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The Arrogant Fan

By James Bacon

"The thing about being a big fish in a small pond, is that they are usually pike, which tend to gobble up all the other smaller fish. When there are none left, the pike dies too."

J. Shields

I was wondering about what to write and I came to the conclusion that, if I were to write something, I would try and make it constructive, yet very personal. There is often talk about how to get more people involved in Fandom, and this is something close to my own heart. Without new blood and fresh faces, the stuff that's going on now won't continue. There seems to be a decrease in stuff going on and I dwell on what is needed to welcome more fans to the fold.

You see, I feel that there is a creature out there that is not helping, an animal who makes new fans feel uncomfortable, a creature that actually repulses newbies, a creature that perhaps unwittingly stomps all over potentially active fans, and that monster is THE ARROGANT FAN.

I believe this due to my own personal and very private experiences, which for the first time I have decided to share with you. Back in 1997 I went to my third tun, and my first one at the Jubilee Pub.

The tun is an informal gathering, in a designated pub, where fans in London meet on a monthly basis, and have done, for years. I had arranged to meet my friend Stef at the tun, as I was staying at his place that night.

I was early and I didn't recognise anyone really, although there was a good crowd. Anyhow I stood around and got a cider, and then I vaguely recognised a couple of people, who I got chatting with, or rather I stood there not saying very much and listened into their conversation, but they seemed ok with that.

There was much talk of the author Stanislaw Lem. This was good as I had read one of his books and had another on my shelf at home. Talk turned to the difficulty in finding his books. I interjected, "I have a first edition of his, I found it in a charity shop." I thought this might be a good discussion point. I was so wrong.

First I was told, "you don't have a first." "I do," I said, "it's in Polish, I am quite sure." Mocking laughter, and a general dismissal that I didn't know what I was talking about, then followed. I was really unsure now, wondering if maybe I *didn't* have a first edition. I said nothing – why start a row? – but it was obvious that I had done something really wrong. Gradually I was ignored, so I drifted back to the bar.

I was lucky; As I looked at the bottom of my glass, quite taken aback and really somewhat embarrassed, a friendly "Hi" came from Rev Jim de Liscard, and my funk was quickly dispelled as we talked about loads of old toot. As more people I knew well from conventions turned up, I received many an offer of somewhere to stay, which was really cool.

I have often wondered about that conversation on Lem. As I type this I look at my sf shelf and there stands a fairly battered book entitled *Opowiesci o pilocie Pirxie*. It's older than me: it was published in 1973, in Warsaw. I wonder why I was dismissed so out of hand, and mocked, and I think I know now: It is the arrogant fan, a nasty character that has so little to show for itself that it will belittle others to prove that it is a better animal than the rest.

I have often wondered whether, if I allowed myself to get aggressive and abusive in return, they would have been so cocky. Something along the lines of, "I know what I am talking about, you hideous, obese, fat fuck. Who are you anyhow, never saw you run a con or write anything at all. What would a forty-something virgin and chronic masturbator like yourself know about it?"

That would have been good.

I got to meet more arrogant fans at a different pub meeting. There was talk going on about various fans, and mention was made of a Dutch fan who now lives in Ireland, Roulof Goudrian. He is a good sort, and he runs the *Albedo One* website, and helps with *Albedo One*, Ireland's longest running, semi-prozine. Anyhow, I am sitting there and it's mentioned that Roulof had a big part to play in The Dutch Worldcon. This took me by surprise, not only because in 1990 I was sixteen and just about attending the ISFA meetings, but because Roulof hadn't been involved with a con in Ireland.

Instead of some details of his involvement to fill me in on this unknown history, my ignorance was mocked. "Didn't you know?" "Where have you been?" "Don't you know anything?" along with that nasty laughter. I said nothing.

You may wonder if these people were nasty people, well-known egotistical fans to whom others give wide berth. Unfortunately not. On both occasions, fans who would consider themselves to be almost ambassadors of fandom were responsible, mature people who should know better. This is why I think they perhaps did it unwittingly, allowing the monster to come out for a moment of self-gratification.

Of course, for these two instances I have literally hundreds of good experiences. I cannot remember all the good times at Eastercons, Albacons, zz9 meetings let alone stuff like Octocon's and Sproutlore. For an example, at Damn Fine Con, I was talking to some trufs about various stuff, and at one stage my lack of knowledge was quite apparent. Now this lack of knowledge, to a creature, would be seen as ignorance, and something to strike at. There are perhaps few things in the world worse than being made look ignorant.

Fortunately I was talking to Julian Headlong, whom I had just met. He saw what he perceived to be a lack of knowledge, and so he shared his knowledge with me, explaining stuff and recounting things, in a simple easygoing fashion. I was enthralled and he seemed happy to pass on his experiences and knowledge as long as I asked questions.

I learned stuff.

Of course knowledge is power, but real power is the ability to empower someone else, and imparting knowledge fulfils this. This is something the creature does not understand. Julian did though, or perhaps is just a decent fellow.

Other forms of the creature exist in fandom, and recently I met one. I was at a convention and met a chap who seemed to be going on quite a lot about a particular author, he was a big collector, had a huge collection, you name it, he had it. He was the guy.

I waited a while and in a quiet moment asked him if he could perhaps send me some scans of some of the near unfindable books that he had in his possession for use on a website, something that everyone could then look at. The response was quite surprising. It was a resounding "No." Apparently they were boxed up, and it would be way too much work to get them out. They were in his brother's lock up, and he didn't get there often. Too much hassle, sorry.

"Useful," I thought. Another form of the monster: arrogant when it comes to boasting – especially to show off and impress – but upon further investigation the creature becomes what it is; a selfish monster that will tell you about its toys, but won't share them.

Of course, the amount of fans who *have* gone to extraordinary lengths to send me stuff is legion; Mark Plummer, for instance, continually sends me stuff. He is really quite decent, as I have no idea where I would get it, if he wasn't so kind. Is it noticeable that Mark is unassuming; I have never seen him act arrogantly. He is always prepared to impart his knowledge. Maybe the monster isn't at home there. No wonder the good doctor took notice and offered a prescription, but even with that there is no monster.

The monster can also incite a negative opinion about someone else, due to its behaviour. At an Albacon, I was talking at the bar with a few guys and one started talking about a guy called Peter Weston. I asked who this guy was, and received the creature's response, wondering how I couldn't know that Weston ran the Worldcon in 1986, ho ho, how funny, you are so naïve and ignorant etc. Being a bit miffed, as one is after such an instance, I took it in my head that although the fan was arrogant and rude, it was somehow Peter Weston's fault. Is that looney or what?

Anyhow as I wandered down a corridor I mumbled "fuck Peter Weston" as I booted an inanimate object, and I received the retort of "I wouldn't do that James." It was Tobes, long time friend and con-goer. I just said, "aw, some wanker took this piss out of me cause I didn't know this Weston guy." "Uh-huh, fucking wanker, eh?" said Tobes. "Well Peter is all right, James, he makes the Hugos, writes fanish stuff, has run good conventions and he is a good bloke, honest." continued the Jersey lad. "Fancy a beer?"

That was that, and although I have never spoken to Peter Weston, I have always assumed that he is a good bloke, just as Tobes said. It could have been different though. Even now when I write it down it seems a bit crazy, or maybe just human.

Is arrogance the enemy then? I thought about this and felt that it wasn't. Some sort of arrogance, which I would class as a form of confidence, seems to have a positive influence on things. I looked to myself. Am I arrogant?

Well, yes I am at times, I think.

For instance, just a couple of months ago I was involved with running Damn Fine Convention. I had previously been at a Karaoke night with a group of fans, and it was brilliant. We all got involved with it and I was really surprised at how well it worked. I put the idea forward to have a karaoke at the con, and was pretty determined about having it. We were going to have three nights of entertainment anyhow, and the committee agreed. We let people know what was going on, and Robert Newman received feedback at the likes of the Tun.

Feedback from Robert quoted many well-known and respected fans, along the following lines: "You're having a stupid karaoke evening which will be crap." In regard to overall opinion about DFC it seemed very positive: "Except the karaoke, which people really were negative about." I didn't care. Here is Robert

being progressive, getting feedback and opinion, and then I throw part of it out the window. Now *that* is arrogant.

The Karaoke was a success, the DJs never saw so many requests, and so many good renditions, people drifted in and stayed, and surprisingly even some who had been bitterly critical of the idea, well, they got up and sang too, which was cool.

So here is a situation where arrogance works, or maybe it is confidence, but aggressive confidence, which could be arrogance, maybe. Perhaps there is good arrogance and negative arrogance, and the end result is the only determining factor.

So some arrogance can be good, depending on the situation.

I wondered whether there was a reason that new fans, or younger fans, might be given a rough welcome. Could it be like Vietnam? Experienced fans feeling that to be too friendly might be a waste as so many newbies come and go. Are they then helping this vicious circle with that attitude? I also wonder... Is it wider? Do conventions offer anything to those who have never been to one before, or offer an explanation of what a convention is, or just welcome people as they walk in? Or is it a blank face looking through a list for a bag or envelope, hassled and rushed and wanting to get on with the next person, someone they know?

Perhaps it's because younger people have a potential that older fans have passed by. It's strange that you rarely see accomplished fans bragging about who they met, or how many books they own. Does the older journeyman fan feel that he needs to keep the young 'uns in their place by forcing a hierarchy within fandom?

I cannot say why some fans feel they have to belittle or mock others for self-gratification purposes. I presume it is a problem that they have and need to deal with.

I do know that it won't hurt to be nice to other individuals.

I do know that I will try to be careful with new fans, and I have tried to be welcoming to all, at cons and stuff, as people will know from various opening ceremonies, or first nights. I think I go too far sometimes, perhaps nearly pestering people seeing if they are ok. Probably the better of two evils though.

I have listed a number of negative experiences. I unfortunately could list more, having seen it happen to others, and also hearing it from them, but that would not be quite so personal. Fortunately the positive ones would take up a lot more space. I have met so many terrific people, and been at so many brilliant events, the craic was mighty, and on occasion I was pulled out of the gutter by fans, so there is an overwhelming positive feeling from fandom.

I found it hard to personally recall the creature's work. I have been around a good while, going to cons and the such, and the instances above occurred on a bi-annual basis, which is few and far between. I wonder, though, how many newbies have slipped through the cracks? And did fans even notice that the creature of the deep, lurking, waiting, lunging and striking a death blow, sent a potential fan on their way? Ask yourself, could you do better? I could, couldn't you? Is it that hard?

I am not asking much. All we need to do is be positive, be enlightening, be friendly, offer information, intrigue our fellow fans, explain stuff that's unclear, ask if they feel patronised, allow them their opinion, listen as well as talk and welcome them to the great party.

Isn't that the way we would like ourselves to be perceived? No one wants to be a monster, surely?

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.