

Pantagraph reporter turns sci-fi writer

You might've missed it, but Thursday, Nov. 10, marked the 50th anniversary of the first airing of the Star Trek episode "The Corbomite Maneuver." Of interest to those of us in Central Illinois is that this episode was written by Gerald Allan "Jerry" Sohl, who prior to that spent 12 years in Bloomington as a feature writer for The Pantagraph.

During his time in Bloomington Sohl wrote science fiction short stories and no less than nine novels. He then moved to Southern California and found success in the television industry and Hollywood. He also wrote a wide-range of published fiction, both low and middlebrow, from soft-core paperbacks to mainstream hardcovers.

As with many writers, science fiction or otherwise, Sohl cut his teeth in the newspaper trade. It was said he started as an office boy with the Evening American, one of the many long-gone Chicago dailies. His years as an "ink-stained wretch" included stops in Beulah, Mich. with the Benzie Record, and Sycamore, Ill. with the True Republican. Sometime in 1946, after serving in the Army Air Forces during World War II, he came to Bloomington to work for The Pantagraph.

Sohl and his wife Jean raised three children during their decade-plus in the Twin Cities. A fine pianist, he became the newspaper's music editor and critic, and even offered commentary on WJBC Radio. Sohl once defended classical music in an on-air debate with the station's "After Hours" disc jockey Ollie Henry, who was there to "give out for jazz." Sohl and fellow "Pantagrapher," Don Goodrich, also endeared themselves to the community by showing movies to patients at Fairview Sanatorium in Normal.

Sohl's first known published work, the short story "The 7th Order," appeared in the March 1952 issue of Galaxy Science Fiction, one of the many cheaply printed pulp digests of this type in wide circulation during the postwar years.

His first science fiction novel, "The Haploids," was published around the same time. That was followed in quick measure by "The Transcendent Man" and "Costigan's Needle" (both 1953), "The Altered Ego" (1954) and "Point Ultimate" (1955). Not surprisingly, at some point Sohl scaled back his Pantagraph duties to part-time work so he could concentrate more on his career in science fiction.

His first five novels were published by Rinehart & Co. Although not as prestigious as some New York publishing houses such as Alfred A. Knopf, Rinehart was no fly-by-night outfit, publishing as it did Norman Mailer's first two novels and Langston Hughes' memoir "I Wonder as I Wander," among other titles from prominent writers.

Sohl's 1950s novels have been noted for their "slick surface and sharp economy of scale" turned out by a "professional craftsman." During his years in Bloomington these works were reprinted (and often translated) by publishers in Argentina, Brazil, France, Italy, Japan and West Germany.

In August 1958, Sohl and his family said goodbye to the Twin Cities and relocated to the sunny clime of Southern California, settling in Thousand Oaks, a community well within the orbit of Los Angeles. He began writing for television, with early credits including shows both quickly forgotten and fondly remembered, including "M Squad," "General Electric Theater," "Route 66," "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and "Target: The Corrupters!"

In 1963 and 1964 he ghostwrote three episodes of "The Twilight Zone," including the perennial fan favorite "Living Doll" (featuring a "Talky Tina" killer doll). For years these episodes were credited exclusively to Charles Beaumont, a beloved fantasy writer closely associated with "The Twilight Zone." By 1962, though, Beaumont was suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's and found himself unable to complete scripts. As a result, he relied on friends such as Sohl to write under his name so he could continue paying medical bills and keep his family afloat.

Sohl, as noted above, is also associated with the original Star Trek series, the one that aired from 1966 to 1969 and starred William Shatner as Captain Kirk and Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock. He's credited with the script or story idea for three episodes, though one appears under the pseudonym Nathan Butler.

"The Corbomite Maneuver," which aired fifty years ago last week, was just the third Star Trek episode produced for the inaugural season (though due to delays with post-production special effects, it was the tenth to air). In the half-century since then there have been five additional television series and more the 720 episodes of Star Trek. To have your name on the third installment of this sprawling, ever-expanding fictional universe (a seventh series is due early next year) is no small accomplishment!

As with many genre writers, Sohl wrote plenty of trashy stuff to pay the bills, all the while employing several byzantine nom de plumes, including Sean Mei Sullivan and the gender-bending Roberta Jean Mountjoy.

Sohl's movie credits include two adaptations in the 1960s of H.P. Lovecraft stories, "Die, Monster, Die" (since renamed the forgettable "Monster of Terror") and "Curse of the Crimson Altar," both starring Boris Karloff in the twilight of his career.

His wide-ranging oeuvre includes the nonfiction companion volumes “Underhanded Chess” (1973) and “Underhanded Bridge” (1975), cheeky book-length treatises on how to cheat or gain unfair advantage “at the table.”

Although pegged as a science fiction and fantasy writer, Sohl also published mainstream fiction. His 1973 novel “The Resurrection of Frank Borchard” from Simon & Shuster, for instance, received a strong notice in *The New York Times*.

Yet his next two books were cheap and kitschy (to put it kindly) dime store paperbacks. From Fawcett Gold Medal came the titillating soft core “Mamelle,” written by Nathan Butler and carrying the tagline, “She was underage and oversexed—a perfect combination.” And then there was Sean Mei Sullivan’s novelization of the Hong Kong martial arts movie “SuperManChu: Master of Kung Fu,” published by Ballantine Books.

Jerry Sohl passed away at a Thousand Oaks hospital in 2002. He was 88 years old.

Fourteen years before his death, in 1988, he reflected on a career that included forays into the lowbrow. “Oftentimes, you have to write because you absolutely have to have the money, so you do make compromises,” he said. “Then you have people come up to you and say, ‘I really loved that novel. It changed my life.’ I get so much of that and it’s a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. What it comes down to is that it has been great fun and if I should die in the next minute I don’t think I would regret anything I’ve done.”