d be embarrassed; and the next night I had dinner at Degraives Tavern with Leigh Edmonds, and John Bangsund, and Valma Brown who happens to be a sister of mine, not by birth but by choice and fandom. And I understood: for me, fandom was a communications network that brought me together with my friends.

It was hardly a unique message, but it was as simple, and honest, as I could make it. At the panel following the introductions, “How to Really Enjoy Yourself at This Convention,” Mike and Rusty and the Aussiefen repeated the same thing: “Talk to people. That’s why we’re here. Talk to people.” And we did. From the platforms and panels; in groups over coffee, supplied by Discon II, bless ‘em, in the lounge outside the meeting room; at the parties by the

Magic Pudding Club and the Science Fiction Writers of America (and Australia) and the '77 worldcon bidders; at Leigh Edmonds' pie-and-sauce party, that vast end-of-contribute to Australian cuisine; in ones and twos and tens: we discussed, debated, disagreed, chattered, gossiped, heavyrapped, and got to know each other. And then we wandered back into the main ballroom to watch Sonar Graphics' unique light-and-sound show, preceding each major program segment (Aussiecon's most impressive innovation), and listen to someone else talk.

What else is there at a worldcon? There's an art show – Aussiecon's was small but impressive, highlighted by Karel Thole's work – hucksters' tables, selling books and magazines and the like; and auctions of collectable material. There's usually a masquerade, this one capably organized by Shayne McCormack, with your hardworking GoHs to judge the costumes – far simpler than the elaborate North American presentations of late, but fun. A movie program has become standard; Aussiecon premiered *Solaris* but I was too busy visiting. At larger conventions, there are often two or more concurrent program items: on SF, fantasy, science, films, writing, editing, fan publishing, anything. Of course, it all leads up to the Hugo banquet, and the presentation of awards voted on by the members of the convention. Some people fall in love at conventions, and some get pros to autograph their books. Lots of things happen at worldcons.

Anyway, at *this* convention there was an excellent, smoothly-run program, organized by Bruce Gillespie and Leigh Edmonds, among others. I enjoyed it, and I rarely get around to attending the formal convention events (though I'd never felt that I was *on* half the program before, either). Carey Handfield, one of the committee members, set an example of stunning efficiency by day; and then in the evening, everyone relaxed and actually enjoyed their own

convention. Remarkable. I just hope they don't all gafiate. (That's "get away from it all," leave fandom, a feeling you understand after running a worldcon.)

Oh yes. A large chunk of my convention was spent talking to reporters. Taping a half-hour program on Canadian literature (my specialty, one reporter discovered to her delight) was an odd experience, but easier than trying to explain fandom as a subculture to Jan Sharpe for her "New Society" program.

"But what are you doing here? Talking to your friends – but you're a successful woman, surely you have *real* friends?"

On Saturday afternoon, I sat trying to tell Jan's tape recorder (because I wasn't reaching Jan) what I valued about fandom: the chance to meet, to become friends (not just acquaintances: friends) with a wide and wonderful circle of people. Look, I said, at the people you found me with today: Bob Tucker, who's a legend, and Jillian Miranda Foyster, who's an Australian schoolgirl, and her mum Elizabeth who teaches and paints lovely watercolors, and John Alderson who raises sheep (and, I thought, I want to get back down to the ballroom and talk to them). But she didn't understand – not even when I turned around and interviewed *her* for an article I'm writing on Australian women (I was busy, this trip, playing pro writer; scholar, too, visiting at University of Melbourne in hopes of coming back).

Young, intelligent, hip, a single mother, Jan complained she had no one to *talk* with, could feel at ease only with a small, elite group of people her age who shared her ideas. Yet she couldn't believe that fandom gave me exactly what she lacked, that I had flown here for a sort of giant family reunion. (It has its quarrels, but it's not a bad clan.)

I passed Jan on to Tucker, and went off to interview an advice-to-housewives columnist and the German chambermaid. Not even Mr. Smooth could dent the preconceptions with which she edited me, and Bruce Gillespie, and Eric Lindsay, though. The radio program presented the stereotype of fans as social misfits, shy, introverted, able to communicate only on paper (some of my second-year English students should be so handicapped!). Shy? Introverted? That raving bunch of lunatics munching daffodils, waiting for the train to Ballarat, and chattering away?

We come together because we value SF. We stay, because we value each other. We celebrate fandom because it is the bond that holds us together.

Well: when we talked to Malcolm Maiden – frizzyhaired freak, writing for the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone* – about “tribe” and “celebration” and “communications network,” *he* understood.

And the latest issue of Leigh Edmonds’ *Fanew Sletter* reports that SF clubs and fanzines are mushrooming all over Australia. Fans coming together, talking with their friends.

“Why are you here?”

“Because John Bangsund has a bottle of Kaiser Stuhl Bin J426 in his wine cellar for me.”

Several years ago, John Bangsund, Publishing Giant, wine critic, and all-around legend of Melbourne fandom, proposed that Australians bid for a world convention, inviting Ursula K. Le Guin as GoH. They did. A somewhat erratic career took John away to Canberra, where he became a civil servant, married a charming woman named Sally, and generally Settled Down – except for producing a steady flow of outrageously brilliant fanzines. The cosmic wheels continued to grind, of course, and they brought me, one August

night, to sit in John and Sally's living room, curled up by the heater with cat Dylan, sharing conversation and wine with them, and Carey Handfield, and three more North Americans: John Berry, Mike Glicksohn, and Sheryl Birkhead.

Now John Bangsund happens to be one of the best personal journalists (synthesizing ideas, emotion, experience, into words – OK, have you got a name for it?) existing today. Not “existing in fandom.” Existing anywhere – though he chooses to distribute his material through fandom's network. Through that writing, its intelligence and insight and quirky humor, he'd earned our admiration; through it, and our writing, and lots of letters, we'd formed a friendship, which gained an extra dimension as we sat talking with him.

John Berry, in San Francisco in July, figured he couldn't go to Aussiecon: he had just enough money to find a place to live, exist till he could live by writing. “Bangsund has that bottle of Kaiser Stuhl waiting for me,” he explained, as he wrote the check to the travel agent. Translation: we have a friendship to confirm in person. This will never happen to any of us again. Translation: impossible in words, possible only in the feeling we share as Bangsund pulls out the July 1972 issue of *Amazing*, with the “Clubhouse” column in which Berry reviews (glowingly) Bangsund's *Scythrop* and incidentally (not so glowingly) Mike's and my *Energumen*; and the July 1975 *Amazing* in which I review (glowingly) Bangsund's *Philosophical Gas* and the defunct *Scythrop*. So we sit and praise each other's writing; and mean more than praise because it touches us, and we wish we'd written it; and we try not to feel silly.

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

“Tourist.”

Sixty of the *North* Americans (six Canadians, including two GoHs, the Torcon II chairman, and a retired mountie) went to Aussiecon because of Grace Lundry, who with husband Don organized a group flight and kept us organized. After the con, they'd left us time to play tourist. Genie DiModica saw Ayers Rock. Alan Frisbie was bitten by a wombat. Don and Grace took lots of trains without 58 other fen. I found myself, one chilly spring night in August, in Ken and Marea Ozanne's garden waiting my turn at Ken's 10" telescope. Freesias scented the air, a cat purred in the long grass, a stream chuckled in a vast country silence: and suddenly the normal, lovely scene shifted. Polaris wasn't there in the clear north sky. The stars were strange. On the southern horizon, there at last were the five points of the Southern Cross! Alpha Centauri, nearest neighbor, new. *Different stars.*

We call it a Sense of Wonder.

Two days later, Australia's fabulous femmefan Shayne McCormack was handing us daffodils in Sydney airport, so we could concentrate on something besides the reality of saying goodbye several months too soon. Fans hugged fans, hiding emotions under the ritual exchange: "See you next year in Kansas City."

"Where're you from?"

"Australia."

"Purpose of visit?"

"To have dinner with my friends."

[1976]