Canon Fodder: UFO

How to stay true to the show without squelching your creativity.

By Matthew White

Any writer who pens derivative works (the legal term for Fan Fiction) is soon going to run across the term canon. The dictionary definition that deals closest with writing is as follows: the body of rules, principles, or standards accepted as axiomatic and universally binding in a field of study or art; the neoclassical canon.

Canon is what was actually shown or what was said in a book, movie or TV show. A true canon fact cannot be debated as there is no ambiguity. If it can be debated, it's probably not canon. I'll give some examples of this later. Discussions on canon in writer forums can be daunting to a new writer and getting involved in these

debates can be intimidating to the uninitiated. These debates can range from open minded intelligent discussion, where all opinions are given valid consideration, to all out flame wars. (And everything in between.)

Some shows have a very well established canon. Shows like *Star Trek, Babylon Five, JAG, Bonanza,* and *Dallas* all ran three years or longer and have both good factual as well as character canon. It takes a good well knit group of writers at least two full seasons to establish solid character canon for a series, an aspect that *Babylon Five* excelled with, having one of the best overarching themes that I have ever seen in a science fiction series.

Shows that ran only one or two seasons, or lacked an overarching theme, often suffered from having poor character continuity. Shows like *Space 1999, The Starlost,* and unfortunately *UFO.* The rest of my discussion will focus on *UFO.*

UFO, with all its flaws, was still one of the best speculative science fiction shows to ever grace the television screen. The fact that there are still diehard fans some forty years later proves that the show was years ahead of its time. With the movie coming out in 2011, new interest has been sparked in the series. Sadly the show suffered some of the common ailments of a low budget TV series. It's hard to establish characterization when it changes from one episode to the next either due to poor direction, poor writing or both.

To start, let's look at some examples of some unambiguous canon facts.

1. Straker was an astronaut. (Established in *The Man Who Came Back*)
2. Seagull X-ray flew at Mach 4. (Established in *Identified*)
3. Virginia Lake had a romantic relationship with Paul Foster. (Established in *The Man Who Came Back*)

There is no ambiguity in these facts. They were very clearly stated or shown and they cannot be debated. Look at the four statements below.

1. Lake and Foster were sleeping together in the episode *The Man Who Came Back*.
2. Rutland was an abusive husband.
3. Virginia Lake was romantically involved with Alec Freeman.
4. Paul Foster was under hypnosis in the episode *The Psychobombs*.

In all of these cases you have subjective implication. An argument can be made for or against each statement, and it becomes a matter of opinion. And as our opinions are often formed by our own life experiences, no two opinions are going to be the same. This is one of the things that makes character canon so hard to nail down.

To further complicate matters, not all series guidebooks are created equal. *The Complete Book of UFO* written by Chris Bentley is a very

good guide to the series and contains some interesting insight; however I found his description of Colonel Lake to be highly subjective. Bentley describes her as a passionate woman who actively seeks contact with the opposite sex, having been romantically involved with Freeman, Collins, and Foster. While canon does indicate that she was involved with Collins and Foster, there is nothing in canon to support the statement that she ever accepted the dinner date with Freeman in *Identified.* To quote from *Top Gun,* Freeman 'crashed and burned, it wasn't pretty.' "Don't you think you should get back to your little seat up front?" Virginia Lake said, putting an abrupt end to the conversation. And other than the episode *The Man Who Came Back,* we don't see her involved with anyone -- although the last three episodes seem to suggest a connection between her and Straker, and according to Sylvia Anderson, this was something that many of the fans saw. Bentley also co-wrote *The UFO Technical*

Manual along with Nick Foreman. In this book Seagull X-ray is described as having a maximum speed of Mach 2. Yet in *Identified*, Gay Ellis clearly stated, "An SST traveling at Mach 4 is a pretty tempting target." She was of course referring to Seagull X-ray. To add to the confusion, Bentley's first book contradicts the second one on several points including Seagull X-ray's top speed.

One major problem for *UFO* was during the break in filming several of the actors and actresses playing major characters left the show. Freeman, Ford, Ellis, Waterman, and Harrington were absent from the last eight episodes. Lake was added to replace Freeman, and the writers didn't seem to know what to do with her. They seemed to have the same problem with Gay Ellis in *Close Up* as she seemed uncharacteristically insecure.

After reading this I could see a new writer saying, "Why would I want to write for a show

with so many flaws?" I can only say that *UFO* had so much going for it that its flaws were overlooked by the fans. I write for it because even with its flaws, it was a great series, and it has limitless potential.

Many Fan Fiction writers have taken the show's flaws and written stories explaining why things happened as they did. *By Invitation Only*, written by Catherine Stewart, is one of my very favorite Ginny stories. The story explains how Virginia went from being the chief designer of the Utronic system to a Colonel in SHADO. I base my back story for Ginny on that work. My story *Silver Star* explains how Virginia and Paul ended up in a brief relationship. I went through great pains not to contradict anything that happened in the episode, yet shed it in a different light. That type of writing is difficult as you really have to pay attention to what was actually shown versus what was simply being implied.

Another thing to consider, when thinking about character canon, is character growth. We have to look at the characters as living, breathing people, with wants, needs and desires. Like real people, they become the sum of their life experiences. This becomes especially important for those who write beyond the last episode in a show. To say that Ed Straker would never change or mellow, or always stay single is an unrealistic viewpoint. This by no means indicates that these events will happen, but the possibilities are there. We as writers need to convey the things that have brought our characters to the place of change.

New writers will often be criticized for characterization, and it's important to look at the critique objectively even if it seems subjective in nature. (You can even learn something from flames.) Constructive critique should always include suggestions to improve your story; how to fix what's wrong. My friend Denise PM'd me on the forum once about a

story I was writing, in regards to Ginny being out of character in that scene. Denise had told me that Ginny would not have gone into the ventilation shaft with her abductors. I reminded her that Ginny was pregnant, and she responded that I was right and Virginia would have been more careful. She then suggested that I add Ginny's thoughts to help clear up the confusion. After looking at the scene again, I realized that Denise had been right all along. Ginny was a scrapper; she'd do something even being pregnant. I rewrote the scene, and we both liked it better. My point however, is that if you are going to have your character act seemingly OOC (out of character), you need to explain to the reader why this is happening.

Sometime in our writing career we will reach the point where we want or need to break from the bonds of canon. Is that a cardinal sin? Most certainly not, as many writers have done incredibly entertaining stories by loosening the canon, so to speak. If you are going to

significantly deviate from canon, I would suggest a note at the beginning of the story, just so you don't confuse your readers. By significant, I mean major changes in the character's established back story or a complete rewrite of the premise. A sad but true fact is some readers will not read stories that deviate from canon, but a writer shouldn't worry about that aspect. People who refuse to read non-canon stories often rob themselves of a great reading experience. Two stories come to mind: *Looking Back* by Dragon, and Denise Felt's Artist's Series, *Face Off*, *About Face* and *Face Up*.

Dragon's story showed what could have happened if Mary had decided to stay with Ed after the baby was born. We know from the show that Mary and Ed separated soon after their son was born, so there is no question that this story does break canon in that respect. In one of the forums, one writer commented that Mary was also OOC, an opinion that I don't

share, as Dragon showed us how Mary had quite a bit of time in the hospital recovering and she spent that time considering her future. This is a classic case of character evolution. My point to all this is that this truly entertaining story would not have been possible without deviating from canon. I do hope that she finishes it as it looks like a smashing good read.

In Denise's story *Face Off*, we find out that Ed has broken the mural behind his desk, a keepsake that he has had for almost thirteen years. In the story Ed breaks the piece during a mental breakdown caused by an event from the past. From the show we know that the mural was broken by Paul Foster in an escape attempt during the episode *Court Martial*. Denise stated to me once that she did violate canon writing this story. But I think the story can stand as it is without violating canon if you place it just before *Court Martial* and claim that as the last episode in the timeline. I have seen at least six different versions of episode order. Which one

is canon? Who's to say? Because Straker marries Cait in *Face Up*, some purists will argue that Straker wasn't married in Court Martial. My question would be, "Does it state anywhere in the episode that he wasn't married then?" Granted, it's a fine line, but it does solve the canon issue. If Denise wanted to make that claim I would certainly defend her position.

I did something similar when I wrote *Soul Mates*. I use the *UFO* Mega-set episode order for my timeline, stretching it over a four year period. The only caveat is I place the episode *The Man Who Came Back* before *The Cat with Ten Lives*. In my story Straker and Lake pursue the beginnings of a romantic relationship just after *Timelash*. This pairing slowly but surely grows through the episodes *Mindbender* and *The Long Sleep*. The relationship becomes intimate right after *The Long Sleep*. I chose to keep that moment at bay as while there was certainly happenings onscreen to indicate a connection between them, I didn't think it

would support the notion of an intimate relationship. The point here is that in no way did I violate events in the show, and I can call my work canonical.

In summary, the most important aspect to remember when discussing character canon is to keep an open mind, a writer's best friend. Just because you may not see an aspect of a character's personality, doesn't mean that it's not there. By the same token, seeing something that others may not see doesn't make you wrong either. Remember that character canon can be highly subjective, and it's all a matter of perception. As stated above, true canon facts are clear and spelled out; there is no ambiguity. Character bibles are not always gospel. While useful, they can contain highly subjective opinions. Evolving characters are not necessarily a violation of canon. And there is nothing wrong with breaking canon if the story calls for it, and in these cases creativity trumps canon.

My closing statement is aimed at new writers in regard to canon. When you receive your first piece of critical feedback, don't let your feelings get hurt even if the critic was impolite. Look at it objectively and ask yourself, were they specific, did they cite examples; did they give advice on how to fix the problem? Even with canon issues, good critique is always constructive and balanced. A supportive critic will highlight what you did right as well as what they think you did wrong, and that is the key to a well balanced review. And just because someone tells you that you have something wrong doesn't mean they are right. Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion or several for that matter. Above all, if you're like me, you started writing to share a vision. Never ever let anyone steal that dream.