Energuwoman

Casey Arnott
Louise Bunn

Energumen: n. demoniac; enthusiast, fanatic. (see Energetic)

For thirty-two years Susan Joan Wood maintained a nearly non-stop expenditure of energy. Born with a great appetite for reading, she developed early the passion for literature which was to be the basis of her entire life. Science fiction claimed her at an early age; Canadian literature was not far behind. She spent much of her time from then on "falling between [these] two stools."[1] A highly organized and diligent worker, Susan produced a mass of writing which was published in everything from the home-mimeographed "fanzines" of the science fiction fan to professional science fiction magazines and academic journals. Her approach to her work was both highly personal and analytic, and her constant, vocal application of these traits helped institute many changes in both the fields of work and the people with whom she came in contact.

Susan Wood was born and raised in Ottawa, Ontario, where she attended Carleton University, majoring in Canadian literature and receiving her M.A. in 1971. She completed her doctorate at the University of Toronto and then moved on to teach university first in Regina, for two years, and then in Vancouver. At thirty-one she became the University of British Columbia's youngest

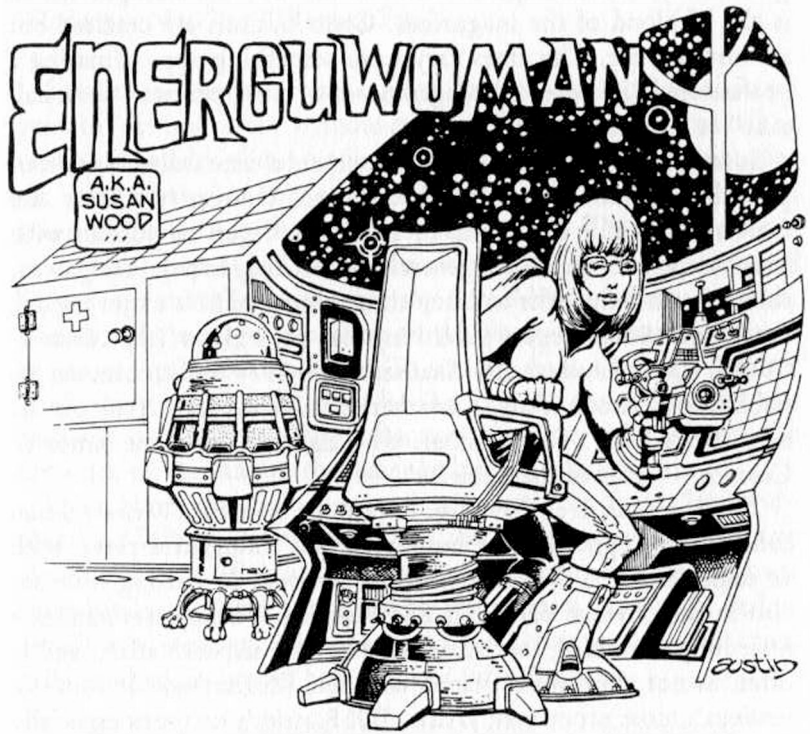
tenured professor. She was never long from academic life, yet her interest in science fiction tended to keep her somewhat apart from many of her colleagues. Teaching, writing, organizing conventions, and more kept her extremely busy and despite attention to her health, she frequently suffered from illness and was forced to take time off work. Tenure year was a particularly stressful one and this was reflected in her writing: criticism that once was delivered gently came more often with an impatient and biting edge, yet she never lost the humour and idealism that were her trademarks.

> The approach to SF I've evolved means having my cake, eating it, licking out the icing bowl and sticking to my diet too.[2]

In the 1960s, while she was still at Carleton, Susan became involved with students who did not think that SF (science fiction) belonged on the juvenile shelf. This encouragement allowed her own interest in the genre—second, for her, to the "respectable" genre of Canadian literature—to develop and be taken seriously. She began attending science fiction conventions and working on fanzines, and soon was teaching Carleton's first (noncredit) science fiction course. As a result her friends came more and more from fandom. It was in this arena that Susan was most comfortable, though she remained active in Canadian literature, which was "a whole nother fandom."[3]

> TORONTO: "Maybe I could get another Canada Council grant, publish some of my truly abysmal poetry in *Nerg*., and call it a 'little magazine of the futuristic arts'."
> REGINA: "It is a proud and lonely thing to be an apricot brandy sherbet fan in a chocolate-and-vanilla town."
> VANCOUVER: "I think one of the reasons I like Vancouver so much is that I don't live *in* it."[4]

As a tribute to the subculture of SF fandom, Susan created the "All Our Yesterdays" room at the 1973 Worldconvention in Toronto (Torcon). The display, which contained issues of important fanzines, photographs, and memorabilia, reflected a



From *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch*

past that most fans were not aware of. It proved to be so popular that it has been incorporated in the annual Worldcons ever since.

Fanzines (fan magazines) are produced at home by one or more science fiction fans. They are not usually sold, but rather traded or given away to encourage letters of comment—the dialogue which is the lifeblood of the magazines. Contributions are credited but are not paid for. The zines vary from something approximating a professional, SF-oriented magazine to a truly private "personalzine" or letter substitute.

Susan's first fanzine was an environmental zine called *Aspidistra*, published while she attended Carleton University. After her marriage to Mike Glicksohn in 1971, she began to publish with him the popular genzine (general interest magazine), *Energumen*, three-time nominee for and one-time winner of SF's major award, the Hugo. Susan began publishing her own *Amor* (the *Amor de Cosmos Quiet-Revolutionary Susanzine*) in 1974 and continued its publication, in one form or another, until her death. *Amor* got its name from B.C.'s first premier, who assumed the name Amor de Cosmos—"lover of the universe".

Twice a winner of the Hugo award for Best Fan Writer, Susan consistently supported her humorous and thoughtful prose with an understructure of meticulousness, not only in writing style but also in the physical production of her zine. Though sometimes a little long in coming, her zines were never a slapdash affair, and as often as not they were graced with the illustrations of some of fandom's most prominent artists. Bill Rotsler's cartoons especially captured Susan's essence, as in his illustration of a rock (Susan) floating above the ground yet held to earth by a rope tied round its middle. A second rock watches critically. "Dreamer," it says.

Amor, though occasionally issued as a genzine, normally appeared in the form of a personalzine, and as such its distribution was limited to friends and family. Even so, Susan's generous and gregarious nature—and the quality of her writing—raised *Amor*'s circulation to 250. Unfortunately, this means that the *Amor* run is not generally available, except in *The Best of Susan Wood*, a small collection of some of her work. Sixteen essays, with original illustrations, comprise this delightful collection. Included are convention reports of an unusual calibre ("The convention came

together while I fell apart," from "Will Somebody Please Tell Bruce Gillespie I Really *Am* Sane Sometimes?"), tales of fannish intrigue ("Who *is* Will Straw?", from "My Two Cents Worth"), an article on how to make a fanzine, and one called "People's Programming", which traces her steady progress from "Honorary Man" to "Woman Fan".

For Susan, fandom was a place for creative and intellectual growth, yet it was not without its flaws. "They [male fans] talked to me, seriously, about books, politics, ideas. They did not (for the most part) play silly sex-role games, those games in which I was a misfit 'girl' in the 'real' mundane world. They accepted me as an Honorary Man."[5] This meant that as long as she ignored her sex, her sexuality, and especially sexual inequalities in both the fannish and the larger mundane world, Susan could function more or less on a par with male fans. These same fans, however, "let her do the dirty work in the chem lab (because she was more deft), the paste-up on the newspaper (because she was neater), and the shitwork on the fanzine (because she had more time)."[6]

Over the years Susan moved progressively from Honorary Man (including a period where she identified herself as "the wife of Mike"[7]) to a Woman Fan with more than a few of her own fannish talents. With her growing awareness of feminism and of herself as a woman, Susan began to speak out so that other fen, male and female, would hear. Writes John Berry:

> Susan never considered herself a joiner, or follower of any "line", but she felt that the personal was the political and that whatever you did to change people's minds —"niggling from within" more often than battering from without—was a political act.

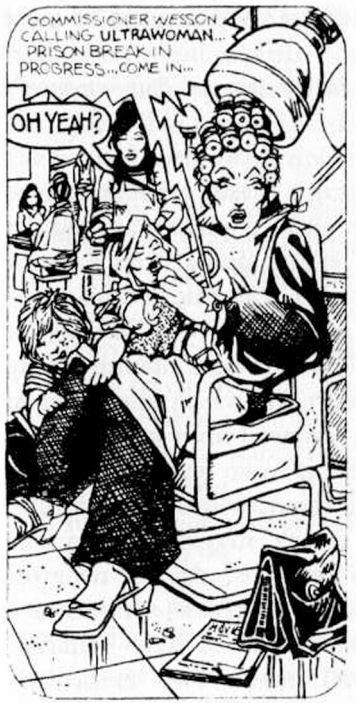
In this way she did much. She conceived a woman's amateur press association based on feminist assumptions. APAs, which originated as a place for the owners of presses to experiment with new kinds of type, have evolved into centrally located and distributed fanzine networks: each member mails her fanzine to the editor, complete with her original writing as well as responses to others' in previous mailings. A women's APA began as a

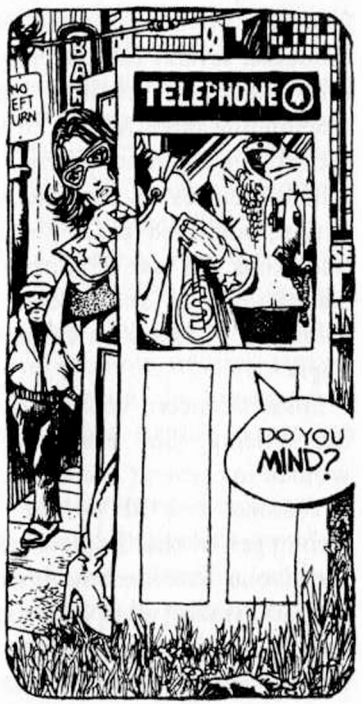
mixed APA; after a period of struggle it was restricted to women. For a long time it was one of the mainstages in science fiction for feminist debate; for mainstream SF, while lauding itself as a testing ground for new ideas, has long been a male-dominated arena, and as such showed a steadfast resistance to many feminist principles.

At conventions, Susan arranged for and participated in "Women and SF" panels. In part because of her work in this area, these panels have now become standard programming at many SF conventions. Another of her creations which still survives is the Room Of Our Own suite: an alternative to the hospitality suites one always finds at conventions. These suites, which she ensured were stocked with non-alcoholic punches and fresh fruit and vegetables (a departure from the norm of junk food and booze), offer a retreat to the women, a hiding place away from Darth Vader anti-feminists and Casanovas in Spock ears.

Naturally, women were affected by Susan's beliefs. Says Jo-Anne McBride, to whom Susan was both mentor and friend, "I learned a lot from her. . . she got me started on the track of feminism. I think she did that to a lot of women, by some really clear writing that says, 'this is why you should be a feminist; this is why you probably are but don't know it.'"

And yet Susan was something else as well. She was the usurping Duchess of (Western) Canadian Fandom. ("I don't even know what a D. of C.F. does."[8] Nobody else did either, by the way.) She was the earnest, inquisitive, energetic assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan who lay in the snow kicking up snow-angels while waiting for her ride to work. She was the woman at Rain—Vancouver's first 'relaxacon'—who arrived in the slinky purple dress and the feather boa. She handed out daffodils at the Melbourne train station, on a lark, you understand, to everyone—*everyone*—who was there. And she was the fanzine reviewer who entitled her column "Propeller Beanie" because "fans, in their self-image, wear propeller beanies, as a token of their proud, self-congratulatory silliness. . . . What could be sillier and more self-indulgent than a serious discussion of smudgy little magazines, mimeoed for a hundred readers, wherein the editor and friends praise each other, draw in-group cartoons, and





From *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch*

become, briefly, the centre of the universe? What could be more gloriously fun?"[9]

There is more. There are deeper, darker secrets. But we won't talk about the *Vogues* under the bed.

Even while producing a zine, writing a thesis, organizing cons and attending school, from the 1960s onward Susan was a regular and prolific contributor of reviews, reports, and articles to many amateur and professional magazines and academic journals. She wrote fanzine columns for *Amazing* and, later, *Algol/Starship*, for which she also wrote a controversial book review column during the last year of her life. This column, in which she raved at publishers for various misdemeanors, reviewed cover paintings and blurbs and otherwise made known her own opinions, earned Susan the loyalty of many readers and the criticism of others. One man, while allowing for freedom of speech, suggested piano wire as an adequate means of repaying her for her efforts. She reviewed Canadian literature for the *Pacific Northwest Review of Books*, and produced several critical essays on the works of Kate Wilhelm, John Newlove, Christie Harris, and more. Two particularly worthwhile pieces which cover much broader areas are "Women and SF", written for *Starship* magazine; and "God's Doormats", which focusses on rural women in pre-World War I Canadian fiction, published in *The Journal of Popular Culture*.[10] In 1980 Susan undertook the task of editing the *Room of One's Own* Fantasy and Science Fiction double issue, and editing Ursula K. LeGuin's collection of essays on fantasy and science fiction, *Language of the Night.*

Susan's concern with women's role/image is evident in most of her writing. She examined the popular media's portrayal of women in comics (*The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch*) and in SF ("Women and SF"). She traced these images back to the archetypes of the Triple Goddess. The Virgin, the Matron, and the Crone have become instead the "mutilated daughters of the Eternal Female [who] languish or stride, four colour, 7"x10" wish fulfillments, across the covers of the true indigenous American art form [comics]."[11] The Virgin has become a pale and sexless "good woman", a shrieking blonde victim to be rescued by the hero

after he endures great trials. The Matron has become either the dark, sexy "bad woman", who leads a man to sin and death through sexuality; the evil stepmother; the nagging wife or the dirty joke. The Crone is reduced to the sweet fairy godmother or the wicked witch, who only frightens children.

> Marvel super heroes succeed in both the adventure fantasy world [crime fighting in garish spandex] and in the "real" world [their secret identities as reporters, lawyers, etc.]. This movement between real and fantasy worlds gives comics and the ideals it represents tremendous credibility.... The comics' creators, proclaiming their relevance and with-it-ness, consciously exploit this credibility to win acceptance for various socially acceptable messages.... In fact, the only liberal cause consistently ridiculed or, at best, trivialized, is the Women's Movement.[12]

Susan also pointed out that comics and SF have been traditionally dominated by, and oriented to, white middle class males. Here the message to the readers was plain: boys beware of dynamic and independent women. The only vaguely strong heroine in comics was given the ominous name Black Widow. "Disturbingly sexy, potentially deadly, violent but vulnerable, the Widow embodies a whole culture's uneasy attitudes to dynamic women."[13]

Susan noted, however, that SF is veering away from the "princess, priestess and the galactic kitchen sink"[14] and achieving a more humanistic approach. She speculated that this is because of the great influx of women writers who are now creating strong, believable women characters and focusing on the personal and social implications of technology rather than on the technology itself.

> If the first generation of SF writers were primarily adventure story hacks, and the second generation were the science-trained men like Asimov, Heinlein, and Clarke, then perhaps the third generation, women and men, can be cultural anthropologists and sociologists, genuinely examining new forms of social organizations in the only fiction that allows us to play god. [15]

Around ten a.m., 12 November 1980, Susan Wood died of a combination of ASA and Naproxin, an anti-inflammatory drug used in the treatment of rheumatism. A few hours later Voyager 1 swooped as close as it would come to the giant planet Saturn and continued to speed outward from our solar system.

Susan might have left academia, had she lived. While university life was proving to be an increasing burden to her, her interest was being kindled in the areas of photojournalism and fiction writing. A book on children's literature was planned. She was editing a book of poetry. In the months following her death her writing continued to be published; her work on Ursula K. LeGuin's *Language of the Night* earned her a ninth Hugo nomination, and she was awarded the second Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Award, for her lifetime contribution to the field. In accordance with her will, a scholarship was set up in her name at Carleton University.

> Time: a timeless few hours on a summer day in San Francisco. Place: a quiet oasis, a courtyard filled with flowers; a helpful monk with a shaven head and a cup of coffee at his elbow.... I wanted to ask [him] several hundred questions; I wanted to ask him how he'd, apparently, found such serenity after upheaval; I wanted to bridge the gap between my world and his, as he sat two feet away eating soup, beneath the hanging flowers. I didn't.[16]

Jo-Anne McBride: "She didn't communicate a whole lot when she was unhappy. In a sort of a wonderful feminist way she'd say, 'I need some support right now', so we'd give her a big hug.... She sort of held it all in and, to be superficially analytic, she tried to dissipate it in her work. And it didn't work.

"She was hard to really get to know but there was just a kind, generous person in there who would do anything for you and expected loyalty in return. I miss her."

> I went outside, breathed in scent of cedar, moist grass, growth. I set off westward to find the totem pole grove beside the ocean.[17]

Notes

[1]*Algol/Starship.*
[2]Jerry Kaufman, ed., *The Best of Susan Wood.*
[3]*Ibid.*
[4]*Amor de Cosmos*
[5]Kaufman.
[6]*Ibid.*
[7]*Amor de Cosmos.*
[8]"Lines From Her Ladyship," in Kaufman.
[9]*Algol/Starship.*
[10]"God's Doormats," in *The Journal of Popular Culture,* 1975.
[11]Susan Wood, *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch* (T-K Graphics, 1974), illustrated by Terry Austin.
[12]*Ibid.*
[13]*Ibid.*
[14]*Algol/Starship.*
[15]*Ibid.*
[16]Kaufman.
[17]*Ibid.*

Illustrations for this article are by Terry Austin, from *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch.*

Back issues of *Algol/Starship* are available in the SF section of Vancouver Public Library, main branch, or from *Starship Magazine*, P.O. Box 4175, New York NY 10163 U.S.A.

The Best of Susan Wood is available from Jerry Kaufman, 4326 Winslow Place North, Seattle WA 98103 U.S.A. Price: $2.00 U.S. or equivalent. Postage not required "but would not be scoffed at." All profits donated to the Susan Joan Wood Memorial Scholarship Fund.

For invaluable help in deciphering "fanspeak," *The Neo-Fan's Guide to Science Fiction Fandom*, ed. Bob Tucker, available from Linda E. Bushyager, 1614 Evans Ave., Prospect Park PA 19076 U.S.A. Price: $1.00.

For information on Vancouver SF activities, including B.C. Science Fiction Association and V-Con (Vancouver's SF convention), contact Jo-Anne McBride, c/o P.O. Box 48478, Bentall Station, Vancouver, B.C. V7X 1A2.

Editors' Note: Copies of Susan Wood's Science Fiction and Fantasy Issue, *Vol. 6, Nos. 2 & 3 of* Room of One's Own, *are available for $4.00 each. Order from P.O. Box 46160, Station G, Vancouver, B.C. V6R 4G5.*