

The Fanzine Phenomenon

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"The mystique of the group—the surrogate of love." Thus Andre Maurois, summing up brilliantly one aspect of that remarkable fellow Balzac. It could almost have been written of that strange phenomenon, science fiction fandom—and its prime vehicle, the fanzine.

A fanzine is a magazine produced by fans. In particular, since they coined the Orwellian word in the first place, a fanzine is a magazine produced by science fiction fans. It is, one might say, a kind of little magazine—but not usually the kind of little magazine that Michael Wilding wrote about in this journal a few issues back. It is more like the sort of publication John Willett wrote about in the 1967 *Penrose Annual*: "Little magazines are essentially magazines—or vaguely magazine-like publications that can be anything from a young portfolio to a single sheet—which are produced for fun, love or conviction, in defiance of alleged economic good sense. . . . No editor, however, has yet managed to make such a magazine look other than shoddy . . .".

John Willett presumably had not seen many fanzines when he wrote that. In general, what he has to say about his little magazines is true of fanzines, but I have quite a few fanzines in my accumulation which are more elaborate in appearance than *The Australian Author*, for example.

Science fiction has existed for a long time—if you are in any doubt about that, read W. H. G. Armytage's excellent *Yesterday's Tomorrows* (a volume, incidentally, in which fanzines are referred to as such, without quotation marks or explanations)—but Hugo Gernsback gave it a name. (Well, actually he preferred "scientifiction", but that didn't last.) It is not a good name, but it serves. Since 1926, when Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* launched the genre as something distinct from the mainstream of literature, something special, there has grown with it the curious complex of relationships, the amorphous, heterogeneous, constantly changing yet undeniably existent universal non-organization, called fandom.

There was nothing unique about the fan clubs started by Gernsback, his successors and competitors. Fan clubs have existed for a long time,

and will spring up (or be organized) wherever there is enthusiasm (or a need for it). There is nothing unique about fan magazines either. They go along with the fan clubs. They serve their (usually commercial) purpose. They spring up, they flourish, they die. Their memorial is the nostalgia of the few.

The early sf fan clubs ranged from the commercially-promoted Captain Galaxy's Space League kind of thing to the British Interplanetary Society, which started off messing about with backyard rockets and is now a most respectable institution. Today there are still clubs orientated basically to particular magazines (such as the enormous Perry Rhodan club in Germany) or television series (such as the proliferation of Star Trek clubs, which still linger on). Most of these clubs, of course, consist of enthusiastic youngsters who sometime or other will decide that their studies or their jobs are more important, or will discover sex or pot or classical music or something, and they drift away from the club and become more or less normal people. Some, however, graduate into fandom.

The three recognizable outward manifestations of fandom are fanzines, conventions and clubs and groups of various kinds. I will not talk about conventions and clubs here, beyond mentioning that there are usually about three conventions each year in Australia, and last time I looked there were about a dozen clubs. The convention is the annual World SF Convention, and Australia is bidding this year in Toronto for the honour of holding it in 1975.

Fandom consists of people whose initial mutual interest is science fiction. They might lose interest in sf, but as long as they remain interested in each other they are fans. At any given time, probably most of the Big Name Fans have relegated sf to a minor interest. They have become more interested in marriage, religion, literature, politics, mediæval brass rubbings—it could be anything—but they remain fans. Along with the greenest 15-year-old neofan who has just been transported into ecstasy by the writings of Andre Norton, A. Bertram Chandler or J. G. Ballard (and won't shut up about it!), they attend conventions and enjoy themselves hugely, and they write for, publish or at least receive in the mail, fanzines.

Historically, the fanzine is said to have started when the sf magazines reduced or eliminated their letter columns. I do not know whether that is correct, but there is something of the personal quality of a letter about most fanzines, and certainly this is true of the best.

There are as many kinds of fanzine as there are people who publish them. In purpose, they range from the letterzine (a duplicated letter-

substitute) to the ultimate in fan publishing—the pro fanzine (large circulation, professional reproduction and content). At what point the pro fanzine turns into a prozine, I am not sure. The British *New Worlds* started as a kind of fanzine, became a quite professional magazine by issue No. 4, was impossible to label in its latter years, and is now a quarterly paperback. The Spanish *Nueva Dimension* is widely distributed, most handsomely produced, and it pays (un-handsomely) for material, but I regard it as basically a fanzine. The Japanese fanzine *Uchujin*, the Hungarian *Pozitron* and many others, are similarly professional in approach.

In subject matter, fanzines are as diverse as the world we live in. If you can think of it, someone has written about it in a fanzine. In writing style, the range is from almost illiterate to surpassingly brilliant, but you do not find much of those extremes. The average is workmanlike. In appearance, fanzines range from the sloppiest, most indecipherable mess to utterly professional work, superbly laid-out, sometimes using full colour artwork. Again, the average is workmanlike, the majority using stencil duplicators of some kind. Experimentation is characteristic. Fanzine production is a craft. For some, the medium is far more important than the message, the craft more important than the content.

A special kind of fanzine is the apazine. Amateur publishing associations (hence “apa”) were not invented by and are not unique to fandom, but the activity flourishes here as perhaps nowhere else. Such an association usually has an “official editor” or mailing officer, to whom each member sends a stated number of copies of his publication for distribution to the rest of the members. Communication, the interplay of diverse personalities, is the essence of the tannish apa. Apart from talking and drinking with fans, this is for me the most pleasant and rewarding of fan activities. I am a member of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (USA), the Off-trail Magazine Publishers Association (UK) and the Australian & New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association. There are many others.

Fanzines are published just about wherever sf is read—and that means practically everywhere. The majority probably (the English-language majority certainly) emanates from America. How many fanzines are there? I have no idea. Thousands perhaps. For a start, the three apas I belong to have a total membership of about 120. The “Fanzines received” column of the American newszine *Locus* usually runs for several pages. Frequency of publication? Many have maintained a monthly schedule for years, some even weekly, but most appear irregu-

lary. Lee Hoffman's *Science Fiction Five-Yearly* has never missed a deadline.

It would be difficult to say how many fanzines are published in Australia. Amongst the better local publications are Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary* (nominated for the Hugo Award last year, and our best and most regular fanzine); David Grigg's *The Fanarchist*, Eric Lindsay's *Gegenschein*, John Alderson's *Chao*, Ron Clarke's *The Mentor*, Dennis Stocks's *Mithral*, John Foyster's *Chunder*, Shayne McCormack's *Something Else*, Bill Wright's *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* and my own *Scythrop*. All the local clubs and groups publish things from time to time. If you would like to contact any of these publishers, write to the Space Age Bookshop, 317 Swanston St, Melbourne. (The Space Age is a kind of four-dimensional fanzine, published daily except Sundays, thinly disguised as a commercial enterprise.)

At the 11th Australian Science Fiction Convention in Sydney last August, I led a discussion on the subject "Why Fanzines?" I was delighted to find no less than sixteen fanzine publishers in my audience, including our American guest of honour, Lealeigh Luttrell, and I asked them in turn why they went to the immense effort and expense of publishing these things. Leigh Edmonds said something about weaving baskets (and promptly went to sleep); Bruce Gillespie, talked profoundly about communication; John Foyster said it kept people off the streets. After badgering them all, and receiving all the expected answers, they turned on me and demanded to know why I publish fanzines. I said: "Because I am lonely." There was a momentary silence, until someone realized there must be more to it than that and asked whether I would stop publishing fanzines if I stopped being lonely. I sidestepped the question, and answered it, simultaneously. Every now and then I want to give up this foolishness, and whenever I feel this way my immediate impulse is to rush to the typewriter and start producing a fanzine explaining why I have stopped publishing fanzines. Make of that what you will.

"It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan." Robert Bloch said it, years ago, in a story called "A Way of Life", in *Fantastic Universe*. The pride is discernible immediately. I am proud to have published original material by Bob Bloch, Bert Chandler, Ursula Le Guin, George Turner, David Compton, Mungo MacCallum, Jim Blish, John Brunner, John Boyd, Mike Moorcock, the late Ted Carnell—and a host of others, famous, not yet famous and never to be famous. The loneliness is less easily discerned.

The trufan finds in fandom "the mystique of the group"—something he has possibly experienced before, in a church (as I did), at university, in some association or other, and has lost. Or perhaps he has never experienced it before. It doesn't matter. Here in fandom he mixes with an elite group. He meets Bert Chandler or Isaac Asimov at a convention. He gets a letter from Brian Aldiss or Stanislaw Lem. He asks L. Sprague de Camp for an article for his fanzine, and gets it by return mail. He does not know it yet perhaps, but this is his "surrogate of love".

When, if, he finds love—personal, immediate love—he might very well give up fandom and rejoin mundania. Or he might continue his fanactivity, realizing that love is universal and fandom one of its multifarious forms. It depends a lot on what he wants from life.

Applying Andre Maurois's words to fandom is, I think, not unseemly or inappropriate. The mystique of the group *can* be the surrogate of love, and for many of my fannish friends is just that. But for some, the group becomes a means of spreading love. I like to think of fandom in that way, and to regard the fanzine as the best way for me to do a bit of that spreading.

And—pardon me, Dr Johnson—who ever wrote, except for love?

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