

stranger in John Foyster
stranger lands GUFF 1979

Why fanzines?

Fanzines are why we are gathered together in this particular way. That's a slippery enough answer in itself, but in 1979 there were more pressing reasons for paying attention to this subterranean aspect of science fiction fandom.

For TAFF, Ian Maule and Joseph Nicholas had published *By British* ('A Fanthology of the Seventies') which not at all coincidentally appeared in time to be on sale at SEACON. More formally, Kevin Smith edited *Mood 70* ('The Best of British Fanwriting 1970–1979') for SEACON '79 Ltd. With a total of just under 150 pages these must be regarded as Serious Publications.

They are significant just because they were published at all. More than that, the editors clearly wanted to present their stories about what constituted British Fandom in this period. They present their aims quite frankly.

- I don't claim to have encapsulated the Seventies with this collection, and I have no doubts that some fans will tell me I've missed the single most vital piece of fanwriting of the last ten years, and why didn't I ask them if I could reprint it? I do claim that these are some of the best

writers straight from the mainstream of British fandom — and that means they are very good indeed. (Kevin Smith)

- At the outset our aim was to publish a couple of articles from each decade to show the development of British fanzine fandom throughout the period. (Ian Maule)

We may begin to muse, for a moment, on the social philosophies underlying these introductory remarks, but we do not get very far before Ian Maule interrupts us with his later thoughts.

- However, looking back and re-reading the fanzines and articles that appeared in the early seventies it strikes us that a lot of what we drooled over and thought excellent then is now only suitable as a trap for fanthology compilers — they just don't stand up by today's standards. (...)
- I think what you now hold in your hands is a better fanthology because of that re-think. Looking at some of the original articles we'd selected I can now see that although well written and interesting to me (...) the interest they originally

aroused was of a transitory nature and is quite irrelevant to the fandom that we have around us now.

One is tempted to build theories about fan philosophies here but instead we can turn aside and consider some facts.

We have a very large number of pages to work with (as did the editors), and a first useful step is, I think, to work out just what they chose to reprint — in chronological terms. Here's a table which shows the approximate number of pages in the two anthologies which came from each year of the 'seventies.

YEAR	Number of reprinted pages
1970	1
1971	0
1972	3
1973	15
1974	0
1975	20
1976	28
1977	30
1978	25
1979	17

There's a clear message here: the first half of the decade might just as well be consigned to the

scrapheap of fannish history (a view several British fans appear to have held in the late 'sixties).

Indeed, given that most of the 1975 contribution was a single article by Peter Nicholls, and that 1979 could scarcely be expected to have made much of a reputation by the time of publication, we find ourselves gazing at 1976 to 1978 as the memorable years of British fanzines in the 'seventies, at least as revealed in these two anthologies.

The 1979 article is really just the long revisionist history of the 'seventies by Joseph Nicholas which appeared in *By British*: fortunately it can serve us as a guide through what might otherwise have been an uncharted forest.

While I will use Joseph's article as a frame for this discussion, there is one minor problem to be noted. Moskowitz's Disease — the need to report pub squabbles as events of world-shaking significance — is one to which most fan historians are mildly susceptible.

Joseph Nicholas's article reveals him to be no exception to this pattern. Colossi bestride the stage of world history in the form of civil servants

using four-letter words as the reader is borne along from alpha ('In The Beginning' is the title of the first section of Joseph's article) to omega ('Sideways Towards the Millenium') by surging section headings which, if somewhat less messianic in tone, unrelentingly make sure we never forget that tide in the affairs of fen which leads inexorably to apocalypse. Who can resist the smell of soft soap in the morning?

But the appropriate place to consider Joseph's fanhistorical article at length is in its proper place: as part of the events of 1979.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Joseph tells us, fandom in Britain was unhealthy. Yet things could have been worse. Previously there had existed

- a scheme whereby anyone who wanted to publish a fanzine — regardless of their literary, artistic and editorial abilities — needed only to churn out a predetermined amount of wordage and then send it away for stencilling and duplicating by a 'central office' ... In other words, you could be rejected absolutely everywhere but still get yourself published.

Since self-publishing is the most common form of fan-publishing, and the barrier which PaDS seemed to be designed to overcome (as described by Joseph) was an economic one (making PaDS an unusually democratizing institution in fandom), it is scarcely possible at this point to avoid the thought that we are here dealing with an uncommonly organizing mind — one which likes to put things — and especially other people — in their places.

It isn't at all clear what the alternative and far more desirable practice is or was, but there is no doubting the writer's view that the practice described above was yucky.

Peter Weston's fanzine *Speculation*, we learn, was 'internationally circulated, highly respected and solidly sercon'. It is by no means clear whether any single one of these credentials did of itself guarantee exclusion from these historical surveys of the Seventies, but of the three the last seems closest: the only item reprinted from *Speculation* is an example of a subgenre very popular with the editors — the 'How I'm trying to become a Big Name Pro' confessional which depends for its impact, I suspect, upon how well one knows the author. That reprint is from 1973.

The Saviour, however, is at hand, in the form of Greg Pickersgill, assisted by Roy Kettle and various others. Pickersgill has his initial influence through *Fouler*, 'a badly laid-out, erratically duplicated and thoroughly tatty-looking ragbag': we may reasonably deduce from this that at this time Pickersgill was devoid of — at least — 'artistic and editorial abilities'.

Fouler is the source of the first reprinted item — a one-page 'ad' which depends for its impact substantially, if not wholly, upon the then-widespread British affliction of associating fanzines with animals. Perhaps this is the sort of thing Ian Maule had in mind when he wrote about having second thoughts on re-reading what he had earlier had high regard for. Now, at any rate, its only value is in reminding us of a long-dead pastime.

1971, despite the continuing publication of *Fouler* and the emergence of Gannetfandom (see what I mean?), is unrepresented in the two collections.

This was also the period when, according to Joseph's review, fandom in Manchester 'began to clamber its way up from obscurity'. It's from one of the 1972 fanzines of that Group, *Hell*, that

Maule and Nicholas reprint the first extended item, John Piggott's 'Babel Version Five: No. 1', an unremarkable account of Piggott's assault upon an apple tree. It stands out in the historical records under discussion by not being about science fiction fandom. This is the only item reprinted from 1972.

As Joseph Nicholas reports, at this time there were three significant serconzines — *Cypher*, *Speculation*, and *Vector* (edited by Malcolm Edwards for most of 1972), but there is no room for science fiction amongst the revisionists.

1973 is the first year with substantial representation. Malcolm Edwards's short piece is historically interesting, for it runs up the flag for yet another British Worldcon. But the longer pieces, by John Brosnan and Andrew M. Stephenson, represent quite different approaches to creativity — whether in fandom or without.

Brosnan's is the first of the 'Big Name Pro' articles I referred to earlier. 'Happiness is a Warm Rejection Slip' was a departure in editorial policy for *Speculation*, but this editorial flickering ensured that this magazine — which had 'five final-ballot Hugo nominations' — was

represented in these compilations from the 1970s.

Australian fans who knew Brosnan before he travelled by bus and other methods to Britain — and especially those who endured his conversations about 'Echo Of Jackboots' — probably find this article more tedious than those who have known only the later Brosnan. This is the brief story of someone who decides he is going to be a writer; there's a serious message, but the touch is light. It isn't hard to see why John's writing would remain popular.

Andrew Stephenson's piece is rather the reverse. It appeared in *Blunt* (described by Joseph Nicholas as 'a large, attractive, well-written genzine with an unfortunately eclectic bent that tended to alienate much of its more fannish audience'), and deals seriously with Stephenson's endeavours as a fan artist. At the same time it is transposed into a fictive world, and the comparison with Brosnan's piece tells us something of the differing attitudes towards the writing of fiction of the two. Stephenson tends to grab one by the lapel, while Brosnan plays it for laughs..

It is instructive, reading Brosnan, to note how much of the time the final sentence in a paragraph reads more like the punchline of a story than anything else.

The years 1974 and 1975 are described by Joseph Nicholas in a section titled ‘Close the doors, they’re coming in the windows!’. The launching of *Science Fiction Monthly*, the return of Greg Pickersgill to fanpublishing, and a general rise in the activity levels led Joseph to summarise the period with ‘... by the end of 1975 fandom was thriving again. The renaissance of earlier years had taken firm root and the future seemed full of promise.’

But there is relatively little representation of this period in the two collections — a long piece from Peter Nicholls and two short pieces by Roy Kettle, all originally published in 1975, constitute the only evidence we have about this renaissance.

Peter Nicholls's piece — a report on SEACON '75 as he saw it — has merits of its own. But it also may be read as an interesting attempt by an outsider to write like a fan, and in particular a fan who had had extensive exposure to at least part of British fandom in the early 1970s. What labels

this as the work of an outsider, in part, is the verisimilitude with which it is presented.

The fact that fans in 1979 still talked about Nicholls's report with considerable awe is a tribute to his skills. For example, Nicholls makes much of Marianne Leconte's attempts to interview Chris Priest: ‘She was onto the seventeenth tape, perspiring and fatigued, but Chris looked as fresh as when he started, two days ago. He was describing the plot of his new book, *La Mer Invertée* (The Lesbian Horse).’ This is not only the start of a little bit of patter about liquids, but the skillfully developed climax of a series of short, blow-by-blow notes on this memorable encounter.

Furthermore, when Peter Nicholls writes about someone — addressing, say, his cretinism (that topic so much beloved of Ratfans) — he does so with skill and in detail, embroidering the initial impression in order to flesh out a whole person for us, not merely someone's hastily assembled straw man. One paragraph may illustrate his skill.

- I really like Martin. He has more integrity than almost anyone I know. He never

slackens his valiant attempts to be totally offensive to absolutely everyone. He is a man of true dedication. To begin with he's good looking, in a poncy way, a fact he offensively hammers home by wearing priceless ivory pendants around his tanned neck. He addresses everyone as 'sweetie'. He boasts. He name-drops. He bullies waiters. He humiliates people. He is unprincipled. Martin is really incredibly vile. I really do like him for this. He is ubiquitous for this, too. I tried to play with his girl-friend's foot under the table, and only when he fluttered his eyelashes at me did I realize that the foot in question was his. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound.

There is much more of this: plainly Peter Nicholls is not the sort of person you should invite to your parties. But in 'The Great SEACON Freakout' he produces one of the most memorable of personal experience convention reports.

Roy Kettle's two fillers, reprinted from *True Rat*, don't really begin to hint adequately at the depth of his talent (revealed rather more

adequately in later reprints), but the advertisement for 'Was God A Poof?' is, I think, superior to the parodied SF magazine titles and stories which are reprinted, after a fashion in both of these collections.

True connoisseurs of the writings of Roy Kettle will be able to argue for years over which version of the contents of Science Fiction Plus VAT the master preferred and should therefore be regarded as canonical — 'Fahrenheit 487' or 'Fahrenheit 519', '2161 — A Space Odyssey' or '2300 — A Space Odyssey'.

1976 saw the return of Greg Pickersgill with *Stop Breaking Down*. But according to Joseph Nicholas 'the promise of late 1975 was not being fulfilled — at least not by older fans'.

Readers of *By British* and *Mood 70* will find this opinion confusing. After all, as the table above indicates, 1976 is the year from which the editors have made the most extensive choice, and almost all of that has been the work of 'older fans'. Five pages from Dave Langford constitutes the only contribution by the 'talented new fans'.

Joseph has recently argued that his review was written independently of the selection of material. This is hardly convincing as a defence of

the notion of establishing a canon of good fan writing from the 1970s. The only substantial item reprinted by the editors, from 1975, was the Nicholls piece, and a single squalor does not, I think, a boomer make.

For 1976 the editors chose much more material, most of it by older fans: direct contradictions of this kind are not the same as differences of opinion about relative merits amongst works of generally high quality.

At any rate, Dave Langford's short articles are thoughtfully planned examples of personal writing, amusing in a mildly-contrived way. But anyone reading through these collections in a chronological order — as I am here — would contrast them immediately with the smoothness of Nicholls's piece.

The pieces by the oldies are varied. Bob Shaw's 'Income Taxi' is straightforward *Hyphenstuff* which reflects Shaw's immensely accomplished skills — especially timing. Peter Nicholls refers, in the SEACON '75 piece, to others of Bob Shaw's skills, but his immaculate sense of timing should not be overlooked.

Rob Holdstock's 'Eight Days a Week' is another 'Big Name Pro' piece, one which by

simple exaggeration can tell us something about the life of the young pros in England in the mid-70s, while carefully protecting the author from the perils of genuine self-revelation.

Graham Charnock's 'The Grand and Glorious Game of Fanac' was scarcely worth reprinting, but his other short article, 'Dodgem Dalmatians', has moments of inspiration. But whether a string of one-liners can hold the article together is another matter; it reads very much like an item which started out with an idea or two about content and some rehearsed lines but which, in execution, faded into boring generality, finally lurching back to the punchline.

Roy Kettle's two articles show some of his versatility. (He also has two fillers, the better of which quotes one 'Peter Nicholls' as defining sci-fi 'succinctly' as 'speculation, whether based on established scientific facts or on ...' going on for another ten lines.)

'The True Cat' immediately brings one out in a sweat worrying that this might be yet another boring thinkpiece about cats. But Roy Kettle does not let one down. The first paragraph amply describes the theme which is to worked upon for the next several pages:

- In the daze of my youth we seemed to get through a lot of cats. We got through them like some people get through Kleenex, and almost as messily, although they were slightly more difficult to dispose of.

‘An Interview with Thomas M. Disch’ not only provides a stage upon which Kettle can deliver a monologue on his major failings as a conversationalist, but also an opportunity to drop careful oneliners like:

- My big chance. I followed him. We were alone. Luckily he is one writer whose name is impossible to slur. ‘Mishter Disch?’ I said.

1977 was also represented to an extent which I think belies Joseph Nicholas's claim about the performances of the older fans.

Kettle's ‘How Not To Be A Writer’ is the longest of his works reprinted, and by far the best single item in *By British*. His lightness of touch enables him to be serious without being maudlin,

but at the same time he does not veer towards the frantic, as is often the case for other writers on this theme.

Kevin Smith's ‘The Way We Are’ is a Damon Runyon pastiche whose charm probably relies heavily upon knowing a little more about the major characters than an outsider can. One may appreciate what has been done in an abstract sort of way, but at that level names may be interchanged freely without changing the impression.

Rob Holdstock's ‘It's Hell Being a Contemporary of Andrew M. Stephenson’ suffers when compared with the other tales of (semi-) professional life. But Holdstock's ear for a good line reveals itself in several places as he reports on the Dublin Professional Writers Conference.

One of the problems of reading a collection of ‘the best’ is that one falls too easily into the sin of comparison, as I've done several times above. Dave Langford is represented again, this time with a piece from his own fanzine and from a relic one might not have expected to see represented — *Triode*.

I have to admit to a great weakness for *Triode*, so it will not surprise you to read that I

felt that Langford's filler from *Twll Ddu* was exactly that, while his *Triode* piece, 'The Sound (If Any) Of Music' manages a straight story line better than much of Langford's other work.

1978, the last year from which items are reprinted, is represented by only two pieces in *Mood 70*, of which one is Greg Pickersgill's 'Billy The Squid'.

Given the role ascribed to Pickersgill by various writers in the two collections this scarcely seems a fair choice. He starts with an old-fan-and-tired paragraph and then wanders forcefully through a long series of topics during the course of which one wonders how much of the writing is in fact self-revelatory.

When Greg Pickersgill writes 'Birmingham or Newcastle or whatever last outpost of civilization the thing is being held in' is he parodying or exemplifying his reputed xenophobia? Is it a coincidence that he quasiquotes Ian Maule on his being 'as much a nonentity in fannish terms as I am in the other world' immediately after his dreary description of his working life? In any case, given the beliefs of the editors, it seems remarkable that he is represented by only one article, and that this should be it.

Joseph Nicholas sees 1978 as a period when there was a resurgence of serconism (not represented in these collections) and when 'The real highlight was Alan Dorey's personalzine *Gross Encounters*' (also not represented in these collections).

1978 is represented by a handful of other pieces, rather varied in style. I was very pleased to see included some of Peter Roberts's damning book reviews appearing as fillers (given his generally acknowledged role throughout the seventies).

Dave Langford's other piece is one of his little playlets which read so well when you know the characters, but otherwise lose some of their bite.

Rob Hansen's article 'Shake, Rattle and Roll' is probably interesting enough but is about a subject for which I have no enthusiasm (see my GUFF platform).

Chris Priest — on being a science fiction fan as well as a writer — reveals his skill as a fan writer without compromising professional standards. And that's it.

Joseph's article reviewing the period is the 1979 representative, and as I've tried to indicate during the course of my review it is difficult to

assess what Joseph is writing when the subjects he writes about are so much at variance with the critical opinion manifested by the choice of material in the two collections. Joseph is very mindful of what he is saying, but whether it is connected with the real world must be left to someone else to assess.

But we can still say a few things about British fandom in the seventies, assuming these two collections to be representative.

Firstly, Roy Kettle was unquestionably the most talented of the younger writers. He is widely and justifiably represented in these two collections and whether an item is long or short there is no doubt at all about its strength or direction.

Other writers seem less exciting by comparison — and at times frankly bland, with prose often limping along in just the manner which the authors so readily lambaste in the work of others.

Secondly, these are not quite representative collections. The mismatch between Joseph's historical review and the selections has been noted over-often, but there is one clearly-

missing element — all that sercon stuff at which the Brits have, in a way, excelled over the years.

Peter Weston, for example, may not have been able to write his way out of a dependent clause, but he did have a way of encouraging others to write so effectively that he fostered a particular way of writing about science fiction which was widely applauded (note the Hugo nominations). I may easily be wrong, but it is difficult to imagine an alternative world in which *Foundation* came into existence without the climate previously created by Weston with *Speculation* (despite the curiously low opinion held of Pete by a number of UK fans).

One undercurrent of these contributions ought also to be noted.

One of the major attractions of fandom for me is that social class is *relatively* unimportant in determining relationships between fans. I've met fans from over a dozen countries, and in only one country has social class appeared to me to be at all a significant factor — the United Kingdom.

Yet another deficiency in what has been considered above is revealed by the title of the second of the official SEACON '79 fan publications. *The Enchanted Duplicator* was

reprinted yet again, and although there's the Bob Shaw reprint from *Maya* (which looked to me like a recycled *Hyphen* article, if one really wants to investigate pre-history) there's little in the two collections which comes close to being distinguished and polished in the peculiar way which the Willis-Shaw collaboration was.

Because, for all the joshing, the writers in *By British* and *Mood 70* take themselves more than a little seriously. Moskowitz's Disease seems pretty rampant throughout the country — perhaps not so overt as in Joseph's article, but subtextually significant. British fandom thought it important to establish a canon for the Seventies. This has been done with unquestioned success. Yet by doing so the editors of these anthologies have opened to us the possibility that all have done is stir the storm in the teacup.