



The forty-ninth issue of a sortof letter substitute, kinda thing, maybe weekly, maybe not, from:

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Available only via the net at the moment. See the colophon for the usual disclaimer. Supporting Toronto in '03 for the 2003 WorldCon. This issue dated, already, 20/09/99.

James White

The following is a eulogy that was written and read out by Mark Lampki at James' funeral, on 27th August 1999.

"I've been asked to speak on behalf of the Queen's University of Belfast Science Fiction Society. We would like to offer our sincere condolences to the family.

I didn't know James White nearly as well as I would have liked, but I met him a number of times. I always looked forward to meeting him and I'll always regret that I'll never have another chance to do so. He always struck me as a perfect gentleman, of a kind which the world has far too few of. He was charming, witty, unassuming and generous, and I never heard anyone say a bad word about him.

James was one of the founding fathers of science fiction fandom in Ireland, and particularly in Belfast. Without him, I might not have met many people I'm proud to call friends. And as a writer he was an inspiration to many prospective young writers - myself included. His stories brought a great deal of enjoyment to many, and showed clearly his intellect, his humour and above all, his compassion.

It's been said that science fiction is metaphor. In that light, it's worth noting that James was best known for his Sector General stories, set on an interstellar hospital, with a cast of doctors, nurses and patients from a huge variety of alien races - a place where all kinds of people could work together to help anyone who needed it, regardless of what they looked like, where they came from or what their beliefs were. A place where hatred and violence were seen as a sickness to be cured. A place with no room for those who would not tolerate others just because they were different.

I once asked James why most of his heroes were in the medical professions. He explained it to me in terms which I later found paraphrased in one of his essays, and I'd like to quote from it now.

'To hold the attention of the reader a story must have conflict, which means that it must incorporate physical or emotional violence of some kind. But if a writer dislikes violence, senseless killing and all forms of war, and is convinced that killers, whatever their excuse, are something less than heroic and most certainly unworthy of being given sympathetic treatment in a story, he faces more immediate difficulties. Avoiding these difficulties was the chief reason why so many of the leading characters in my stories are medics.

In a medical S.F. story the violence and bloodshed comes about as a result of a natural or technological catastrophe ... but if there is a war situation in such a story then the leading characters are fighting to save lives, and doctors and nurses do not as a rule admire the "heroes" on either side who are making so much repair work for them.'*

To James, those who healed and did no harm were the true heroes, and their struggles to help others were the most satisfying and laudable conflicts he could find. I can think of no better tribute than that to a man we should all strive to be more like.

*The quote above is taken from the essay "Reality in Science Fiction" from the collection "Monsters and Medics", by James White.

Other asides. The Monico group put a notice in the personals section of the local rag (not the Belfast Telegraph) on James White's death. Basically the usual condolences to the family, but all the other notices were finishing with tacky SF references: "The force will always be with him." etc. so we thought we'd put something a bit more appropriate from his books, or fanzine articles. At the end of it we couldn't think of anything and just put a sentimental piece of tosh about him being a gentleman and all that. True as it was, we thought something a 'bit' more skiffy would have been cool. However time was pressing.

The following day some non-fan friends of his from England had put in a notice that finished with: "The silent stars go by."

Here's what Mark McCann emailed back to me when I asked him why didn't we get that?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

Fans, eh?

Greg Pickersgill: "I didn't know until today - Wednesday 25th - that James had died. I can't say I'm shocked or surprised, but I am very definitely sorry. He was an excellent

person - everything that will be said about him is true. He wrote some great SF too, but for me his greatest work will always be THE EXORCISTS OF IF, a brilliant, perfectly framed, and deeply touching work of what could be called fanfiction, but is probably too close to our collective consciousness to be wholly imaginary."

Joyce & Arnie Katz: "Arnie and I send our best, and saddest regards. I hope you will communicate to Irish fans how very sad all American fandom is at this terrible loss. Arnie and I, and I know the rest of American fanzine fandom as well, will be with you in spirit. I knew James for 20-30 years by mail, and only got to meet him one time, in Florida at Magicon. He was a charming and delightful man, and fandom will be poorer without him."

Seamus McKenna: "James White was indeed a real gentleman in the true sense of the word. He had a soft, hesitant voice that made you hang on every word with a wit that made the wait worthwhile. There was an impish touch to his humour, although it was never directed maliciously. It's what I would call Belfast humour, very dry, often self deprecating, always understated. After I met him, I could never look at a Tunnocks Teacake in the same light again."

Steve Jeffrey & Vikki Lee France: "Vikki and I are really sorry to hear that. We only met James and his wife (Peggy?) a few times at conventions. He was unfailingly charming and polite, a gentleman fan. And, by all accounts, a demon ghoddminton player, who could strike fear into the heart of his opponent (like the equally demonic Berry) but without disturbing the immaculate crease of his suits. A lot of people are going to miss him, and fondly remember him. Vinc, Chuch, James... this is happening with horrible regularity."

There is also a whole bunch of comments on previous issues that I hope to get around to using in the near future. On a personal note I'll be moving back to Belfast on 27 September to start work for the Northern Ireland Film Commission as their Database Officer (a cross between System Administrator and Database Administrator) No doubt a COA will be forthcoming, but please still use the 40 Deramore Av, Belfast, BT7 3ER, UK address for any long time usage as I still have all my mail forwarded from there.

Next issue, something special for the fifty.

WAHF: Suzanne R Vick, Victor Gonzalez, Chris Murphy, Karen Babich, Jack Weaver, Pamela Boal, David Stewart, Kate Schaefer, Steve Green, Bridget Wilkinson, John Fairleigh, Peter Halasz, Bill Bowers and Cheryl Vick.

This is being distributed to a whole bunch of friends on the net, if you received this and would NOT like to be on the mailing list please accept my apologies for this intrusion and let me know so that you will not be bothered by further ramblings. If you know someone who would like to be on the mailing drop me a line.