

Fanzine Fandom and Oral Tradition

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I haven't been so active in fandom over the past decade or so because, in that period, I've gone off and made myself into a historian. That took seven years part time as an undergraduate and four years as a post-graduate, ('graduate student' as they are called in the US). Along the way you pick up a few things that you never knew before and somewhere along the way I woke up one day and realize that I was a historian. While I was a post-graduate I also did a lot of part-time teaching in a whole range of subjects and I learned a lot more about them than the students I was teaching. Somehow I became something of an expert in the field of history and I've got a growing interest in a field called cultural ecology.

These days I'm a filthy pro in the history business. (I'm actually writing this instead of a commissioned history that I'm supposed to be working on.) As a filthy pro in a field which has probably even more amateurs than stf. I find myself trying not to sound condescending to amateurs (and even gifted amateurs).

It's not that people don't mean well when they set out to try their hand at history. it's just that they all make the same mistakes and try to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes the results are worthwhile. but normally they make me wish that they knew what they were doing, I wonder if the filthy pros in stf feel the same way, Or perhaps they avoid fan fiction the same way I generally avoid amateur history.

At history conferences (they're a lot like stf conventions only they are usually smaller and you normally go to most of the program items). It is sometimes the case that historians will get together over a few beers and mutter about the low standards in much history that is being published. If we are feeling suitably denigratory that terrible word 'antiquarian' will be heard. And if somebody is feeling sarcastic the terrible term, 'sterile antiquarian' is uttered.

I have not read THEN 4. but Ted's review of it in HABAKKUK 3:2 gives me the impression that Rob Hansen's efforts might have to bear that cross. Of course. there is nothing to stop anybody publishing anything they like and calling it history. but that doesn't mean that it actually is history or that it comes anywhere near being good history.

So what is good history? It's a bit like stf. 'what I say when I point at it.' But as far as I'm concerned, it has to tell a story, and it has to be enjoyable and informative. Other historians who have spent their lives immersed in universities have a more scholarly definition - I guess I picked up my attitudes from hanging around fandom. Consequently I agree with Ted that histories of fandom need to have the vitality of the people and events they are about.

Recently an Arnie Katz fanzine encouraged me to think about the whole business of history and fandom. I'm not really sure that fandom as we enjoy it actually has any need for the factual reconstruction that most people think history has to be and Rob Hansen seems to have produced. My reading in cultural theory makes me think that fandom is so complex, in some

aspects, that it requires more than a simple history. Or at least something better than (sterile) antiquarianism.

Since fandom is about the construction of a shared social reality and since social realities are constructed from shared experience, what fandom is really about is people telling stories about their lives and the lives of their friends. By telling these stories fans construct a shared reality. And as fans are (or were) stf readers, they are more turned on by a good story than they are by the truth of what happened.

However, since stf fans also want some 'science' in their stories, they also want their fannish stories to have a foundation of truth upon which the greater stories are constructed.

It occurs to me that fandom makes myths about itself because what things felt like, and how they could be made that little bit more story-like and more lively, is more interesting than being tied down with the antiquarian facts of dates and places and names. If anything has made fannish fandom different from most other leisure activities it is that we know about fiction and we know how to make our lives into fiction and how to enjoy our lives as though we were writing them. (As in FIAWOL.) If the reality of a situation was not as good a story as it should have been, that is what convention reports and trio reports are for.

But there is more to it than that: there is the business of how these stories are created and transmitted. Back in 1974 Valma and I were in the US on my DUFF trip we visited FM and Elinor Busby in Seattle. We sat looking at pictures of John Berry who had visited 15 years earlier and they told us about what had happened. It occurred to me that fandom is really a medium of oral transmission.

The interesting thing about fanzine fandom is that it has conventions where people meet and it has fanzines which become a form of 'oral transmission' because they create stories about the things that happened in the past.

Last year I had to write a lecture on how the oral traditions of people without written traditions could be used as historical sources, so long as you knew some interesting things about how oral transmission works.

For the sake of this article let me mention only three points. One is that oral traditions, in particular the formal ones, are transmitted as a way of legitimizing the dominant culture. This means that the oral transmission of stories about the 'Insurgents' or 'Sixth Fandom' or any other influence signifies that it has become part of the dominant culture of fanzine fandom.

Another is that the meaning of an oral tradition does not have to be its literal meaning. It can be symbolic or metaphorical as well. Walt Willis may not be surprised to learn that many of the things that he and the Irish fans reported that they had done have now become symbolic of the trufannish life. They probably have metaphorical meanings depending on the circumstances in which the stories are told and retold and ghodminton is reinterpreted in modern contexts.

A third (and final) point here is that, since oral traditions reflect current orthodoxy, they have to change to remain relevant to any change in orthodoxy. This means that if, in the fight between the forces lined up in the TAFF wars, if the Bergeron forces had prevailed. the current oral traditions would be quite different from the ones we now have.

Many of the oral traditions in fanzine fandom are about what happened when fans met. usually at conventions. and they are a way of spreading the tradition to those who weren't there and for recreating it for those who were. (For example. it now matters very little what actually happened in Room 770. What matters is that it has become the archetypal room party.)

The ability of fannish fans to create myths about themselves which entertain then and maintain their cohesion is something like the old tribal ways of creating laws and traditions which are passed down from generations to generation, In this ancient way most of us 'learned' what we know of fannish custom and tradition at the feet of BNFs. sometimes literally at convention room parties. (Put on your sociologist's hat when you enter a room party and see what the positioning of the bodies tells you about who are the elders and who are their acolytes.)

Just as the Australian Aboriginals have their concept of the past which we whitefellas call their 'dreaming' (a collection of stories about the roots and beliefs of the group) so do fannish fans have their 'dreaming' stories. These stories pass on the values and traditions of the group.

When Valma and I listened to Buz and Elinor telling stories about John Berry it did not really matter whether these stories were actually historically accurate. (They probably were but specialists in memory would have some things to say about that.) What mattered was that these were stories worth telling. What mattered even more was that the process of their transmission was a fannish act in itself.

So, through these and other stories, not only did John Berry become a person of some importance but also a mythical person who did mythical things. He became a name attached to certain fannish attributes which taught me certain fannish values.

Those stories, and other stories which I have read in fanzines, also taught me that one of the best things about the fannish existence is that it helps people to uncover and expose their human natures in a way which is not recorded or cherished in almost every other leisure activity. This is probably because. in fannish fandom, it is the process of being fannish its self which is the goal, whereas in most other forms of leisure activity it is the external interest which is the most important part of the activity. By living and Interacting as we do, we make fiction of our lives: fiction with which we entertain and educate each other.

The above comments are probably the main reason why I have not been tempted to engage in fan history myself. Unlike Ted. I think a good fannish history could be written. but it would not be the kind of thing that most historians or most; fans would write. Historians would leave out the epic quality of fandom in the search for theory and analysis (I'd suggest that the 'epic' nature of fandom would be theory enough) and most fans lack the historical expertise to know how to leave things out and how to Integrate fact into text without getting bogged down

and distracted by the trivial. The other reason for not attempting such an adventure is, of course, that as a filthy pro I'd expect to get paid. (You can't eat egoboo.)