

Harlan Ellison and Star Trek

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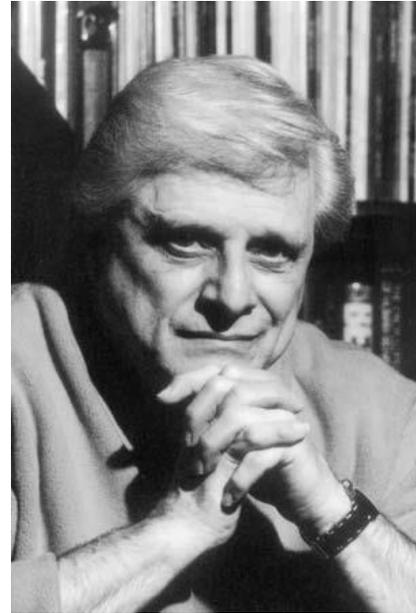
Michael Hickerson over at Slice of SciFi lets us in on this little teaser: What if J.J. Abrams' rebooting of the "Star Trek" universe was enough to convince none other than Harlan Ellison to come back to the fold as a writer? That's what Harlan is apparently quoted as saying.

In case you're not a die-hard, follow-the-RL-politics Star Trek type of fan, Harlan Ellison got an excellent writing credit back during the original Star Trek series with "City on the Edge of Forever". Gene Roddenberry, in his allegedly standard Gene-like way, modified the script, which miffed Harlan to no end - and Harlan let everyone know it. He's been entangled with lawsuits with Paramount for years, accusing them of lifting a lot of his ideas - and mostly, he's got a leg to stand on.

As awesome and spine-tingling as this news would be for just about any science fiction fan, it is not the real story. The real story is that it shows that reboots can work, and that there is something more universal and pressing about the Star Trek story that can appeal to the mainstream.

That's been the white elephant in the room concerning the Star Trek franchise: as wildly popular as it seems, it's actually been supported primarily by a fan base best described as "not mainstream" (but usually termed as "distant-fringe weirdoes" by those who don't "get it"). Granted, these "weirdoes" have been loud and intensely prolific in terms of producing and pushing for additional materials (conventions, novels, artwork, fan-fic, spin-off series), but the nature of the material has almost always required a pre-existing knowledge of the universe. That's what we in RPGing call "meta-gaming" - and it is bad game-form, always. Movie producers had to bank on that "meta-gaming" because the translation from television to big screen is difficult. There was just no way to make the first ten movies long enough to include real background information so that a non-fan would enjoy the underlying complexities. Most of the story is lost on the average viewer, which led to relatively poor performance at every single big screen release.

Don't get me wrong: the devout focus of the fan base - especially and in particular concerning the original Star Trek series - has produced some amazing results. Without Star Trek, we wouldn't have cell phones, for instance, or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines or the internet. There wouldn't be interactive computers, or, some posit, even home computers at all. You know those automatic sliding doors at the supermarkets? Star Trek. Then again, we also



wouldn't have Leonard Nimoy singing "the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins" or Bill Shatner's... interpretation of "Rocket Man"... but I digress.

This willingness by Ellison to return to the Star Trek family suggests that J.J. Abrams provided something that previous iterations of the Roddenberry universe were missing: sympathetic characters, excellent writing, humor that stands on its own merit, and settings that don't feel like they came from the fine folks at Fisher Price.

While we tend to think that Harlan's conflicts with the Roddenberry camp had more to do with ethics and intellectual property conflicts, there's still the sense that his offer is at least partially based in the perception of a serious lack of good writing associated with Star Trek movies up to the most recent installation. This widening of the talent pool demonstrated by the success of a mostly previously unassociated group is the mark of excellent things in the future, and Harlan's interest in contributing to the next installment says that maybe these positive changes will continue.