

The Sphere

Vol. 201 no. 1, is published for the 230th Mailing of The Southern Fandom Press Alliance by Don Markstein, P.O. Box 55148, Phoenix, AZ 85032, (602)485-7860, ddmartstein@cox.net, don@toonopedia.com, <http://www.uncadonald.com>, <http://www.toonopedia.com>. (And I remember when most people didn't even put phone numbers in their SFPFA addresses.) Headline type: New Order Engraved. (The body is, as usual, in Lucida Bright, which I think is one of the better straight Romans.)

This morning, I heard a newscaster mention Al Gore's alleged defeat in the election of 2000, together with the observation that he's still "whining" about it. Exact word! Straight news! Not even an opinion piece! And of course, nobody batted an eye, except me.

Despite this and many similar incidents, the myth of Liberal Media continues to be believed by many Americans, some of whom actually appear to be reasonably intelligent, aside from that one clear example of sheer, gullible stupidity. One guy on a message board said all he ever hears in the news is desperate hope that the Liberals will save us from the evil schemes of Republicans.

I responded by beseeching the Liberals to save us from the Patriots Act. Actually, I added, I beseech **anybody** to save us from the Patriots Act, but if it's the Liberals who offer the best hope of saving us from the evil schemes of Republicans, then I beseech the Liberals.

Funny how they always dress up the most invidious schemes to destroy freedom and privacy with names like "Patriots Act". Anybody who claims to "distrust" government, and isn't **seriously alarmed** by all this "Homeland Security" talk, is a liar. (Another thing that alarms everyone who truly distrusts government is the fact that all three branches are now controlled by the same party, which will make it much easier for them to do the things we distrust them for, but that's neither here nor there.)

Meanwhile, I see Al Qaeda is demanding the U.S. reverse certain policies, or there'll be more terrorism on U.S. soil. Geez, how stupid are these guys? Can't they see the U.S. government doesn't care about terrorism on U.S. soil? That just gives them more excuses for things like the Patriots Act. It certainly doesn't threaten the government, or any individuals high in it.

And another war with Iraq looms, tho it's hard to tell why. Certainly, the excuses the administration offers are far too thin to justify any such thing — not that it's very clear just what their excuses, which change from week to week as old ones collapse under internal contradictions, are.

Imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction? Aside from the fact that the biggest imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction comes from Washington, how did it

recently become more imminent? Ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda? But Al Qaeda **despises** secular governments in Moslem countries. Anyway, if ties with Al Qaeda are grounds for attack, what the hell is keeping U.S. troops out of Saudi Arabia?

(But those whose faith leads them to deny the possibility of an ally of U.S. oil companies being involved may take heart. The recent revelation of direct ties between the Saudi royal family and the September 11 hijackers hasn't made me the least bit more convinced of their complicity.)

As one columnist succinctly put it, these excuses (aside from "he tried to kill my daddy", which I, for one, find less than compelling) reek of ex-post-facto. First came wanting the war, then came dreaming up a reason for it.

Ya gotta be a real True Believer to swallow that stuff — especially starting with the point of view of wanting smaller government. But there are apparently an awful lot of Orthodox Republicanist True Believers.

Work Prospects

The news broke on November 18 that Disney comic books will once again be published in the U.S. Gemstone Publishing, a subsidiary of Diamond Distributors, has **finally** signed up as their new licensor, after negotiations that have been going on ever since Gladstone dropped it, and after having allegedly been mere minutes away from signing for at least the past couple of years.

Exactly what they're going to fill them with hasn't been announced, but it's a good bet they'll reprint a lot of Barks and a lot of previously unseen European stories — especially since they've hired the Gladstone guys to package the comics for them, and that's what Gladstone was doing.

This bodes well for seeing my own European stuff in print, in English. It also bodes well for more "American script" work, i.e., rewriting dialog in idiomatic American-style English. A lot of the current European material doesn't need that (having been written by Americans (like me) in the first place), but quite a bit is more than a little stilted, suitable more for translating into other languages than being read for enjoyment.

Maybe I can even talk them into doing more of those Dutch Bucky Bug stories I enjoyed scripting during Gladstone's last couple of years.

The first two titles will be *Uncle Scrooge* and *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories*. I wonder if they'll maintain the numbering — *Comics & Stories*, which spans four or five publishers, is well past its 600th issue, and I'd like to see its rich legacy acknowledged in the numbering. It'd also be nice to see *Donald Duck* and *Mickey Mouse* titles, the latter if only to increase the odds of my own stories turning up in it.

Meanwhile, I'm still plugging away at Egmont. I had eight stories for 2002, and am still working on two of them, which makes for a very busy end of the year — which is how I like it, but that's not so good for my SFPA output. Everything should wrap up by about mid-December, in a furious flurry of activity, and then I can take a couple of weeks off and hibernate with the rest of the world until business starts again in January.

Family Affairs

A friend of mine, Bob Steinhilber, recently remarked that I know more people who commit suicide than anybody else he's ever met. Bob and I have known each other since about mid-1999, which is when Michael Deitenbeck, my "distant in-law" (as I described him at the time), shot himself. Actually, I'd never even met the boy, tho I did once talk with his father (whose brother married my cousin), but we were still sort of related, and it did have an impact on my immediate family.

A year or so after that, Blake Shira, whom I'd been dealing comic books with (both buying and selling) for years, did the same. Blake and I weren't really close friends, but we'd see each other a few times a year, and I sure do miss him. He was one of the few people I knew who could talk about comics at my level.

The occasion for the remark was my 27-year-old nephew, Adam Clifton, closing himself up in a garage and turning on the car, which he did a week or two ago as I write this (mid-October). I'm not quite sure of the exact day, because everything has been kind of a blur since then. I could look it up, of course, because it's duly entered in the family tree database, but who cares?

Of course, you always think, was there anything I could have done to prevent this? Equally of course, there isn't — too many things have to come together for anything like this to happen, so it's unlikely any one person would say or do exactly the right thing at exactly the right time.

But not impossible, so you can never quite dismiss it.

In this case, I'm thinking of a conversation we had in June (I know it was June because I men-

tioned Karen's upcoming high school graduation). Looking back, I can see he was in fairly dire straits financially, and wasn't doing too well emotionally either, but at the time I didn't pick up on it. Of course, my saying there there, it's all right, which is about what I'd be able to do, doesn't seem likely to have derailed anything that built over a period of months, but the vanishingly slim possibility will inevitably continue to haunt me.

I understand that's fairly normal among people who know suicides, and I do seem to know too damn many.

I said he was my nephew, tho blood-wise, he was GiGi's nephew. I did watch him grow up, tho, and he sure seemed like a nephew to me. Most of her family is in Missouri, but Adam and his older sister, Crystal, had put down roots in the Phoenix area, and they were just about the only family we had within socializing distance (tho being the elderly relatives people their age try to avoid, we didn't see as much of them as we'd like).

Naturally, the town quickly filled up with in-laws. We were expecting some truly unpleasant doings, because in the face of something you can't affect and just don't want to deal with, some people find solace in blaming. Fortunately, in the two days it took them to drive here, they mellowed out some.

Needless to say, I want to grab the little idiot by the shoulders and just **shake him!** What a jerk! He had **so much** going for him! Not least of which was a woman who loved him (even through the considerable turmoil in their house lately), and the complete adoration of two very young boys (the older one hers, the younger theirs). Which, of course, brings up the question, how could he do such a thing to **them?**

Boy, has my opinion of him gone down!

It took about a week to get him into the ground. I attribute this incompetence to amateurism — you'd think these people had never handled a job like that before.

No, wait — they hadn't. Crystal and Bekkah, Addam's wife, were completely out of their depth in dealing with this sort of thing. It fell mostly on Crystal, at least partly because Bekkah was practically a basket case. Not that Crystal was much better, but both were models of composure compared to Crystal's 13-year-old son, Kyle — when he heard the news, he went screaming off into the night, and was next heard from when the neighbor whose house he wound up at called to ask what his incoherent ravings were all about.

I wonder if suicide runs in families. Not genetically, necessarily — I'm thinking mostly of those two impressionable little boys (2 and 4 years old)

who will grow up knowing what he did, and maybe get the idea that when things are really bad, abandoning your family like that is an acceptable option.

Nathan

Speaking of family affairs, we're taking my grandson on a visit. Rachel, Karen, Nathan and I are going to my brother's house for Thanksgiving. (GiGi is looking forward to having the house to herself.) He's at an incredibly cute age — he's pretty much given up crawling, but still has that unsteady gait that comes from not fully knowing how to walk. (Guess that's why they're called toddlers, huh.)

And he'll be able to appreciate the spread. Last Thanksgiving, all he was eating was baby formula, but now, he can chew up practically anything. He still subsists mostly on Gerber products, but we always include him at dinner, and cut whatever we're eating into Nathan-size bites. He even expresses preferences — whatever he's given, he'll pick out the pieces of meat first.

He's a year old now, and I'm finally getting used to the idea of being a grandfather.

He & She

Those following my Ongoing Saga may recall this as the title of a proposed comic book series, about a wholesome, loving young couple whose hobby is having sex in odd places, done in pantomime. The script for the first 24-page story has been written for years, but I haven't been able to get enough commitment from an artist to see it drawn. (The fact that it's spec work is, of course, a major deterrent.)

It now looks like Bob Steinhilber (mentioned in the first paragraph a couple of sections back) is going to draw it. He's gone over the script and thinks it'll make a hilarious comic book, and he's between large projects right now. Bob's artwork, in various styles, can be seen here and there on the Internet, if you're interested enough to look. For this project, I favor a bold, cartoony style, detailed enough to tell the story, but without a lot of distracting noodling, and he agrees.

He was here the other day for a story conference, and did sketches of the first four pages. Just thumbnails, but they look great! I lent him a couple of *Love & Rockets* books, which have exactly the sort of look I'd like to see on this.

Maybe you'll actually be able to read the story in another year or so.

Don Markstein's Toonopedia™

I can tell the thing has been around a while now. I've already received a notice of the domain registration's imminent expiration, with an urgent plea to renew it immediately. I expect to get a few more of those, from various domain registration outfits and at various prices, between now and February, when it actually is scheduled to expire.

I've been getting invitations to join Webrings. If it were paying more than its own expenses, I'd take the trouble to seek the things out, but as it is, I don't think it's worth the effort. (I've scarcely even lifted a finger to promote it, and yet, I averaged more than 10,000 page views per day in October.) Still, when they go to the trouble of asking me, I'll be polite and join. The most prominent one isn't up yet — Universal Studios is going to link to my "Incredible Hulk" page when they start seriously publicizing their movie about him.

New articles since the last SFPA mailing: The All Winners Squad; Atom Ant; The Atomic Knights; The Creeper; Defenders of the Earth; Eck! the Cat; Foxy Grandpa; Hourman; Johnny Thunder; Kid Colt, Outlaw; Maus; Mr. Abernathy; Mr. Terrific; MGM Studios cartoons; Rick O'Shay; Ripley's Believe It or Not; Smitty; Sparky Watts; Tim Tyler's Luck; Vigilante; Wally Gator; Winnie the Pooh; two series called "Three Mouseketeers"; one series called "Two Mouseketeers" and no series called "One Mouseketeer". New total: 546.

Not too many obscuros this time. Mr. Abernathy and Ozark Ike both went up on their anniversaries, when I didn't have much else for "Today in Toons". One of the "Three Mouseketeers" is pretty obscure, but it kind of had to go in when the other, which is not all that obscure, did. Two Mouseketeers was based on a cartoon that won an Oscar, so how obscure can that one be?

Foxy Grandpa isn't nearly as obscure as the fact that practically no living person has ever heard of it might lead one to think. In fact, it fits one of my objective criteria for fame, being a newspaper strip that started before World War I, and lasted more than ten years. Sooner or later, it was bound to go in, just like the later strips that last 30 years or more, the comic book characters that run at least 20 years, the TV cartoons that last at least five and others that meet my objective criteria for fame. (Besides, it was a funny strip, at least in small doses.)

At the other end of the spectrum are such items as Winnie the Pooh and Believe It or Not,

which are regular household words. I'm making a serious effort to get that class of toon all squared away — in recent months, I've also done Mad magazine, Smurfs, Ziggy, and The Chipmunks. Guess that means I'll be writing articles on a bunch of Disney features in the near future. Other than that, I think I've got just about all the "household word" entries done.

An odd little anomaly has cropped up recently. The Black Canary is one of my top 10 or 12 articles for November so far, and I can't figure out where those hits are coming from. Surely, people aren't seeking her out over Tom & Jerry, Casper, Tweety and the others that a lot of folks have actually heard of (even tho she is a regular on a weekly TV show now). Somebody very popular must have linked directly to that page, but I can't seem to find out who. Apparently, this putative link is too new for Google to find it, but maybe it'll last long enough to turn up there.

Eve Ackerman:

So, you're one of those writers who just start writing, and don't necessarily know where they're going with it, huh? I've never been able to do that, myself, and am amazed that anyone can. I've got to know what comes next to do any kind of decent job on what's happening now, and I feel handicapped if I don't know the ending from the time I begin writing. I've had to abandon quite a few projects that read fairly well, because couldn't figure out how to wind them up..

Not that I can't modify the end as I go along — but if I don't know where I'm going, I can't get there. People who can write a scene, then write the next, and eventually have it come to a conclusion, have a talent that is simply lacking in me.

Last week, I was having trouble writing the synopsis to a Mickey Mouse story (that's the second of three stages, and the one where the story is laid out page by page and pretty much carved in stone), because I didn't have a clear enough view of the ending. I also had a go-ahead to script (the third stage) on another story, so I took a few days off and knocked that one out. The script is a much larger work than the synopsis, but I zipped right through it because I knew exactly where I was going. While doing so, I thought of an ending for the other one, so when I got back to it, that one came right out.

The ending pretty much is the story for me. If I don't have that, I'm just up a creek.

Ned Brooks:

I use WordPerfect 8, but set it to save files in 5.1 format. That's the last one where the data was

saved in ASCII. Later versions convert everything to something else, which without the software to convert it back, appears on the screen as Greek letters; so if for some reason WordPerfect can't read the file, I can't just rescue the stuff in another program. It's been years since I've had to do that, but I keep on saving in 5.1, because you never know, I might, and since 5.1 supports all the features I use, it doesn't cost anything.

I don't see "There's a hell of a good universe next door — let's go" as even remotely like the use of the word "universe" as currently applied to fictional worlds in which many stories take place (e.g., Star Trek Universe, Marvel Universe). I'm still waiting for an example of the word used in that sense before my 1970 CAPA-alpha article. You can come up with all the plausibility arguments you want, but I'm looking for an example of that use of the word.

I'm not disputing the idea that it might have been invented by several people independently. I just haven't seen any real indication that it was. In any case, **somebody** used it that way **first**. I can say with near certainty that I used it without having seen it used that way before. Therefore, I don't see how I can avoid entertaining the possibility that I was the first to do so, unless I'm shown otherwise. And only an **example** will qualify as showing me otherwise.

Frankly, I wish you **would** come up with one. At least that way, I'd know for sure. But until somebody does, the possibility is still open that I **might** have been its original coiner. And the longer it takes to come up with one, the stronger the possibility becomes.

I read a couple of the Lemony Snicket books. They're lightweight, but entertaining enough to keep me turning pages. But they're not so compelling I want to read a whole lot more of them.

There's no need to assume Castro's regime is now propped up by Satan. I'm sure the Republican faith is strong enough to foster belief that it's still supported by the Soviet Union. Look how easily they believed in Liberal Media, even while we were all being constantly bombarded with anti-Clinton diatribes. I don't see why the non-existence of the Soviet Union should bother them.

Pledging allegiance to the flag is a modern form of ancient Roman emperor worship. I generally maintain respectful silence while others are doing it, as I would for any other form of worship, but I don't participate. A couple of nice Christian ladies once harangued me about that at a PTA meeting, but I told them pretty much what you just said, connecting it with idolatry, and they became very, very confused.

Gary Brown:

You say this Dottie person, who is married to Alan Hutchinson, went off to try out the new computer . . . So what you're telling us, in other words, is that **Alan Hutchinson** lives in a house where there is **e-mail!!!?**

And you haven't given us the address yet?

I don't think my kids will throw out my old zines after I'm dead. In fact, they read my zines regularly as they come out (and have for years — they started by just picking up the ones lying around the house) — if anything, they'll be glad for a chance to read the back issues.

As far as I can tell, getting mentioned on fark.com had absolutely no long-term effect on Toonopedia™ traffic. I just suddenly had five or six times my usual hits, next day it was down to half that, and within a couple more days it was completely normal. It's possible one or two kept coming back to explore the site, or told a friend about it, or linked to it from his own site, but I have no reason to think that happened. Really, one blip and it was over.

The right-wingers who sneer at ordinary people for voting on the basis of their own economic well-being get absolutely no respect from me. Huge tax breaks for rich people never influenced **their** votes, you betcha.

And of course, economic policy is just one more element of their religious convictions. They know what's best, because their faith tells them — and they know it with such certainty, they openly jeer at anyone who says otherwise. Every time they get a chance to put their beliefs into practice, the economy heads straight for the toilet — but by gosh, they've got **faith!**

On a side note, why would anyone be surprised that Clinton survived in office on the basis of the economy? Wasn't "It's the economy, stupid!" his unofficial campaign slogan?

Randy Cleary:

A 266 with 128 Mb of RAM and a 4-gig hard drive, huh? Oh, that is so 20th century! But for \$25? Man, that's great! At that kind of price, who needs state of the art? They could do some pretty fancy computing back in 1998.

We have a couple of new computers too. GiGi brought a pile of parts home when her office moved, and we (with the essential help of Rachel's boyfriend) combined them with some parts we had lying around to make a 266 and a 3-something — which makes them the slowest computers in the house (total of four), but they should meet the kids' needs admirably. Through

the magic of ethernet cards, we're all hooked up to the same cable modem, so at long last we have no squabbling over who gets on the Internet.

(Of course, that last statement is contingent on Nathan not putting in for computer time. But he's a year old now, and could develop urgent computing needs any minute.)

Reinhardt:

There is an entire genre of conspiracy theory that concerns AIDS and how it's transmitted. Some of the motivations (which are the most interesting part of any good conspiracy theory, and the area where bad ones are most implausible) concern allocation of research money. Others concern the origin of AIDS itself. Most deal in one way or another with alleged holes in the scientific reasoning behind what we know about AIDS, including the connection between AIDS and HIV. And the difficulty of adequately explaining how it's transmitted, given what science supposedly knows about it, is prime fodder for them. Hank asks some very good questions about it, and Toni's answers to them (which sound a little like a government handout, but that's not surprising) merely raise more questions. Personally, I just look at the inadequacy of all the explanations I hear, and wonder what the hell is going on.

As for using AIDS as an excuse to inquire into people's sexual practices — like most Republicans, especially of the Orthodox variety, Hank lets his concern for the tax money involved lead him to justify regulating personal behavior and trampling on privacy rights. People who favor less government and more freedom, on the other hand, see the remedy in reducing or eliminating tax funding.

It's the same with illegal immigrants using state services — those who say they favor smaller government see their alleged absorption of our tax money as a reason to crack down on illegal immigration, whereas those who do favor smaller government see it as a reason to crack down on the areas where it's possible for them, or anyone else, to absorb our money.

It's truly amazing how broadly the tax excuse can be applied to regulating behavior they don't like. A couple of months ago, I saw an exchange where a young man complained about the possibility of being drafted for Bush's Iraq adventurism, and made allusion to the 1960s draft candidates who fled to a freer country. He was given a severe dressing-down by a guy who could get a job as Republican Stereotype Poster Boy, who, among other things, told him in no uncertain terms that if he ever set foot in Canada, he'd

better not come back and soak up any tax money from patriotic, war-loving Americans. (Huh?!!)

Tho they give lip service to reducing government spending, the closest any Republican ever came to actually **doing** it was when Reagan's administration slowed down the rate of increase. In reality, they **love** funding things that give them excuses to regulate personal behavior.

All of which makes me wonder -- what part of "smaller government" do you True Believing Republicanists not understand?

Hank's "objections" to racial profiling are cute, but like most supposedly-humorous jeering at stereotyped liberals (I laugh out loud whenever I see the word "peepul", which refers to stereotypes that **might** have been relevant as recently as the late 1970s, i.e., about when Republican thinking completed its ossification) they miss the point. When people walking down the street are picked up by policemen, who have no reason to suspect them of KKK terrorism other than the color of their skin, **then** white people will be victims of racial profiling.

And what's this in #79? Why, for heaven's sake, you're arguing in favor of government funding for railroads! I agree it's a very pleasant way to travel, but can't think of any morally defensible reason those who use it shouldn't be required to pay the full cost of a ticket, including their share of all expenses. How does wanting the government to fund things you like square with wanting less government?

By the way -- I don't recall what you said in response to my question a couple of mailings ago. If Elian Gonzales should not have been returned to his custodial parent in Cuba, then what do you say to the custodial parents whose children have been kidnaped to Iran?

Gary Robe:

Cherokee is another language that has a written form, the exact date of introduction of which is known.

Interesting pros and cons on war with Iraq. But the Bottom Line is -- who cares what you or I think? If Bush, Cheney, etc. decide to go to war, they're going to do so; and if they don't they won't. All the rights and wrongs in the world, and all the debate over pros and cons, won't have a thing to do with their decision. Considering how they achieved office, you don't think they feel an obligation to the voters (whom they probably think of as "peepul"), do you?

I **love** the expression "jump the shark". Pithy, colorful, expressive -- it's everything the writer in me likes in a phrase. And the concept is one the

language needs. Lately, I've gotten in the habit of watching reruns of *The Practice* during my noon break from work. GiGi watches the prime time version, but I haven't seen very many episodes from the past two or three years. The other day, I asked her if it later jumped the shark. I'm not sure I could have asked the question quite so succinctly without the phrase.

GiGi uses one of those sleep apnea machines. It's kind of a hassle, since she has to carry it around whenever she sleeps away from home, but it **really** improves her ability to sleep! She reports many beneficial effects, some of which were completely unexpected. Hope it works out for you too.

mike weber:

What is Opera, and should I consider getting an affiliate program with them? (I've already tried Commission Junction, and the result was zilch.)

I have an Amazon affiliate ID, and occasionally get a check from them for other things. But at present, it would be a stupendous effort to get the affiliate program I want going on the Toonopedia™ site. It would also require knowing a good deal more about HTML than I do -- if I could set the pages up the way I want them, I might start putting it together on an incremental basis. Maybe I'll make it a project over the Xmas holidays to get at least one prototype page done.

I gather that clown Patrick J. Gibbs isn't as funny in person as he is when he writes for Toni's zine. Too bad. But if you keep on pointing out his internal contradictions, and the areas where he ignores facts that don't support his point of view, laughing as you do, maybe you can at least get him to manufacture an excuse for dismissing anything you say, so he'll ignore you. That's pretty giggle-inducing, as I've found with Hank and Toni. They simply refuse to turn loose of the notion that I insulted Toni's zine title, despite the fact that I've explained the misunderstanding and apologized for my part in it. (Even without that, it's a pretty flimsy excuse, but when you're unable to answer a guy's questions without violating your religion, any excuse is a good one.)

Next time that troll on rec.arts.sf.fandom brings up the "what 'is' is" routine, point out that Clinton is the one who got it **right**. If he's even **trying** to make sense, that should shut him up. Not that it **will** shut him up, but at least you can have a good laugh when it doesn't.

The type's pretty large this time, but I still had ten pages before formatting. So minac is, as usual, made, and it even worked out so I don't have to ignore a lot of white space at the bottom.