



# COMSTAR

Publication of the *U.S.S. Chesapeake Star Trek* and Science-Fiction Club  
December, 2007

## Happy holidays! It's the December club meeting!

Let's celebrate the season as only the crew of the *U.S.S. Chesapeake Star Trek* and Science-Fiction Club can do on Saturday night, December 15, for what has long been one of our most popular and enjoyable events of the entire year!

The meeting will be held at the Potomac, Maryland, home of Chief Operations Officer Ann Harding.

We'll kick off the holiday festivities with our dinner at 5:00 p.m., which is again being coordinated this year by Second Officer Phil Margolies.

Conn Officer Lorenzo Heard will be cooking turkey and some veggies for club members to enjoy, so be sure to come hungry and bring plenty of food to share with your crewmates.

At 7:00 p.m., we'll start our monthly business meeting, which will include the latest updates on club member activities, finding out the most recent news in *Star Trek* and other science fiction, and

planning many of our discussion panels for the fan-run Farpoint convention that will be held in Hunt Valley (north of Baltimore), Maryland, in mid-February. Of course, that always depends on the snow or lack thereof.

We'll also be talking about other conventions that will take place over the next year, including Shore Leave during July, 2008.

At some point during the evening, we'll participate in our annual gift exchange. Be sure that you bring at least one wrapped science-fiction-related gift costing no more than \$20. Chief of Security Wayne Hall will manage this yearly event. It's always fun to see just what the creative minds in the club have sought out and brought to the meeting to exchange with (and then steal from) other members!

For directions to the meeting and party, check out the front page of this month's Insert in our club's Yahoo! Group! ■



## CAPTAIN'S LOG: It's a wonderful *Trek*

Judging from the weather the past several days, it's beginning to look a lot like the holiday season. And just in time, we're finally going to see some of the "independent pro-



Without Captain Kirk (center), would it be a "wonderful *Trek*?"

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"*Star Trek*,"  
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duction" entitled *Star Trek: Of Gods and Men* on December 22.

I'm really looking forward to that, in part because it features several actors who had one-time guest spots in Classic *Trek* and was directed by Tim Russ, who played Vulcan Security Chief Tuvok in

*Voyager* for seven years.

In case you haven't heard, the plot of that three-part film deals with what would have happened if Kirk had never become captain of the *Enterprise*. And if that reminds you of an old Christmas movie, join the club (in a manner of speaking).

Wayne can tell you that one of my favorite traditions this time of year is watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, the story of George Bailey and his chance to see what the world would have been like if he'd never been born.

Granted that the film is a long haul to sit through, but I never cease to be moved by the tale of a regular guy who thought he was a failure only to learn that he really had made a difference in other people's lives.

I guess it's pretty obvious why a Kirk fan like me would be moved by a tale like that, but this year, I've had a different twist on that concept: What would the world be like if *Star Trek* had never happened?

In the grand scheme of things, I suppose not much would be different. The world would still be revolving, and most of us would still be living out our lives, though certainly without nearly as much fun.

And many of the scientific advances heralded by appearing on the *Enterprise* – such as cell phones and doors that seem to open on their own – would likely have still come our way, though they might have taken a while longer.

By the way, do you remember where you were the first time a set of doors opened up in front of you, just like on the bridge? I was

going into a grocery store in southwestern Michigan when that happened to me, and I was dumbfounded.

The people inside told me to come on in because the winter air was making them cold, but instead, I stepped back and waited for the doors to close. When that was done, I walked back into the entrance and watched the doors open again. And again! I did finally get my groceries, but it took me a while.

*Star Trek* has had an impact in many other areas as well, such as interracial tolerance and trends in entertainment (such as ensemble casts and extended continuity). Nevertheless, it's still likely that those things would have come around eventually.

With that concept in mind, I suspect that if *Trek* had not been there, someone else would have come up with it. Oh, it probably wouldn't have been exactly the same, since the particular combination of producers, writers, actors and others from the 1960s would have been different.

Still, the combination of high-flying science-fiction adventure with philosophy and social commentary would have happened and caught on at some point, and those of us who have embraced *Trek* with all the energy and enthusiasm we have would have done so in that other incarnation.

But I figure it wouldn't have been quite the same, either. Each of us has our favorite characters and stories, and whether it's Captain Kirk, Seven of Nine or Ensign Mayweather, they have inspired and motivated us to be better than we've been, and that's something special in entertainment.

A year from now, we'll get our first look at a movie presenting a new "vision" of *Star Trek*, and it'll be "fascinating" to see how that will play out.

For now, though, our favorite science-fiction franchise continues to live long and prosper, and that's something worth celebrating.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to wish the members and friends of the U.S.S. *Chesapeake* a happy holiday season and a joyous new year. I hope to see you at the Holiday Party next Saturday, so bring your food and your fun as we bring another "enterprising" year to a close! ■

Captain Randy Hall

# SCIENCE *TREK*: The genes in you, not on you

Remember grammar school (or did I just bring up painful memories)? Learning all those words, from the simple “a” to the slightly more complex, such as “endeavor” and “lexicalization,” and the rules to assemble them in one or more standardized or at least comprehensible order wasn’t easy in first grade (or for some people, college).

Imagine a language with only four letters and an all-important rule of grammar: All words consist of exactly three letters ... though sentences can be of any length. Oh, and most of the words in each sentence are gibberish.

If you guessed we’re talking about the language of genetics, go get yourself a cookie; you deserve it!

When people speak of genes/jeans most days, they’re talking about the “J” word. It’s only when we’re seeking a mate or spawning offspring that we think about the “G” ones (biologists excused).

Conjecture: Most folk thought they knew all they needed to know about genetics by the end of high school. Well, think again. According to a November 12, 2007, article (page A8) in the *Washington Post*, “[s]cience is rewriting the book on genes.” (Wayne can bring copies to the Holiday Party.)

For those who skipped 10<sup>th</sup>-grade biology or fell asleep during the lectures, here’s a quick refresher. The code that runs our body is written in DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). Each DNA molecule is composed of compounds called nucleotides strung along a long, twisted ladder with sections called genes (a pair of ladders wrapped around each other is a chromosome, of which most people have 23).

The four nucleotides are conveniently called A, T, C and G. (For those who want to know, those are the first letter of the name of each chemical. For those who want to know the names, look ‘em up or ask Abby ... she’s a scientist.) All told, each person has about 22,000 genes made of 3.1 billion nucleotide pairs.

Each “rung” of the ladder consists of a pair of nucleotides (A always pairs with T, and C always pairs with G), and each set of three pairs forms a word: ATC, GGT, CAT, etc. Each word is a code (read by mRNA, which is just a temporary string of nucleotides that match

up with a section of DNA) that specifies an amino acid.

A gene consists of a starting section, coding sequences (exons), filler sequences (introns) and an ending section. Between the genes are strings of nucleotide pairs that scientists used to refer to as “junk” DNA because they appeared to have no function. The 500,000 stretches of “junk” DNA makes up about 95 percent of the 23 chromosomes.

Build together a gaggle of amino acids, and you have a protein. Proteins are the switches that turn on and off bodily functions. (No, not that kind of bodily functions — I mean, telling a gland to start or stop producing a hormone ... oh, forget it.)

*Real world example:* There’s a gene somewhere in each of your cells that contains the code for making the protein prothrombin, which tells your blood when to clot. Kinda important if you’re bleeding.

In the past few years, scientists have made several discoveries that have changed the way we think about DNA and how it operates. One big revelation is that one gene does not equal one protein. That is, a gene can produce different proteins under different circumstances.

Say there’s a “Dog squirrel sentence gene” that typically produces a sentence (code for making a protein): “The brown dog attacked the grey squirrel.” Sometimes, the gene can produce proteins that have different wording (that is, functions): “The dog attacked the squirrel” or even “The brown squirrel attacked the grey dog.”

(How does it do that? Remember those exons — coding sequences — and introns — non-coding filler sequences? Just add a few introns, leave out a few exons, and suddenly, the gene is coding different amino acids, and hence different proteins.)

What about those “junk” sequences that don’t code amino acids? Turns out they appear to regulate the sections that do code amino acids. (The old 5 percent code, 95 percent documentation).

Another beautiful theory knocked down by ugly fact is that the genome is not the efficient machine it was thought to be. The gene that produces prothrombin is a complicated

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A DNA ladder

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## REFLECTIONS: The *Eureka* Factor

Someone inquired as to my thoughts on the current writers' strike, and how I could survive it (Yes, I'm on strike. I'm not really writing this.) since I watch so much television. Question one was easy — this is the first writer's strike that I actually agree with. (I was labeled a traitor during the last strike.) The fact that the networks are adamant about not paying residuals for box sets and Internet airings are actually political in nature and is much too complicated to delve into for this column.

As for the second question, there are some shows I will sincerely miss (the lack of *24* may produce real tears), but most of the genre shows, especially the new ones, will be no major loss to me. Besides, I have so many genre TV box sets to watch, I've created my own network, complete with daily schedules and listing catalog. *Lorenzo TV* — the dawn of a new era.

You may have noticed that in recent years, most of the genre shows seem to share certain distinctions. They seem to be ... (How can I put this delicately?) science fiction without REALLY being science fiction. Let me elaborate.

A few years ago, there was a show on ABC called *Invasion* and its creator, Shaun Cassidy (Yes, the "Hardy Boy"—great writer, horrible musician.) stated emphatically that his show was NOT science fiction even though it involved alien landings and abduction.

Mr. Cassidy figured if he could convince the mass public that his show was a drama, he could trick them into tuning in. The Networks, along with Mr. Cassidy, believe that most people (Mundanes) are turned off by those two little words, and they're right. As a matter of fact, fantasy writers are being seriously pushed to call ALL genre outings "speculative fiction," lumping them in to one group. Fortunately, this is meeting with serious resistance from science-fiction writers.

For the most part, your best science fiction was usually about some discovery and exploration, not technology as the Mundanes think. The current crop of genre shows show little in the way of discovery, exploration and forward-thinking. There are exceptions (*Battlestar Galactica*, *Eureka*, *The 4400*, *Stargate Atlantis*, *Painkiller Jane*), but they aren't the rule. The rest are shows that at first glance do not LOOK like science fiction. This is called the *Eureka* Factor.

Since this show and *The 4400* began, they have become the templates for all genre shows

that follow. *Eureka's* big numbers do not go unnoticed by the Networks, and if something on TV is successful, the other Networks will copy it. Except FOX. They are the only network to take science fiction head on and not water it down like cheap rot-gut whiskey.

To further elaborate, the *Eureka* Factor is when you take a show with a science-fiction premise and disguise or de-emphasize that aspect. Networks think this will create a show that ordinary people (Mundanes) will appreciate, thus making it a hit and pleasing both the Networks and the American people (except FOX).

Ever since Sci Fi Channel hit pay dirt with *Eureka*, they have been desperately trying to milk that formula for all it's worth, but with mixed results. Some did not catch on (*Flash Gordon* and the excellent *Painkiller Jane*), some did (*Tin Man*). But they all shared the same bottom line: they were shows the Mundanes did not have to put a lot of thought into.

Pretty soon, ALL the Networks were working the *Eureka* Factor. CBS tried with *Threshold*, a series produced by *Star Trek's* Brannon Braga. NBC tried, first with *Surface*, then with its entire new line-up. ABC did it with the aforementioned *Invasion*. They all want that elusive science-fiction show (because "science fiction" means "smart") that won't go over the heads of your average viewer (Mundanes) and if it does, the average viewer (Mundanes) won't notice.

This backward way of genre programming is not just restricted to the U.S. Britain has been abandoning science fiction also, albeit in an entirely different way. They have the "I can't believe it's not science fiction" approach or, as I call it, the "Josh Weedon" method. Take a show with an interesting premise and make the writing so tongue-in-cheek or silly that no one takes it seriously. *Torchwood*, for all its ADULT approach to its storylines, blocks the science fiction with its tongue planted firmly in cheek, usually overshadowing a good story with stupidity. *Primeval* lacked the will, nerve or courage to take itself or its premise serious even for a nano-second.

This is what prevented me from becoming a *Buffy* fan (that and the really silly premises that aired instead of real stories). This also plagued *Farscape* in its last two seasons (when Kemper took over). This is what scares me the most.

Next month: *DS9* turns 15! Boy howdy! ■  
Conn Officer Lorenzo Heard



Sheriff Jack Carter (right) and his daughter Zoe try to figure out why *Eureka's* ratings are so high.



## WAYNE'S WORLDS: Good luck, *Bionic Woman*

I've been thinking about the state of women in genre television ever since word came out that *Painkiller Jane* had been cancelled. This concerns me because another show with a female lead, *Bionic Woman*, debuted on NBC this fall. If *Jane* couldn't survive on cable, how will this new show do on a broadcast network? And what does all this mean as far as programs that focus on women as their main characters?

I consider myself something of an observer and admire detectives. I like to look for patterns and interesting twists and turns in things. Sadly, the only credential I can give as a detective is when I figured out who died in the painting that the folks at *CSI* posted on the web a few seasons back, so take what I say with a grain of salt.

Outside the genre, women seem to be taking significant strides as far as shows being built around them. Recent examples include CBS's *Cold Case*, NBC's *Crossing Jordan* and, of course, ABC's *Desperate Housewives*, just to name a few. Of course, the networks aren't where they should be, but that will change.

Looking into *Bionic Woman*, I gained more respect for David Eick because he has crafted a show with a female lead that both women and men might like. And that's saying something.

Men's roles have become more and more varied over time on television, and include jock, nerd, professional, womanizer, etc. The roles for women, though, haven't evolved nearly as far.

Looking many years back, most female roles have been secondary ones, from mom to nosy neighbor, but it took decades before women had jobs on TV. But even then, they were mostly serving as secretaries or nurses, taking orders from men. That has changed very slowly.

In particular, *Star Trek* has done a lot in representing women as professionals.

Of course, Lieutenant Uhura was groundbreaking. She was able to hold her own with Kirk, Spock and McCoy, and inspired a lot of women along the way.

Then in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi helped show women as leaders, although they were still maternal roles since they usually were involved in healing. The new female who didn't fit this mold was the one who only lasted the first

season, a security officer named Tasha Yar. She kicked butt and took names, challenging even Worf. We also got to see Dr. Pulaski, who never let Captain Picard finish a sentence. (Of course, she's still my very favorite *TNG* character of all time.)

When *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* came along, the female roles again evolved. Jadzia Dax, who had elements of both male and female in her, and Kira, who was patterned after the valkyries of old, gave as good as they got when it came to working with men. The thing that struck me so much at that time was that the men loved those characters. Many women, on the other hand, did not.

*Star Trek: Voyager* moved women even further, bringing in a female captain and a female chief engineer. Seven of Nine was added in the fourth season, and she helped the show progress as it explored various aspects of womanhood, although not always successfully.

Other genre shows, like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, have succeeded while centered around a female lead.

But for a woman to be in a lead role and be popular, it seemed that one of two things had to be in play:

1. The woman is stepping into a role we have seen men play before (like in *Voyager* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*), and
2. The female is a teenager or in her early 20s at most (like *Buffy*).

Things are different now, and two of the most popular genre-related shows with female leads are very popular among women viewers.

Currently on the air, NBC's *Medium* is quite a hit with the ladies I know. Even though her husband is really a rocket scientist, Allison Dubois wears the pants in that family although she never throws a punch. She's much more the brains, the advisor, the intelligence behind the scenes ... until she yells at her husband.

Same thing applies to CBS's *Ghost Whisperer*, in which Melinda Gordon works to reconcile live people with their dead partners and family members. She's kind of a Dr. Phil for the recently departed, usually ending up telling the living goodbye for the dead who now must move on to star on the CW Network. Again, no punching or kicking on her part — she's a facilitator, not a fighter.

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# COMING EVENTS

DECEMBER

*December 15* ..... Our Holiday Party/ club meeting will be on Saturday, December 15, at Ann Harding's home in Potomac, Maryland! Dinner at 5, meeting at 7!

## SCIENCE TREK: The genes in you, not on you concluded

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read at one end, meaning it's not easy for the body to produce the clotting agent.

Some people have a mutation that makes the gene easier to read, which in turn causes blood clots at the wrong times or places. Why build an inefficient gene? Well, you want to retain the ability to make a clotting agent when needed, but not make it too often.

You'd think it was easy — four letters, always three letter words — but 50 years after the discovery of DNA, we're still learning. Today, we've just scratched the surface of DNA and how the science is changing today.

By the time we reach the 24<sup>th</sup> century, who knows what we'll have discovered, or evolved ourselves into? ■

*Second Officer Phil Margolies*

## WAYNE'S WORLDS: Good luck, *Bionic Woman* concluded

*Continued from page 5*

Why are these well-liked by the ladies while *Painkiller Jane* was not?

COO Ann Harding stated it best: "A female lead must display the best aspects of womanhood."

What does that mean, exactly? Several friends have told me they have to behave specifically the way women want them to, and that includes never resorting to violence or responding in anger; in being supportive rather than confrontational; in talking things out rather than using their fists. They want to feel that they could be friends with the lead character. Really.

See, here's where men and women differ. Men can be scoundrels and jerks and heroes and mass murderers. For many women fans to like a female lead, she can't be, as was told many, many times, "too manly."

This is why many women didn't like Jadzia Dax and Kira on *DS9*, for example. And this is where *Painkiller Jane* failed, I believe. Jane Vasco was "a guy with tits," as one of my comrades told me. Jane didn't act like women wanted her to behave. She punched people in the face when she deemed that necessary.

And many women hated her for it.

Let me point out that this only seems to apply to a female *lead*. If the character is a secondary one, then it seems that anything goes.

I've watched every episode of *Bionic Woman* aired so far, and I have to say I find it kind of moving at a very slow pace. But

something leaped out at me as I watched — David Eick appears to be trying to have it both ways. Yes, Jaime Sommers is a strong, powerful woman. She and Katee Sackhoff fling each other across rooftops in scenes some guys will surely love. But that's not all there is to Jamie. She's also very maternal, taking care of a deaf sister. And that's sure to appeal to the ladies.

Is Mr. Eick on to something here?

I have stated before that I often find myself in the odd position of asking science-fiction fans to think "outside the box." I'm going to make a request like that again.

Why can't we have *Painkiller Jane* as well as *Ghost Whisperer*? I honestly believe that both are valid aspects of women today. And I know there are real-life Jane Vasco's out there just as there are Melinda Gordon's. I'd like to see more of both, honestly.

I think, especially in genre television where pretty much anything goes and we try to expand the limits of our knowledge about ourselves, why not explore as many aspects of our humanity and genders as possible? I honestly believe we limit ourselves when we don't look beyond what's been acceptable in the past.

The bad news is that NBC's *Bionic Woman* has seen its ratings literally cut in half since its debut. Perhaps in trying to please everyone, Mr. Eick has pleased no one. We'll see.

Next month: The success of Sci Fi Channel's *Tin Man*, and why sci-fi fans didn't like it. ■

*Wayne Hall, Chief of Security*



David Eick, the man behind the ladies in *Bionic Woman*