

The Island of Doctor Gernsback 2.0

A fannish ritual written by Bernadette L. Bosky, Kevin J. Maroney, and Arthur D. Hlavaty and performed at Detcon 1

Welcome to “The Island of Dr. Gernsback 2.0.”

Arthur and I wrote the original “Island of Dr. Gernsback” back in the dark ages of the mid-1980s, before we became a family with Kevin. The two of us performed the skit at the 1987 Corflu, a small convention for old-style fannish fanzine fans. As part of that Corflu, it was videotaped and appeared in a special issue of Bill Bowers’ fanzine **Outworlds**, which also came out in print. The original “Island of Dr. Gernsback” was reprinted in *Fanthology* ’87, which is archived online.

<<http://www.reocities.com/Athens/8720/island.htm>>.

Arthur and I could not have done this revised edition without our better third, Kevin Maroney—his contributions range from the new title on.

Updating from the 20th century to the 21st was more work than I had anticipated, though Kevin said he expected it to be just that complicated. Ever the pessimist. Fandom is more diverse in many ways, and everything sped up and amplified once we entered the digital age.

In this presentation, you may recognize many references to specific fannish scandals and faux pas, classic and recent. But we almost never mention names, and I doubt you’d win if you did sue in a court of law.

The title is an allusion to **The Island of Dr. Moreau**, a short, classic sf novel by H. G. Wells. In that work--as you know, Bob—a shipwrecked man is washed up on a strange island. He finds the people there extremely odd and vaguely repellent—something about their hairy appearance, odd physique, or even odor. Yet they seem to have some abilities that also separate them from normal human beings. {pause} Of course, this suggested some analogies to fandom.

The people seem to function like a tribe. (Knowing look, even “Right?”) Their ritual is the Saying of the Law, with the rules of the tribe, which the visitor witnesses with some astonishment. After each law, everyone in the tribe replies, “Are we not men?”

So this presentation—the Saying of **our** Laws—depends greatly on audience participation. When I raise my arms (does so), answer, “Are we not fen?”

Are we not fen?

Everyone! No need to use your indoor voices!

Are we not fen?

More, like it’s a cult or something!

Are we not fen?

Great!

Be sure to wait and respond when I raise my arms but not until I do. Otherwise you might spoil some of the jokes. And then we might have to kill you. H H O K.

–Bernadette Bosky

The Island of Doctor Gernsback 2.0

The Sayer of the Law stepped into the room filled with hushed and respectful men and women waiting for his word. He was tall and walked with a nerdy little half-shuffle, but all saw on him the vestments of his authority: the nametag, the propeller beanie, and the black bow tie. The red light from around the corners of the room reflected from his eyeglasses, which seemed to have been made out of the bottom of Coca-Cola bottles, edged with wire rims. He set down his bheer, ascended the podium, and cleared his throat. An expectant hush fell over the eager faces of those assembled.

Around him all the tribes of fandom gathered. Older men and women reminisced about Walt Willis, prozine lettercols, mimeography, and apas. Younger fen spoke excitedly about the latest Kickstarter project, Benedict Cumberbatch reaction shots on Tumblr, and lolcats vs. doge, usually in 140 characters or less.

Everyone had come together: the con fen and club fen and zine fen, the sercon and the fannish, the neofen and SMOFs, the media fanfic writers and the fake geek boys, the costumers and the academics. Here were the Whovians, Trekkers and Trekkies, and the SCAdians. The LARPerS, the tabletop gamers, the comic fans. The filkers and furies and even the dirty pros.

The Sayer of the Law shook his incipient jowls and intoned:

"Now begins the Saying of the Law!" The strong voice rang out.

And all the fans turned to the speaker, and as one the voices rose from the worn carpet to the cheap chandelier, filling the room and even reaching the group backrub in the blandly painted hotel corridor beyond.

They replied, *"Are we not fen?"*

"Not to call it sci-fi, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to pull a raygun on a SWAT team, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to bend comic book covers back."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to feed the trolls, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to vote awards to those we disagree with."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to worship dead white male writers."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to give spoilers, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to be a jerk if someone gives spoilers, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to delay the elevators at conventions."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to mistake the customs of your tribe for the laws of the universe."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to mistake a costume for consent, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

Then, the troublemaker came forth: the notorious Monkey Ravine.

[Monkey: I'M AN ANAGRAM!]

Famous both for his endlessly retweeted tweets and his acerbic remarks, he was a figure feared by all on the Intertubes and desired by all femmefen. His many followers were known for imitating his formidable, unkempt hair, beard, and eyebrows and his imposing corpulent physique.

He snickered at the Sayer of the Law, and the Sayer of the Law scowled at Monkey Ravine. Yet both knew that each represented an essential side of the Cosmic Fannish Force.

"Not to bring dozens of copies of the same book to the author's autograph session, that is the Law."

COULD YOU SIGN THOSE "TO EBAY"?

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to be a walking bingo card of thoughtless remarks, that is the Law."

FREE SPACE: "I DON'T SEE A PROBLEM."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to mansplain."

THAT'S WHEN YOU EXPLAIN, IN A CONDESCENDING MANNER, SOMETHING EVERYONE ALREADY KNOWS.

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to cause actual casualties when LARPing, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to say 'hashtag' out loud."

HASHTAG: #AN-NOY-ING

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to read the comments on an unmoderated blog."

FIRST!

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to reveal the secrets of Scientology."

POOR LITTLE CLAMS! SNAP SNAP SNAP!

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to call anyone a fake geek girl, that is the Law!"

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to ask authors where they get their ideas."

SCHENECTADY!

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to repeat yourself like a consuite blowhard."

GOING ON AND ON AND SAYING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER IN AS MANY WORDS AS POSSIBLE.

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to make it your job to fulfill Rule 34."

[MONKEY GRINS & LOOKS LASCIVIOUS]

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to live-tweet while you're ON THE PANEL."

[MONKEY TWEETS THIS]

[Sayer scowls]

"Are we not fen?"

The Sayer of the Law smiled. This was good. His father and his father's father before him had been Sayers of the Law—although there had been talk recently about women wanting the job. The holders of his holy office led the fen in the Saying of the Law at each secret gathering, just like this one. Thus had it been since the days of Roscoe, when *Zombie* meant a zine by Bob Tucker and not a cannibalistic corpse (slow or fast), when even Harry Warner was young. Many had tried to stop the Saying of the Law--the Shaverfen and fringefen, the Siffy channel and douchebros. All had failed. And all would fail!

There were rumors of a strange, dark history of which no one spoke. Some said that all those in the room--even, some hinted, the Sayer of the Law himself!--had originally been among the most feared enemies of the Law: the Mundanes. Then, these rumors said, some unknown, fantastic, astounding—

(AND F&SF!)

—surgery had reduced their wallets but amplifying their voices and enlarging their bandwidth, book collections, capacity to remember trivia, and waistlines, making them fen.

But the origin mattered not--they were fen! The audience grew restless, beginning to live-tweet, and the speaker nodded and began again.

"Not to say no one reads young adult fiction, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to let George R.R. Martin cater your wedding."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to come to a masquerade with peanut butter as your only costume."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to use hecto to print zines."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to be a mad dog that knees people in the groin."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to play D&D in the steam tunnels."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to tolerate book covers that depict African-American characters as green, blue, or even Caucasian."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to bind prozines with staples, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to grope someone who gives you an award."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to do bondage with the hotel sprinkler system."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to follow people into the elevator to proposition them."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to start a war over a fan fund, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to sit where Dave Kyle says you can't."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to say, 'But there weren't people of color then.'"

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to take Isaac Asimov as a role model for flirting."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to hold a disabilities panel where the participants will have to climb stairs."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to ask when *The Last Dangerous Visions* is coming out."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to talk about how good an editor looks in her bathing suit."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to hijack the Hugoes just to be a dick, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

The enthusiasm in the room grew. The figures in the red-lit room began to sway in unison with the chant.

"Not to call anyone a fake geek girl, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to regard the fiction Hugos as the only real ones, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to be a rules lawyer."

UM, ACTUALLY, ASSERTING THE FINE POINTS OF RULES CAN BE QUITE VALUABLE.

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to laugh at the ships in someone else's fanfic."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to mistake costume for consent, that is the Law."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to make fun of the Bronies."

BECAUSE THEY CAN WHUP YOUR ASS.

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to have obvious zippers on your SCA garb."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to wear costumes at a World Fantasy Con, unless you're a guest of honor."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to use 'gay,' 'girlie,' or 'lame' as general insults."

THAT'S SO RETARDED.

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to treat the pros as more than human. Or less than human."

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to tell an author you'll be angry at him if he dies before he finishes the series."

GRRM SAYS, "FUCK YOU." [SHOOTS THE DOUBLE BIRD.]

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to think that 'bisexual polyamorous' means 'of course I'll have sex with you.'"

[MIMES PHONING AND MOUTHS "CALL ME."]

"Are we not fen?"

"Not to go to programming, that is the law."

"Are we not fen?"

The Sayer of the Law straightened his bow tie and held out his hands in blessing over his congregation--neo and First Fandom alike, he blessed them. From such eager disciples would the SMOFS of tomorrow come--the BNFs, the Fan GoHs, perhaps even another Speaker of the Law when his own days were through and he retired to his past glory and to FAPA. He lowered his hands and began the stirring conclusion in a rhythmic voice, pounding the table and almost spilling his bheer:

"His is the hand that types!

"His are the thumbs that text!

"His are the bleary eyes!

"His are the hands that hit send!

"His are the words on the paper; his is the post on the blog!

"His are the pixel-stained wretches; his are the LoCs and reviews!

"His is the Tumblr; his is the LJ.

"His is the house of fanac!

"His are the e-zines and archives!

"His are the con and the concom!

"His are the Hokus or egoboo!

"HIS IS THE LAW!"

And in a triumphant, climactic swell came the reply from the excited, almost dancing, figures in the room:

"ARE WE NOT FEN?"

Afterwards, the fen began to relax, knowing that in that moment they had all experienced that ultimate, still moment of peace beyond understanding, the lovely sweetness of the direct experience of trufanhood.

The Sayer of the Law looked out over the satisfied crowd in front of him, femmefan and manfan, young and old alike, and was happy. No one exactly knew anymore who the "him" referred to in the Saying of the Law was. Was it Yog-Xipcode, eater of fanzines, whose hungry tricolored maw must ever be appeased? Was it Ghu, god of fanac, or Corflu, god of goo? It could not be Kalahaba, god of turn signals, that being another mythos altogether. Some had even whispered that "he" was Roscoe himself.

Giving his propeller a jaunty swirl, the Sayer of the Law walked out of the red-litten ceremonial room and into the earthtone tacky monotone of the convention hotel corridor. A few departing fen smiled at him with unabashed admiration in their eyes, and he was pleased to see them going back to their various fannish activities.

In one corner, some smoffed, speaking of Worldcon sites. Others played Hearts, or Candy Crush, or Cards Against Humanity. The bathtub was being filled with the traditional lime Jell-o. Learned elders spoke of the Breendoggle and Degler, while younger ones muttered "Ermahgerd" and snickered. Worldcon bidcoms grew, split, and rejoined, like crazed amoebas. Blog was quaffed and crottled greeps were eaten. Filksongs were sung and LARPs were larped.

The Sayer of the Law looked, and found it good. As he closed the door behind him and walked down the hallway he smiled and whispered to himself,

"Yes.

"Yes. We are fen."