

Nostalgia for You, Dear Geek

Lysandra Woods

Damn, I loved the geeks in high school. Indeed, they were my true, unrequited love, though I would have undergone antiquated forms of torture before admitting it to anyone. I had problems of my own. Like many, I look back at high school as three years of unyielding trauma, and when I finally got to leave, I left—for good. I maintained no contacts, never felt the urge to attend a reunion, and after years of self-imposed mind control I have basically forgotten the whole thing. But I remember the geeks.

The geeks arouse my curiosity; the others do not. I wonder what those geeks are doing now. The rest of them, well, you just sort of know: The bright popular kids are now Intellectual Property Rights lawyers; the dumb popular kids are now making good use of their education degrees; and the jocks are now chubby and effectively still in high school. But with the geeks no such foregone conclusion exists, for I went to high school in the mid- 80s before ‘geek’ became affectionate slang for the computer gods of today. Now, all the signs are in place: NHL Hockey is dead, and beautiful people celebrity culture has imploded into a tacky, cheesy, gooey mess. The most startling aspect of the whole Brad Pitt-Jennifer Aniston-Angelina Jolie triangle is how much none of us could give a rat’s ass as to who’s smooching whom. *Wired* magazine is in ascension; Seth Cohen is the new sex symbol; geekT-shirt.org is style’s new frontier; *Halo* is at critical mass. The geeks have inherited the earth, and perhaps, to everyone’s surprise, their world order is pretty cool.

But trouble is afoot in geek-land, and for the sake of convenience let’s blame it on Bill Gates. Gates has

ruined the geek, in part because his specter of goofy, spectacle-wearing world domination stands in for the geek in popular vernacular. But Gates is no geek. His talent is that he can manage geeks. Not an easy task, as geeks are not inherently responsive to the usual lures of money and benefit packages; nor do they answer to scaretactics, as most geeks are inoculated to fear by the daily threats they endured and lived through in high school. Geeks know no fear, not out of a misplaced courage, but instinctually, due to an internal defense mechanism that has long ago relegated and reduced fear to the quotidian. The rest of us see fear in bold strokes, as a colossus to be conquered by grand gestures of bravery and heroism. The geek sees no such large scale; the geek has slept with it, woken up to it and tapped out its rhythm as he brushes his teeth. Fear and the geek are old friends. In contrast, the nerd does respond to fear, and, correspondingly, has a greater desire to please: a nerd does well in school, a geek may not. Back to Gates though, the true geeks may still have the last laugh, for while Gates was built by geeks, the same sort of fearless, trailblazing geeks are mounting challenges to Microsoft which may one day, not in the close future, but one day, dislodge Gate’s monopoly. Live by the sword; die by the sword.

So, with Gates leading the charge, mainstream success and crossover appeal have found the geek, but I wonder if the geek ever wanted to be found. Have geeks made the world more interesting at the expense of making themselves less so? Is brilliant success not somehow antithetical to the entire philosophy of geekdom? Has the computer age ruined the geeks of yore?

My one consolation is that I am not alone in my nostalgia. *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) and *Tv's Freaks And Geeks*, significantly both set in the 80s, are high school love letters to the 'old-skool' geek. The geeks who go about their business and their projects with a single-minded vision that leaves them unscarred regardless of how many jock beatings may come their way. And the beauty of it all is their total disregard for the use value of their projects, for any sort of upward mobility, for any validation outside of their own tight circle. Throughout the course of the eponymous film, Napoleon is the subject of a dodgy time travel experiment, learns a dance, and buys a corduroy suit at the thrift shop, all with the total innocence of pure selfish devotion to his own vision, a vision not of himself in relation to others, but of himself for himself. Another word for this selfishness would be, of course, childhood. In high school while the rest of us were desperately trying to mimic adults with our messy sex lives and substance addictions, the geeks made no such overtures to growing up. They remained essentially kids and reveled in their play.

Of the three "geeks" in *Freaks And Geeks*, Sam, Neal and Bill, only Bill is a true geek, and he is my favourite geek of all—ahhhhhh, how I do love you Bill Haverchuck. Like Napoleon, Bill likes what he likes cause he likes it—comedy, rockets, science fiction. He does not degrade his loves by ascribing to them any usefulness or future career plans. Bill lives in the moment and finds the fun. The best Bill snippet, one that reveals Bill's particular charm and unwavering insight, occurs as Bill and Neal are about to enter the rec-room basement hell of the popular kids spin-the-bottle party:

Neal: You know that scene in *Animal House* where Jim Belushi is pledging to the fraternity, and he goes to the party and ends up in the room with the blind guy and the Indian. I feel that's about to happen to us.

Bill: Blind guys are cool. They have supersonic hearing.

Neal: Yeah, you're right. (Now reassured, he looks admiringly at Bill). Blind guys are cool.

As always, Neal receives Bill's transmissions as utterances from an oracle, interpreting them as figurative words of wisdom to be decoded. To Max, Bill's words mean that they will be fine, will persevere regardless of their treatment by the populars. But Bill never intends them that way. His is a stubbornly literal mind. As far as he is concerned, he is just telling Neal the facts: Blind guys are cool. Rooted in a literal world but with the imagination

to dress up as Lindsey Wagner/Bionic Woman for Halloween, Bill is the epitome of the geek, taking up a curious positioning towards the literal and the figurative, a positioning that eschews the metaphorical understanding through which most of us live.

The literal is sacred to the geek, and in this awe it takes an unexpected direction, bypassing the figurative and landing smack in the middle of extreme imagination—the geek can soar with the eagles while wearing cement boots. The geek and the computer were thus destined for each other: The computer is a physical manifestation of these same odd co-ordinates on the material/imagination matrix. But before the computer, *Dungeons and Dragons* reigned, and those are the days I miss.

Here's to you geeks, you've done on a mass scale what I always admired about you in high school. For the shock of high school is the sudden and brutal narrowing of vision—and yet the geeks seemed to keep alive the wide range of life's possibilities. They practiced a mode of friendship and solidarity that was alien to the rest of us dealing with the cruel Byzantine rituals of the high school court. The geeks were self-contained somehow, mercilessly out of the loop. They understood that they were opposed to the popular kids for the simple reason that the geeks knew at a subconscious level that high school would one day be over, whereas the populars believed it would last forever. And in knowing it would end, the geeks filled their days with heady play and eccentric projects. With no eye towards cool or use-value or future gains, the geeks offered a radical alternative for, not only high school life, but for life in general. As Papa Geek Walter Benjamin said, we understand something only in its disappearance. Now that the 80s model of geekdom is outmoded, we see in its traces what it meant, and what we have lost. I salute your success geeks, but don't let it change you—at least not too much.

*Lys Woods wrote about **Basic Instinct** in Synoptique 6.*