

Swill Online



Fandom

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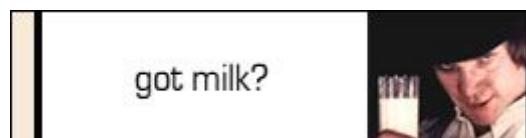
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Editorial

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Last year, when I first mused the notion of reviving Swill, an old droog of mine asked the question -- "Why? Just because it's the 20th anniversary, or because you want to piss off fandom?" At the time, I really didn't have a solid answer. I shrugged and replied, "Mostly, 20th anniversary." And that was that.

I've given the question some thought -- not much, but some -- since then.

Back in 1981, the primary reasons for publishing Swill were:

- because it really ticked off SF fandom in Ontario, Canada
- because it was fun
- because of the local notoriety I received

As I mulled over the re-launch of Swill in the latter months of 2000, the primary reasons for this endeavour were:

- pure nostalgia
- the hope that it would be fun
- miscellaneous reasons

In essence, the revival of Swill was to be a retrospective, an opportunity to gather in and re-connect with some of the old contributors for on final "kick-at-the-can". Nostalgia, period.

However, as the time ticks down toward launch the miscellaneous reasons began to creep forward in prominence.

A nostalgic retrospective just wouldn't be true to the spirit of Swill. In fact, it would be inappropriate to say the least. Swill was a vicious, angry, intentionally offensive, silly, irreverent, and obnoxious series of attacks on the science fiction genre and, in particular, science fiction fandom. Any revival of Swill would have to embody that same spirit...

The problem is, I have changed -- twenty years will do that. I ceased to be a science fiction fan in 1986, undergoing the quiet transformation into a reader. Of the literature that I read, a significant portion continues to be within the genre of science fiction, but I am no longer a science fiction fan.

With the exception of an 18 month period between 1992 and 1993, when I was performing participant observation research on subcultural groups -- including science fiction fandom -- that host annual public special events, I have had no connexion with science fiction fandom. As a part of my life, science fiction fandom has become, well; completely irrelevant. The concerns, ideals, mores, and virtues -- such as they are -- of this subcultural group have ceased to be mine. I have no anger directed toward science fiction fandom, only mild contempt.

A contempt that arises, as the old cliché says, out of my familiarity with the subject group rooted within experience and observation. This contempt is largely not even specific to science fiction fandom, but is shared with other hobby/leisure based subcultural groups that exhibit the same traits of useless tribalism. Still some of this contempt is specific to science fiction fandom and its ideology that the members of this subculture are somehow inherently superior to the rest of us that exist outside of it.

Nevertheless, it is a mild contempt. Mild, as it rarely crosses my mind because I don't ordinarily even think about these subcultural groups, let alone science fiction fandom specifically. Hardly the sort of feeling to use as the foundation for the re-launch of Swill.

And yet... There is something older and deeper that rises out of the backbrain. A primal and primate behaviour that possesses a certain pleasure.

There is a short sequence of film that I used to show when I taught intro Anthropology. In this clip there are two young chimps and some chickens. The first chimp would toss out some feed to the chickens. The chickens would approach the two chimps as they gobbled the feed. When the chickens got within reach, the second chimp would whack the closest chicken with a stick. In a flurry of flapping and clucking the chickens would scatter. The first chimp would toss out some more feed and the chickens -- being chickens -- would once again go after the feed and draw close to the pair of chimpanzees. I have no idea as to how long the two chimps let this loop continue nor do I confess to truly know what these chimps were thinking and feeling. I will offer the opinion that I think that they were playing a game. They were teasing the chickens.

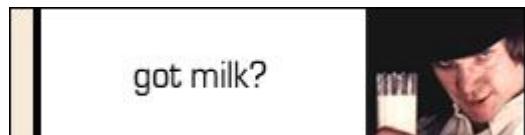
And that is why Swill has returned. The major reason for reviving Swill is so that I can play a game, a game called teasing science fiction fandom. I think that this game will be more akin to disturbing an anthill than teasing chickens -- I'm not certain as to what

would make good feed -- but I sure do intend to have some fun. With hope, some of the old contributors will decide to join in the game too.

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The State of the Genre: some observations

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Over the past few months, I have perused many science fiction fan sites on the internet. According to the general consensus within the subculture:

- science fiction is **dead**
- science fiction is **dying**
- science fiction has **gone downhill**
- science fiction is in **crisis**

Rubbish. Looking backward over the past score of years and comparing them to the present, the genre has never been healthier.

In reference to the first two fannish claims, I present the following observations.

Within a medium-sized Canadian city (population 300,000) that does not have a specialty store devoted to the genres of science fiction and fantasy, in most general bookshops, science fiction and fantasy command, on average, a larger proportion of shelf space than any other fiction genre. Only the romance section offers any real competition in the quest for shelf space. True, individual stores will vary, but on average, science fiction and fantasy have larger sections. This pattern is very apparent in the book superstores, such as Chapters and Indigo.

Now, it is also true that the majority of small general book retailers, such as Coles here in Canada, tend to stock their science fiction sections with a predominance of Star Trek, Star Wars, and other media related novels and novelisations along with copies of genre bestsellers. That said, these are general book retailers. I do not expect to find the re-issue of Ellison's *Deathbird Stories* in the science fiction section any more than I would expect to find a re-issue of Solzhénitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the literature section at my local Coles. However, if I want a copy of either book I can order it into the store or purchase it online.

There are more science fiction books being published than ever before. In the magazine trade -- while the fates of individual science fiction and fantasy magazines ebb and flow -

- there is an increase in the number of professional science fiction and fantasy magazines published.

Media science fiction has established a definite niche for itself to the extent that science fiction has become -- just like medical, lawyer, and police shows -- a standard genre on television. Similar for film. And, like the other standard genres, one can expect that there will be at least one new television series produced and at least one new film released each year that is science fiction.

There is little observable evidence to indicate that the genre is dead or dying.

The claims that science fiction has "gone downhill" or that it is "in crisis" are highly subjective statements. Usually, these claims refer to the decline in the frequency that new material is being published within the claimant's preferred subgenre of science fiction -- be that hard science, military, science fantasy, "New Wave", or whatever. The popularity of individual subgenres fluctuates over time and the current popularity of any given subgenre is not a reflection of the health of the genre as a whole.

What these doom and gloom claims are actually in reference to is the perceived loss of science fiction as the special literature to specific group of people -- science fiction fandom. Science fiction fandom no longer owns the genre; nor has it for quite some time, but the belief that fandom owns science fiction is now much harder to maintain with any degree of rationality.

If there is any group that can be said to own the genre, it is the readers -- be they casual or steady. And most readers are not fans. And a good thing too. If the genre had to depend solely upon fandom as its audience, it would have become extinct decades ago. Fandom itself is not a large enough market to sustain the genre. Readers sustain the genre. And the overwhelming majority of science fiction readers are happily oblivious to the existence of fandom. Some have had a taste of fandom, usually through attending a local convention, and found it to be either unsatisfactory or unpalatable and therefore do not seek to repeat the experience. And others are ex-fans, such as myself.

While science fiction readers tend to be unaware or indifferent to fandom, fandom tends to harbour a strong dislike and distrust for those that are "just readers". Readers, well, aren't fannish. They don't know all the subcultural acronyms and sayings, they call the genre sci-fi, they don't know what the regional convention circuit is, they don't realise that the person they are disagreeing with about the fact that "The Postman" was originally a piece of short fiction is the Lord High Ruler of the Video Room and a local Big Name Fan. In short, they are not fans. They are not part of the science fiction fan subculture. And, most have no interest in becoming members of that subculture. Readers are outsiders...

Or are they?

A better case could be made that science fiction fans are the outsiders, given that the readers must outnumber them by a factor of no less than ten to one.

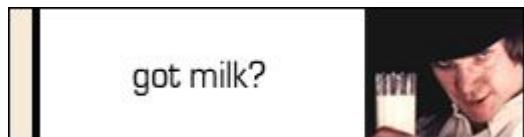
As for the state of the genre -- From my perspective, it is healthy, strong, and fully integrated into popular culture. Things have never been better.

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Is There Anything Unique About Fandom?

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Science fiction fandom likes to think of itself as being unique and in some manner different from the mundane mainstream of contemporary culture. But, it really isn't.

The ordinary member of society engages in work, fulfilling the basic physical needs (eating, hygiene, and sleep), procurement of resources (food, drink, and cleaning and hygiene products), social interaction (friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances), and the leisure activities that serve to fulfill their individual mental and/or emotional and/or spiritual and/or additional physical needs. Leisure activities may be solitary or occur within groups. When in a group activity, they may be informal (getting together with a group of friends to see a movie or to play a game of cards) or more formalised (attending a dinner party, playing the weekly curling match, participation in some form of club or organisation). Of the more formalised leisure activities that individuals participate in, some of these may occur within the context of a subcultural group -- be that religious, ethnic, political or leisure-based.

Most individuals balance their leisure activities, i.e. they have several different leisure activities that bring them into contact with different groups of individuals. Some persons, however, focus their leisure activities. One activity is given primacy over the others so that they interact with an overlapping set of groups or just a single group of individuals. This is most common in regards to leisure activities that occur within a subcultural context.

Science fiction fandom is a leisure-based subculture. Little theatre groups, internet newsgroups, amateur sport clubs, historical re-creation groups also have leisure-based subcultures. On the surface, it would appear that these leisure-based subcultures have little in common, but, if you look deeper, there is a pervasive sameness to all of these groups.

All have their own subcultural acronyms, sayings, and history -- both mythic and actual. All have their internal politics, feuds, and power struggles. All have a sense of tribalism, whether it is mild or strong. All have some individuals who make the subculture their way of life -- be that little theatre, rugby football, the Society for Creative Anachronism, or science fiction fandom -- to the exclusion of all other activities. All have individuals

who engage in status climbing games in pursuit of ephemeral power. Ephemeral because in the grand scheme of things outside of the subculture, the fact that you have fought your way to the top to become the Queen of props, or the Grand Poohbah of the newsgroup, or the Baron of Itsyoudelusion, or the Bonspiel Master of the Lower Lonsdale Curling Club, or the Grand Wizard of the consuite, really means very little. Maybe you can put a spin on it and work it into a résumé, but that is all that it is worth in society as a whole.

So science fiction fandom is really no different from these other leisure based subcultures -- except for the ideology of superiority. Now all of these subcultures have some form of ideology of superiority, but it tends to be relative to the subculture's competitors. To rugby football fans, their team is superior (or should be) and their sport is superior to its strongest competitor -- soccer. Little theatre people view themselves as being superior to those who don't support the arts who are viewed as being competition, threat, or both. Roman re-creation groups tend to view themselves as superior to the SCA -- a competitor. Internet newsgroups members view their newsgroup of choice to be superior to similar competing newsgroups. Science fiction fandom views itself as being superior not to competitors, such as comic book fandom or Star Trek fandom (in fact, these competitors tend to be viewed as potential allies and/or poor deluded souls who are on the right path but have yet to see the light), but to everybody else. (This could be an indication of paranoia within science fiction fandom -- that everybody else is seen as being a competitor or a threat.)

And what is the basis of the superiority of science fiction fandom?

- science fiction fans are regular readers
- science fiction fans are scientific literates
- science fiction fans have a "sense of wonder"

It is indeed true that science fiction fans are regular readers. This does place them within a select group within the general population -- that of those individuals who regularly read as a form of entertainment. However, this is not a group that encompasses only science fiction fandom. There are other genres with their own readership. In addition, the vast majority of science fiction readers are not science fiction fans. At best, this superior trait is a shared trait that is not exclusive to science fiction fandom.

Science fiction fans claim to be scientific literates. The question that must be asked first is, relative to whom? Relative to Christian fundamentalists who believe that the universe is a mere ten thousand years old and that humans and dinosaurs were contemporaries; yes, science fiction fandom does have a greater level of scientific literacy -- and so does most of the general populace. I have heard the worst kind of junk science and pseudo-science spouted from the mouths of science fiction fans over the years and seen much of the same drivel on fan websites. Overall, the scientific literacy of fandom cannot be said to be that much greater than that of the average individual in society.

Now there is a subgroup within fandom, the fans of "hard science" science fiction who do display a high degree of literacy in regards to the physical sciences. Alas, these persons usually tend to be abysmally ignorant of the social sciences, as well as the humanities. They find it to be perfectly realistic that four hundred, two thousand, ten thousand years hence that the social and economic structure of future society will be just the same as it was in the late twentieth century.

Endnote This is not scientific literacy, as far as I'm concerned. To be scientific literate, you should have a basic grounding in both the physical and the social sciences, not just one or the other.

Science fiction fans have a "sense of wonder"... There are so many different definitions of this term within science fiction and science fiction fandom that it is difficult to discuss this supposed superior trait. Regardless, it doesn't matter any more. The term has passed into popular culture, because all of us now experience either a "sense of wonder" or a dread of "the engines of the night" in this world of fast paced technological change. The wonder of brave new worlds, fantastic new technologies, strange sights never before seen, and godlike powers are no longer the private reserve of science fiction readers or of science fiction fandom. It is part of mundane, mainstream culture. When such topics are reported, albeit briefly and poorly, on the tabloid news programmes they cease to be subcultural; they have moved into the cultural. Same goes for the antithesis to the "sense of wonder", "the engines of the night" -- the dark nightmares of the possible abuse and threat that could arise out of these new technologies and capabilities. Again, this is not a trait exclusive to science fiction fandom.

So, just what is unique about science fiction fandom? Only the false perception that science fiction fans are superior to everybody else. Guess what, they're not.

Endnote:

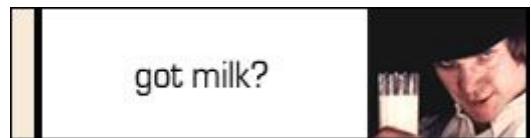
Yes, the writers do employ the device that things will mostly be the same as they are now and they do it because they are writing fiction. They are trying to tell a story about people in a fantastical setting and they have to use the reference point of contemporary culture. One, because, in most cases, it is the only culture that they truly know. Two, because it is, again in most cases, the only culture that the intended readership really knows. Consider the simple boy-meets-girl tale that is Day Million and imagine how incomprehensible a longer, more complex story would be if it were written in this style. However, there is a big difference between a writer using a literary device to communicate to the reader and a fan believing that a literary device is how the future is going to be.

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A Brief History of Swill

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It all began as a surreal, last minute, idle prank.

The Catalyst:

I was attending York University in Toronto. My old high school friend, Lester Rainsford, as also at York. Another friend of ours from high school, Andrew Hoyt, was studying at the University of Ottawa. In early October of 1988, I pitched the idea to Lester that we should all attend Maplecon III in Ottawa. I was going to the convention anyway -- some other friends and I were entering the masquerade as droogs from A Clockwork Orange -- and I thought that Lester and Andrew might enjoy attending the convention. Both were science fiction readers, but had never attended a convention nor had any interest in fandom.

When Lester found out that this was going to be a science fiction and comic book convention, he initially had cold feet about attending. Then, he had the idea that we should distribute a boycott flyer at the convention. It told him that that would be pointless, since anybody who would read the flyer would already be attending the convention. His reply was, "Exactly."

So a couple of days before the convention, Lester with my help hashed out the boycott flyer on my aging manual typewriter. The flyer was offensive, outrageously politically incorrect by present standards, with intentional poor grammar, typos, misspellings, and strikeouts. We printed 500 copies and headed off to Ottawa.

At the convention, Andrew and Lester quickly became bored. They found the panels to be dull or stupid, the dealers room to be overpriced and a waste of time, and the art show to be laughable. By Saturday morning they were pretending to be sociology graduate students from the University of Toronto gathering initial research on deviant subcultures -- comic book fandom being highly deviant and science fiction fandom simply deviant. Then Andrew noticed that the boycott flyer was creating a stir.

Initially, we were putting out the flyers in piles of twenty. These disappeared quickly, so we started putting them out in piles of ten. These vanished even faster. Andrew and Lester noticed that everytime some of the boycott flyers were set out, a someone wearing a special coloured badge -- I forgot the colour, but it was the colour that indicated that the person was part of the convention committee -- would spirit away the entire pile. And so began a game of cat and mouse.

We started putting out flyers in piles of five, then one. The convention committee eventually stationed somebody to watch the table. Tape was borrowed from the front desk and the flyers were put up in several places on the convention floor and in some of the panel rooms. Now there was some poor sod patrolling the entire convention floor searching for our boycott flyers. At this time, I was getting ready for the masquerade judging. We split the remaining flyers between us, and I headed off to join my droogs.

Lester and Andrew amused themselves getting rid of their remaining flyers. They slipped them in, underneath other flyers, had a small pile set out on the hotel literature and tourist info table, and even had some set out at the hotel bar... When their flyers were gone, they left to go back to Andrew's residence.

After the judging -- the droogs won first prize for best group costume -- I distributed the rest of my flyers at various room parties. The last batch I slipped in on the flyer table before I retired to my hotel room.

Lester and Andrew returned to the convention early Sunday afternoon and we all went to the train station where Lester and I caught the train back to

Toronto. Aside of the fun with the boycott flyer, the convention had been a bust for both Lester and Andrew and I don't think that they have attended any since then.

The Reactions

Back in Toronto, things were the same as usual until I attended the next monthly fan gathering. Here I heard that the local powers that be -- the Big Name Fans of Toronto -- were looking for who was responsible for the boycott flyer. It appeared that the Ottawa fan organisation that hosted Maplecon was very upset about the flyer and that they held OSFiC responsible. Of course, I found this to be hilarious.

- First that anybody would believe that OSFiC actually wrote the flyer
- Second that anybody would be stupid enough to believe that OSFiC would write the flyer and sign their name to it

I mentioned this to Lester and he suggested that we do something to really annoy the Big Name Fans. And so the germ of Swill was born. Christmas break came and went. When we got back Lester, Andrew, and I began work on the magazine that would become Swill.

The Products:

In February of 1981 the first issue of Swill appeared. I no longer have any copies of the magazine, so I will have to go on recollection alone. It contained an Editorial by myself, columns by Lester and Andrew, some filler, and a reprint of the boycott flyer. I called the publishing company VileFen Press and the magazine had a punk look to it. I think I had 200 copies made and charged one dollar -- or whatever I could get -- for the magazine. At the February fan gathering I brought some copies that I handed out for free.

Well, the proverbial faecal matter struck the fan. All of the Big Name Fans in Toronto were very very angry with me. Of course, in true fannish

fashion, nobody said anything directly to me. So, whatever I heard was second or third hand at best. Not that that really mattered. The details were unimportant; the general consensus was that people were angry and disapproved.

Swill was intended as a one-shot, single-issue magazine. However, with the response it received, Lester and I decided that more issues should be produced. Another York student, using the name Stephano, joined as our cartoonist and we set out to produce a second issue. This time, I enlisted the facilities of a friend in Guelph to print the magazine rather than use a printing company. The mimeograph was cheaper and gave Swill that grunge look that so befitted it.

In all, six or seven issues of Swill were published. Of those issues the first four were the best, in particular issues two and three. At the time of issue four was published two things happened that changed Swill and led to its decline.

- I moved to Vancouver
- Stephano began to publish his own version of Swill called BeSwill.

While I was getting settled in Vancouver, Swill ceased to be published.

In Ontario, BeSwill was being published, but BeSwill was... I don't know how to describe it, just weird, a side branch of Swill that was in essence a separate species.

In the late summer of '81 I began to publish Swill again, but it was not the same as the original four issues. I don't remember how many issues I published from Vancouver, two or three, but as the year drew to a close so did Swill. No longer living in Ontario, I had any real desire to try and tick off Toronto fandom. I was getting more and more involved in the anti-arms race peace movement and the anarchist community to spend time on Swill. The drive and the desire had faded. As of February 1982, Swill was no more.

Aftermath:

In 1984 I published three issues of a magazine called Daughter of Swill, Mother of Scum. This magazine had some of the same spirit that was in Swill, but it was also quite different. Each issue was an essay on a single topic; one on fandom and fascism, one on the science fiction of winnable nuclear war, and one on the lack of alien aliens in science fiction. These were distributed to a select group of friends. Of these three issues, the one on science fiction aliens was the best. Again, no known copies of this magazine survive -- and it is probably for the best.

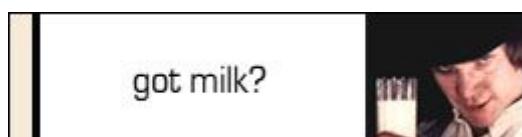
In 1991, I wrote the magazine Scum. It had a series of essays in it on various topics about the genre and one on fandom. Some reprints of old Swill columns, such as Lester Rainsford's rant against Libertarian Party science fiction, "A Gram of Brains, is Worth a Pound of Shit" as well as some material that had been written for Swill by Hoyt and Rainsford, but never published. I wrote Scum, but I never published it. It and all the Swill related things went into a box in the basement. And there it rested until a basement flood some years later reduced it and several other items to garbage.

In 2001, Swill Online was published.

And that is the history of Swill.

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Swill Online is a project that will run from February 22nd, 2001 to January 31st, 2002.

The site will be updated on an irregular basis throughout the year. To any of our old columnists and contributors out there please feel free to send us something new for the site.

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