

WHAT I'VE REALLY LEARNED FROM ZINES

13

The editor looks back on his tenure

By Christopher Becker

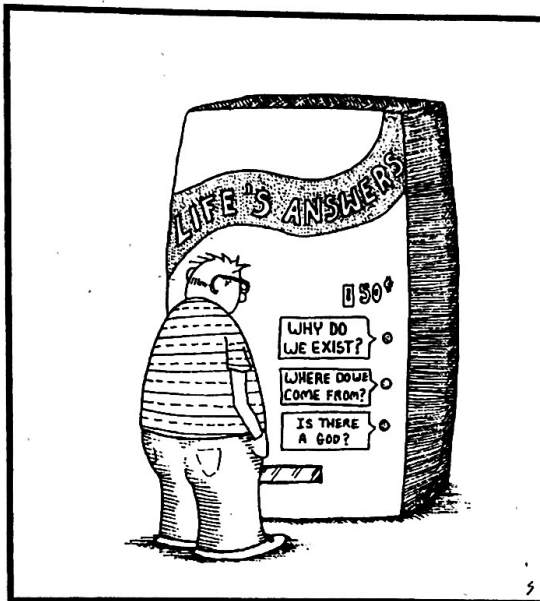
Several years ago in *Factsheet Five*, I started a semi-regular column to report on issues that were being talked about in zines. Although it only lasted a few issues (#57: Mumia, #58: community money, #59: microbroadcasting) "Things I've Learned From Zines" was a neat way for me to highlight interesting current topics. Since this issue of *Factsheet Five* is the last one I will edit, I would like to take some time to explore zines from a broader perspective. When I think back on reading thousands of zines, so many things come to mind that I could make my own zine about the experience. In fact, that's something I hope to do when I rejoin the ranks of zine publishers later this year. But for now, here are some of my ideas distilled to their essence.

1. The Internet will not replace paper. I used to fear that zines would be abandoned in favor of Web-surfing. But with virtually no zine publishers going electronic-only, it's safe to say that staplers and postage stamps will be used by publishers for a long time to come. An Internet connection can, in some instances, be amazingly fast and helpful in tracking down information. But it can't hope to duplicate the experience of receiving a zine in the mail or establishing a personal connection between a publisher and reader. I don't know who first coined "ezine" but it is a horrible misnomer, having nothing to do with what a zine is. Likewise the newsgroup alt.zines: People look to it in vain for information, discussion, and news when they could be getting those things from dedicated review zines or other real sources in the network.

2. Zines are a true source of under-reported news. If there's one thing that reading zines has cemented in my mind, it's that people in power will steal and kill to stay that way, and then lie about their actions. Obviously, not every government official is importing drugs and spying on people, nor is every large company using sweatshop labor or testing their products on people without their consent. But some are. When the government and corporations are forced into admitting their foul play, especially after initial denial, it only makes you wonder what they aren't owning up to. Quaker Oats and MIT fed oatmeal with radioactive tracers to a group of developmentally disabled kids without telling anyone. When they finally settled their case, it was all over in zines. All of my friends knew that Phil Hartman died; practically none of them knew about this.

3. Some people are inexplicably weird, mean, and persistent. Before I became the editor of *Factsheet Five*, I was mostly insulated from dealing with zineworld cranks. But when it became my job to answer the mail and look the kooks square in the face, I got a better appreciation of what Seth had been dealing

with for so long. Hearing complaints about reviews or a lost issue is normal. Getting random, unsigned threatening mail, or having to deal with people who make harassment their full-time job is ridiculous. I started out trying



A philosopher's dream-come-true

to respond to some of the letters I got, but soon realized I was only fueling people's obsessive and warped animosity. Mary Fleener's words of caution from *Factsheet Five* #60 bear repeating: People who contact you through the mail are strangers and you shouldn't let your guard down. I'd like to add that some people will purposely antagonize you, so you shouldn't put too much energy into responding to, or even thinking about their taunts.

4. Zines show a remarkable lack of diversity. While zines sometimes surprise me with the topics that they cover, more often they are clustered around a narrow spectrum of interests. For every zine about country and western music, there are 50 about punk rock. Similar things can be said about zine coverage of politics, lifestyle, hobbies, and personal outlook. Of course, zines reflect the interests of their publishers which raises the bigger question of why publishing attracts such a particular crowd. Where is the zine about model railroad-ing written by a retired family man who goes to church on Sundays? Or the one by a Mexican immigrant that reflects different cultural ideas? Maybe these zines do exist, but I rarely see anything that comes close. Probably the broadest range can be seen in sex zines, where there is something for almost every interest, whether it's pedestrian whack-off material or a fetish for getting crushed by giant black women. But even here, there is a concentration for hot male readers, with only a handful of titles for everyone else.

5. The zine world is fragmented. It still amazes me that zine readers often see only one slice of what is being published. Despite *Factsheet Five* covering the range of zines out there, too many people define zines as existing only within the bounds of one subculture.

While it's great that people can mark out their own territory, there is often little crossover between the niches of science fiction fandom, indie music, sex, mail art, and literary writing. I'm not saying that zines need to include a bit of everything, only that some outsiders (as well as publishers) are so isolated and entrenched that they are unaware of the masses of people publishing within a completely different scene.

6. Zines display an unbelievable amount of talent. In the previous issue of *Factsheet Five*, I wrote about the amazing sense of design that some publishers have. But it really goes further than that. Nearly every zine I read while I was reviewing had something original and creative to it, and many were full of one amazing idea after another. After a while, it became almost overwhelming as it made returning to zine publishing such a daunting task. The more I read, the more I realized that another publisher (or often, lots of them) had a great idea before me, could tell funnier stories, went on better adventures, wrote more sincere personal stories, or could draw a straight line a hell of a lot better than I could. Zines can be beautifully inspiring but when you don't have time to publish your own, they are only a reminder of how great everyone else's is.

Leaving *Factsheet Five*, I will miss being at the hub of so much information, but in its place I hope to deepen some of the connections I've already made. A few issues ago I quoted Candi Strecker without realizing that her words would so soon apply to me. "A zine is a wonderful tool for making connections with other people, especially when you're just starting out and the world seems big and wide and you need something extra to establish your identity. But once you've made a few hundred of those connections, you want to stop and pursue the best of them, instead of constantly widening your circle until you feel pulled thinner and thinner."

Before I go, I'd like to give some long overdue thanks to the many people I have worked with. It's been wonderful to have the support of John Held, Jr., Miriam Wolf, Jerod Pore, Mark Frischman, Larry-bob, and the many reviewers who have contributed so much to this magazine. Working closely with Seth over the past several years is not something to dismiss lightly, as it has been an amazing experience. I have nothing but respect for him and his ability to do the impossible at times. He has taught me so much and given me one of the rarest experiences of my life. Thanks, Seth.