



Imagine, if you will, a snotty little kid standing in front of the corner store counter, rolled up comic book in one hand and greasy quarter in the palm of the other.

Or how about a surly teenager draped like a coat over a study hall chair, engrossed in a beaten-up sci fi paperback?

They are both classic scenarios in American culture, representing our fascination as youths for fantasy and myth. Indeed, the images are easy to pull from most of our memories, because the majority of us were there at one time.

But move on a step, through high school and college, and the images begin to get foggy. Somewhere along the line, we are left on the borders of the plains of reality, and conceptions of the mind change. Life becomes serious business; the comics are handed down to siblings and the sci fi books are turned in for mature fiction.

After all, no one wants to be a snotty or surly adult.

All that is changing, though. Children no longer have the corner on the fantasy market. Science fiction stores are springing up like proverbial mushrooms, and are doing well. And they are gearing themselves increasingly toward the older reader.

The Fantasy Shop, at 667 E. 13th Street, is a prime example. When the comic book store opened in 1974, says owner Darrell Grimes, patrons were mostly younger. Now, he says, at least 40 percent of his clientele

are collectors. At least half of his customers are over 21.

"When most people were in junior high and high school, there was heavy pressure from parents and peers that comics were for kids," he says. "And if you read comics you were considered weak and pansy. People couldn't relate anything serious to funnies."

Things started to change in the sixties with the rise of Marvel comics characters such as Spiderman.

"They left the characters with the personalities they had before they got their powers," Grimes says. "They also put more realism in the thing. In one Spiderman, for instance, he was shooting his web to another building and nothing happened — he had run out of the stuff."

"Marvel still had the kids, but they had sophistication."

Marvel certainly knew what it was doing. Begun in 1961 with Stan Lee at the fore, it overtook D.C. for the leadership in the comic book world by 1965. Now, Marvel sells three times as many comics as its nearest competitor.

Grimes says his biggest seller is Howard the Duck, a relative newcomer to the field. Howard sells about 100 a month, edging out Spiderman and the Fantastic Four.

For comparative purposes, Superman, the former champ, sells about 20.

Grimes hedges on judging whether comics are better or worse than ten years ago.

"Today, kids think that the new comics are better than the old ones. It's their time. It all depends on what your time is."

Michael Coan doesn't think that age makes any difference when it comes to appreciating science fiction.

"I think it's your mental space," he says. "It depends a lot on how open-minded you are."

Coan has been running Gandalf's Den in the Atrium Building for about a year and a half. The store handles science fiction, fantasy, classic mysteries, and various related paraphernalia — T-shirts, jewelry, games.

"We opened to fill a gap that was here," he says. "There were no science fiction stores. So people would end up going into a store, and they'd tell you something was good, and it'd turn out to be garbage."

The store, he says, was designed for the hard cores, the people who have been into science fiction and needed a place for good books and good advice. The response has been so good that Coan is thinking of expanding later in the year.

Coan feels secure about the store's future because he doesn't think it needs sci fi fads to survive. *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, he says, have not changed trends as much as one would think, other than to give it increased respectability. Parents, he says, are no longer as reluctant to buy their children science fiction.

The biggest effect the two movies have had, outside of paraphernalia related directly to them, has been in the area of games and toys. TSR has put out several games that have broken many of the conventions of games heretofore popular.

The new games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, center not so much on winning as on players assuming the roles of various characters in the game. The situations and characters can change continually, and the game can run as long as the players like.

Still, 80 percent of Coan's sales are from books. Sci fi sells more than fantasy, Coan says, but adds that true light fantasy — *Lord of the Rings*, *Watership Down* — is not as plentiful. He also sells sword and sorcery literature, which he says is much more technical.

Coan says that the biggest charge he gets out of the store is "dealing with people." He admits

that he loves to talk, and a half hour in the store bears it out — a one sentence question is greeted with a 10-minute answer.

The worst part of it?

"When some ass comes in and says, 'oh, a comic book store' or 'a science fiction store.' I suppose people have to deal with it somehow."

Peralandra's, 790 E. 11th Street, is the youngest of the three, opening last September. It also has the distinction of selling both science fiction and metaphysical literature.

Unlike Coan, who finds it "too dry," owner Marva Van Natta likes "hard core" science fiction — that which deals extensively with technology of the future.

"I don't like living right now and I look in the past and don't like that either, so I like the future," she says.

She pauses, then adds, "Although if I were born 2000 years from now, I would probably still bitch."

Van Natta, who has a degree in English, has read science fiction most of her life. The metaphysical literature, on the other hand, is a

more recent addition to her reading lists. She sees a relationship between the two, pointing out that science fiction often manifests powers discussed in occult books. Furthermore, science fiction has the potential of becoming cultish, such as have *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune*, and *Lord of the Rings*.

However, Van Natta will not call science fiction a religion.

"There's too many different opinions," she says.

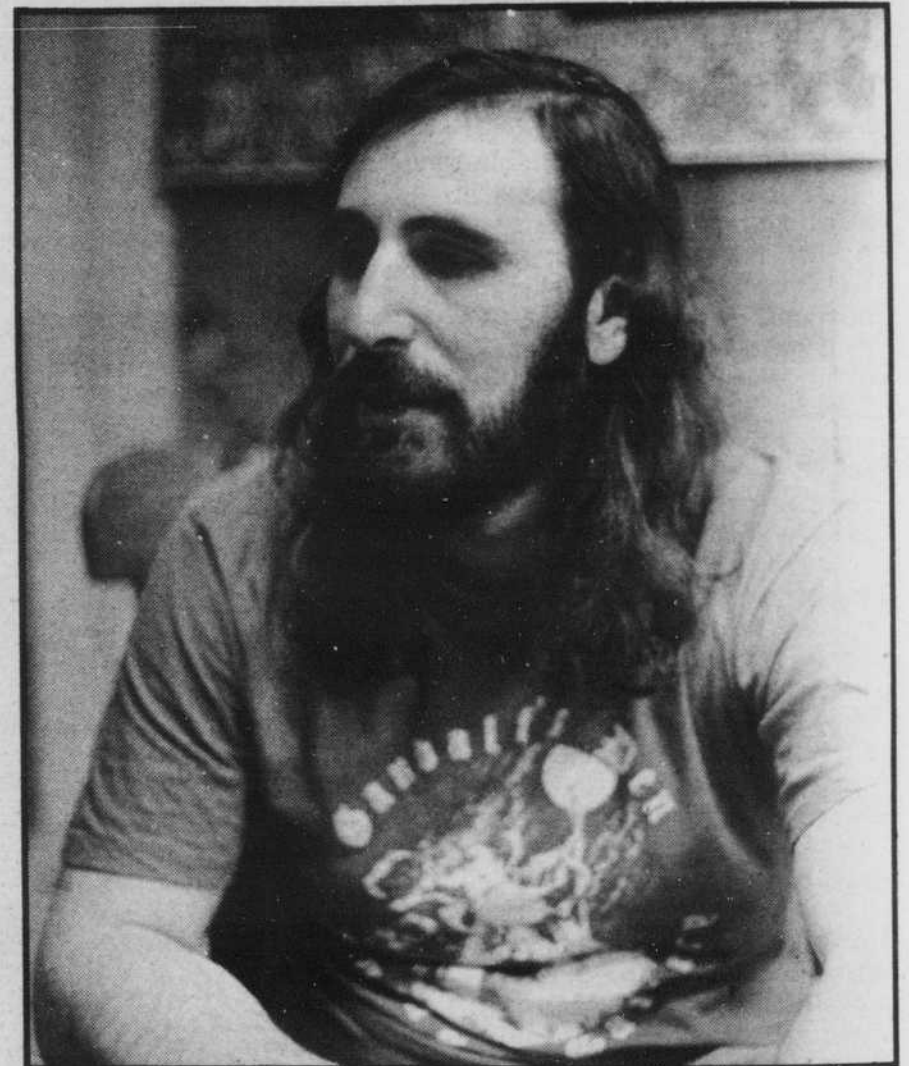
Different opinions? It may prevent science fiction from becoming religion, a total indulgence in a fantasy world. But it also gives science fiction its appeal. One can pick and choose how one wishes to push back reality for a few hours.

Most people who scorn science fiction do not despise the literature, but the freedom which it implies.

Why should anyone have the right to avoid the realities which we must all face?

Perhaps the answer lies back there somewhere with the snotty kid and the surly teenager. That's where the whole thing started.

By Eric Maloney
Photos by Erich Boekelheide



Michael Coan, owner of Gandalf's Den, got into the fantasy business a year and a half ago. And it's beginning to be profitable, as Coan looks to expanding his store later this year.

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