



# DISPATCHES FROM ANIME COUNTRY

by Glenn Russell

The girl walking toward me is wrapped in layers of voluminous red robe gathered at her waist by a long sash. Clunky wooden prayer beads swing around her neck, a massive blue-grey wig spills down her back to her waistline, and she carries a wicked-looking but physically improbable sword – don't panic, it's only made of cardboard. The business end of the weapon seems impractical, overcomplicated and top-heavy, designed by an artist half a world away to catch the eye on the page, never meant to appear natural in reality. She smiles, and with a twinkle in her eye, stops near me. I wonder if I haven't been so distracted by all the glitz that I've missed recognizing someone I know. After a moment of squinting at her one-eyed, I see that underneath the special effects she's unfamiliar.

"Nice costume," I tell her. "Inu-Yasha, right? That must have been a lot of work."

She seems pleased. "Oh, not really. This only took a few hours. You should see what I'll be wearing tomorrow -- making the wings took me forever!"

I promise to watch for her, and she's off, up the stairs, toward the heart of the weekend's event, leaving me bemused, impressed and a little lost.

I am in what I can only think of as the Japanese Pop-Cultural Embassy to the world at large – that strange and quirky event known as an Anime Convention. It's like spelunking and skydiving stark naked – a fairly novel hobby that can leave onlookers a little bewildered...like me, after meeting the Inu-Yasha Girl. An Anime Convention is where fans of imported Japanese comic books, cartoons, movies and music can come together in the safety of numbers, let down their collective guard and, for a couple of days, behave in public as they do in private.

Don't worry. You can always make a break for the nearest exit if things get too weird. Until then, get ready to meet a fresh breed of toy collectors, ooh and aah over the latest bootleg imports, page through the portfolios of local aspiring local artists, and get trampled by armies of excitable teenage girls who have discovered that a tiny, wonderful country on the other side of the ocean has created some of the coolest comics, films and TV shows on planet Earth.

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I suppose it's best to start at the beginning. A few months back, a good friend asked for help organizing events at an upcoming convention. Steered by the Anime Club at the University of Victoria, Keikon settles into buildings on campus once a year for three days of anime screenings, junk food, dealer tables, costume contests and other anime-related pastimes. I agreed to help...and that's how I wound up surrounded by extras from a sci-fi cartoon version of a Fellini film for one wacky long weekend in March.

Anime, a nickname derived from "animation", if you haven't already guessed, is an umbrella term that, more or less, covers any cartoon that sees the light of day in Japan. Anime includes the ubiquitous magical girl series, Sailor Moon; weekly televised Rage-Aholics Anonymous



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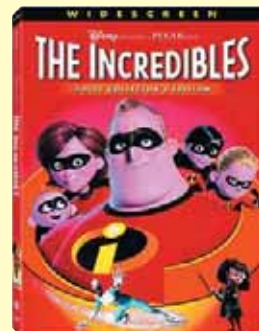
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Chobits is the story of a young man who finds a female robot on a junk heap. Persistent master/slave sexual connotations aside, I'm told that much of the series is relatively innocent.



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meetings on Dragonball Z; the merciless trash-talking monster throwdown that is Yu-Gi-Oh; Inu Yasha, 2004's breakout hit for Rumiko Takahashi, already the world's best-selling female comic book artist long before her stuff came to North America, and the show that started it all for so many of the current generation of kids on this side of the Pacific, the televised branch of Nintendo's cross-marketing triumph, Pokemon.

Manga, meanwhile, is the word for comic books in Japan, though some folks over here might be surprised at what that entails. Far from the rigidly controlled, highly stylized superhero stuff you find in your average Canadian comic book shop, Manga covers everything from the essential giant robot stories to crunchy science fiction packed with enough hard science to jack up a reader's IQ whether he wants to cooperate or not – hey, read anything by scary-smart writer/artist Masamune Shirow if you don't believe me. You'll also find epic fantasy, raunchy comedy, explicit adult comics, soap operas, period dramas, teen slapstick romantic comedies, and political suspense stories – even comics that revolve around professional chefs in their search for the perfect recipe. The field is wide, wide open here.

Manga is anime's older cousin, and, like any two related teenaged girls who are near the same age, they have about as much in common as they do in contrast. Check out any franchise that jumped the boundary and saw production in both of these formats and you'll find yourself looking at some pretty different end products. In Japan, series that find success in one format are routinely retooled to fit another, dumping themes, characters and art styles in the process. An anime pitched to boys on TV might be altered to skew toward girls in manga, and can be even more drastically re-imagined as a movie. Try any of this mix-and-match jigsaw-puzzle approach to comic book adaptations in North America and producers would soon find themselves looking for the remnants of their careers in trashcans in the back alleyways of Hollywood...but in Japan? No problem. Imagination is key. Diversity is all.

This is where the convention scene comes into play – after all, now that you've seen the show and read the book, it's time to talk about it, right? Every year in cities all over the globe, anime and manga fans come together to gorge themselves on a manic binge of anime screenings, reckless spending, autographs, costumes, games, panels featuring industry professionals, and good times with old friends they never knew they had. A quick look at the schedule for Keikon (remember, that's where we are: Victoria's own homegrown anime convention) and you'll be hard pressed to figure out how you're going to see everything. It's not all about the back-to-back rows of anime screening rooms. There are video games to play, contests to enter, music videos to watch and role-playing games to chase down.

It's not so strange really – Star Trek fans have been doing the convention thing from way back, and Xena: Warrior Princess and Buffy The Vampire Slayer fans still do it, cancelled shows or no. Star Wars fans do it in a big way. Doctor Who fans do it too, Daleks and all. Even gun companies and triple-X adult video stars do it, and why should they have all the fun?

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Step in through the front doors and – chaos! Wild colours, unfamiliar sounds, strange languages and people with antennae dashing in all directions. It's enough to make a person think he'd forgotten to take his morning anti-psychotics.

My job here won't be challenging or front-and-center; I'll be facilitating a few contests and overseeing a series of gaming events; pretty low-profile stuff. I sign in at the registration tables, get my all-access badge and take my cue from fellow volunteers – play it cool.

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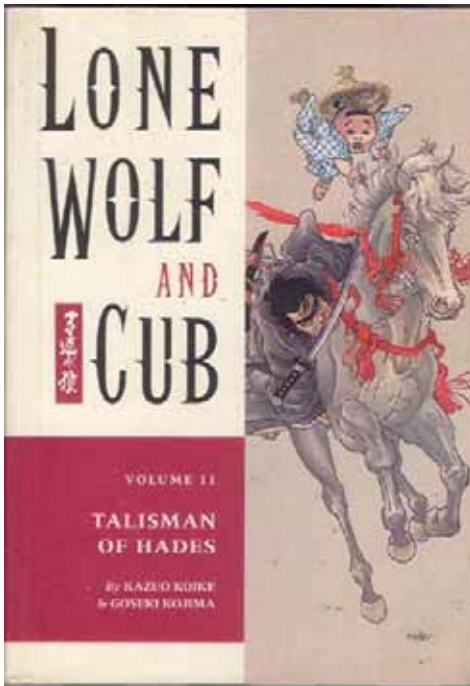
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... fledgling independent publisher First Comics won a loyal readership with their pioneering translations of the long-running, bleak and bloody samurai epic, *Lone Wolf & Cub*. Rising star of sadistically violent film noir, Frank Miller – writer, artist and now co-director of the film *Sin City*, provided many original cover illustrations for the First Comics run of *Lone Wolf & Cub*, citing the harsh influence on his career.

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look at my schedule and I'm disappointed it leaves little time for rubbernecking. If I'm lucky I'll squeeze in a show or two, but it's not looking likely. Sure, maybe there's little on offer here that you can't download on your computer at home, but this event is less a chance to catch up on your series backlog than it is a rare opportunity to socialize with your fellow anime enthusiasts.

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A few hours later and I'm two events down – so far so good. I still feel like the proverbial stranger in a strange land, but the natives are happy, upbeat, having a good time and glad to be here. I'm taking a break, sitting on the sidelines, indulging in a little people-watching. I watch the enthusiastic crowd comb through stacks of J-Pop-fueled anime soundtrack CDs, oversized silk-screened posters, non-articulated so-called action figures – mostly pink-haired anime girls with proportions bending the laws of physics, cast in various states of undress and compromising behaviour – and mountains of colourful little cardboard boxes, their surfaces clogged with kanji and dramatic illustrations, each hiding a tiny randomized pre-painted plastic model kit inside. These last items are the coveted collectibles known as capsule figures.

I watch as two con-goers haggle over one of the figures – named for their availability in goose-egg-sized plastic capsules dispensed from vending machines all over Japan. The negotiations over the model appear intense; the party interested in acquiring the item claims he's already blown a considerable amount of dough on this line of capsule figures today, slowly working his way through the vendor's stock one by one in hopes of finding this particular character. The other fella just happened to luck into it. Neither seem able to let it go.

Elsewhere in the hall, con attendees – some in full costume, some in civilian clobber – wander up and down the spaces between the vending tables and the registration area, consulting the schedules and formulating plans. The sounds of explosions, panicked shrieks and laser bolts spill from the open doors of the nearest screening room.

I can spot many of the volunteers – wearing what look like weird little pink and grey earmuffs. Triangular and apparently homemade, they stick out on either side of the wearer's head like little bat-ears. I was offered a pair, but guessing that they had something to do with giant mice, I'd politely declined. By this point, it's been explained to me that they are part of the signature look of an anime character – Chii, from the *Chobits* series.

*Chobits* is the story of a young man who finds a female robot on a junk heap. Persistent master/slave sexual connotations aside, I'm told that much of the series is relatively innocent. The robot calls herself Chii and looks like many gorgeous young anime girls – huge dreamy eyes, long improbably-coloured hair, and a face and body that don't quite match up but evoke something in the 15-25 year old age range – all perfectly ordinary as far as anime girls are concerned. Perfectly ordinary, that is, apart from the weird triangular mouse-ears stuck on either side of her head.

Whew! That's one weird sex-robot-anime-costume bullet successfully dodged. My ignorance is working against me and I feel lost, coasting a tide of in-jokes I can't track. Ride it out, I tell myself. It's all good.

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Manga & anime have clawed their way up the domestic sales charts for close to thirty years. Chances are that one of your favourite Saturday morning TV shows when you were growing up was one of the pioneers of anime exports; shows such as *Robotech*, *Star Blazers*, *Speed Racer* and *Battle of the Planets* were among the early arrivals, earning a generation of loyal fans who had never heard the term "anime". I watched *Astro Boy* every morning before school, singing along to the catchy theme song around a mouthful of porridge. I knew even then

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that there was something subtly different about the show, but hey, I grew up in Winnipeg, land of the Festival du Voyageur, Louis Riel and pea soup. I thought Astro Boy was French.

Meanwhile, in comic shops throughout the eighties, fledgling independent publisher First Comics won a loyal readership with their pioneering translations of the long-running, bleak and bloody samurai epic, Lone Wolf & Cub. Rising star of sadistically violent film noir, Frank Miller – writer, artist and now co-director of the film Sin City, provided many original cover illustrations for the First Comics run of Lone Wolf & Cub, citing the harsh series as a major influence on his career.

Marvel Comics, creative powerhouse behind many of the super-hero pop-culture icons of the last 40 years, made much ballyhoo of its foray into manga-esque storytelling with a pair of successive publishing initiatives. First, the Marvel Mangaverse, where familiar characters like Spider-Man, The Punisher and the Incredible Hulk were filtered through a morass of Japanese pop culture cliches and re-imagined as ninjas, giant rampaging monsters and the like. Then, the Marvel Tsunami line, designed to ape the visual appeal of anime while still supplying time-honoured superhero slugfests.



“Sailor Moon, the soap-opera epic about a group of Tokyo high school girls chosen by fate to defend against evil, is a member of an infamous family of series that made it to US and Canadian TV screens in a form far removed from what their Japanese creators had intended.”

Rival DC Comics, home of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, recently took a different approach, opening a new editorial wing dedicated to importing fresh Japanese titles. With much publicity surrounding their launch and stated goal of bringing the best manga to North America unedited and undiluted, they weren't long out of the gate before one of their titles, Tenjho Tenge, turned out to be too hot to handle.

What started with a couple of strategic trims and cover-ups in the first volume won't help them by the time they get to Volume Ten, featuring a graphic – and hoo boy, do I mean graphic – sex torture scene. DC created their own controversy, angering die-hard manga fans who would prefer to see the series as originally promised: translated but not edited. They'd hoped for a top-shelf approach, maybe shrink-wrapped and labeled for an adult readership, as with similar titles Battle Royale and Berserk. In the other camp, those pleased with the edits on Volume One could not possibly wrap their heads around events later in the series; the unsuitable bits, unsavoury as they may or may not be, are pretty much an integral part of the story. Abandoning them entirely would leave readers with a story that doesn't make sense. DC is being harried by the very audience it sought to attract.

Contrary to expectation, smaller publication houses are reaping the most benefits from the anime industry. Dark Horse Comics, long a bastion of lesser-known titles and the prime source of English-language manga for much of the 1990s, brought series like Oh My Goddess!, Ghost in the Shell, Dirty Pair and Akira to our bookshelves. Tyros like Tokyopop, ADV and CPM have shown there's much more gold to be mined in them thar hills, smashing their way out of nonexistence to muscle DC and Marvel off the top of the graphic novel charts in less than half a decade.

Anime is everywhere, and like that letter in Poe's story, it seems it was hidden in plain sight all along.

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It's much quieter up here on the second floor, removed from the activity around the retailers' tables, contests, game rooms, and the endless troop of con-goers heading from one projection room to another. It's been quite a day. I've got five minutes to spare and welcome a little downtime.

I find myself in what appears to be the only active projection room on this floor. It's empty. Not a single soul to grumble over the director's choice of voice actors, wisecrack about poorly written lines or chuck popcorn at the screen. Even the DVD player hooked up to the projector

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is unmanned, chugging its way through the feature program unsupervised.

I wonder what sets this room apart from the rooms downstairs that have been packed to the gills since the convention opened. Maybe this is too far off the main drag to draw drop-in traffic. Or maybe the air conditioning is on the fritz? I conclude it's more likely because the projection screen is dominated by a six-foot high image of a teenaged blonde in knee-high boots, a gold tiara and pigtails, threatening a big bug-eyed monster: "In the name of the Moon, I will punish you!"

Yes folks, it's time for that anime so many people love to hate -- Sailor Moon.

Perhaps a little back-story is required. Sailor Moon, the soap-opera epic about a group of Tokyo high school girls chosen by fate to defend against evil, is a member of an infamous family of series that made it to US and Canadian TV screens in a form far removed from what their Japanese creators had intended. Deemed too racy for what Canadian production company DIC had settled on as their target audience, the nation's eight to twelve year olds, Sailor Moon was drastically cut before reaching our sensitive TV screens. Gone were many subtleties of plot and nuances of character; gone was the homosexual relationship between two of the male villains; long gone were the messy deaths of all but one of the Sailor Scouts in the final episodes of the first series.

Still, in whatever state it was broadcast, the series' success prompted further seasons of the Japanese TV show to be licensed, and, of course, edited. Romances, plot details, and even genders were re-written. Demand continued until the English-language run of the show ground to a halt at the doorstep of the final season. There was just no way that DIC could edit what they wanted out of the last, no-holds-barred episodes and still have anything left to show in North America that made sense. The unfinished product that made it onto TV here may have been more palatable to censors, but viewers aware of the strengths of the original -- i.e., most of the attendees at this convention -- saw it as a missed opportunity.

And then, of course, there's the part of the audience that just plain hates it. Don't get me started.

It seems the only other person on this floor is bored enough to pass a little time watching the sanitized Sailor Scouts kick some multidimensional butt. A blond kid of about twenty, he hangs in the doorway, slouching against the jamb and sucking on his teeth.

"Pretty quiet up here," he eventually observes. "But all that's going to change once the Hentai starts."

His comment sets off alarm bells in my head. I may not have solved the mystery of the empty screening room after all. For those readers unfamiliar with the term -- Hentai, a word borrowed from the Japanese, refers to an unhealthy sexual perversion, the sort of thing that would land you in some serious counseling, prison or worse. In the anime/manga arena it's used as a catch-all term to describe any animated short, comic book, film or series with explicit sexual content.

"Hentai? What do you mean? They're playing Sailor Moon."

He points to the schedule, posted on the wall just outside the door. Sure enough, the daytime lineup of the over-edited and much-loathed Sailor Moon is about to wrap, and the evening program -- chock-a-block with nubile young anime girls being attacked by lusty multi-tentacled creatures from Dimension X -- is due to start rolling within the hour.

The guy grins. "This place is going to be packed in a little while." He waggles his fingers at me. "Hey, hands above the table, everybody!"

It's obvious now why this room is deserted. No one wants to be seen hanging around waiting for the porn to start. I guess you're supposed to sneak in the back after the credits roll, when no one will notice or recognize you. I make my excuses and slink back downstairs.

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At this point, you may be wondering if all of this strangeness is some peculiar quirk of Vancouver Islanders -- maybe something weird in the water, or a short-circuit in the intersection of local ley lines that keeps everyone slightly off-center -- but anime conventions are making inroads all over the world. Natives of Seattle pack the halls at Sakura Con, and die-hards make the pilgrimage to Dallas, Texas, for North America's longest-running Anime convention, Project A-Kon. Drop in at any of the big-name shows like the New England Anime Society's Anime Boston Convention or New York's Big Apple Anime Festival and you'll walk away having had an eyeful.

Canada, not to be outdone by our neighbour to the south, is no slouch in the anime-con department. At Winnipeg's Convention Center this August, Ai-Kon 2005 will jam art shows, panels, screenings and make-your-own homemade Anime Music Video contests into a frenetic three-day window. Vancouverites can look forward to the annual Anime Evolution, hosted by Simon Fraser University, boasting 24-hour video rooms, games, karaoke and even an anime themed dance. Calgary cowpokes rally at the strangely named Otafest and Edmonton's Animethon hosts anime fashion shows and competitive anime improv.

Toronto natives can split their time between Anime North -- featuring a toy show, anime-themed gaming events and a skewed version of the TV show you love to hate, J-Idol. At Canada's largest anime event, the Canadian National Anime Expo, you can dip into the Canadian Gundam Model Building Championship, take a class in Voice Acting 101, or get your portfolio reviewed by industry professionals.

And yes, they even do this stuff in Japan. The yearly Tokyo International Anime Fair attracts 200 production companies and enough established anime creators and ambitious rookies to choke a giant robot. It has the strange distinction of being the only convention organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and counted more than seventy thousand attendees over a four-day period in 2004. In short, this is Anime Convention Mecca, people.

From Tokyo, Japan, to Leicester in the UK, from Trinidad in the West Indies to the Twin Cities in Minnesota, from Vancouver Island to Melbourne, Australia, the total combined forces of these anime convention-goers could, if harnessed, topple governments or colonize the surface of Mars.

Good thing we've got all this anime stuff to keep 'em occupied, eh?

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The end is near. With just a few hours left, real life is slowly creeping in under the doors like icy water finding its way into the innards of the Titanic. Instead of winding down, attendees seem to be kicking it up a notch, knocking back a quick Starbucks and generating enough nervous energy to carry them through to the end without missing a thing.

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I'm back on the main floor, running a painting contest in what, in its civilian life, is one of UVIC's lab rooms. People keep darting in and out of the room with confused looks on their faces, asking for the Anime Music Video Room: "Is this it? Is it over? Did I miss it?"

The peculiar progeny of easy-to-use editing features in Windows, plenty of video footage readily available on the internet and fans with too much time on their hands, Anime Music Videos have become something of a tradition at conventions. Combining images from their favourite shows and the pop song of their choice, AMV makers get to play with – and in some cases, snap, mangle and mutilate – the toys that other fans just admire from a distance. Some of the only original video features on offer at events like this, there are certain famous AMVs that are tacitly banned from casual distribution and carefully divvied out to certain conventions as a little added incentive for fans. This year, Keikon has bagged the infamous Nescaflowne, and the results are plain to see in the faces of everyone who mis-reads the posted maps and ends up stumped at the sight of my painting contest.

One after another, I tell them: "Don't worry, you haven't missed it. It's happening just down the hall, second door on your right."

I see the relief on their faces in the point-three nanoseconds it takes them to spin around and beat it outta there, leaving me in the dust like the Roadrunner outdistancing Wile E. Coyote in less time than it takes to blink. Hey, I had to work in a domestic cartoon reference somewhere.

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And then it's over. I pack up, pulling down event posters and shuffling out of the MacLaurin Building with enough leftover convention ballast - prizes, paperwork and promo materials – weighing me down to alter

local space-time and create my own personal planet-sized gravity well. I crash in slow-motion onto one of the wooden benches outside, and, as the sun sets, take a minute to collect my thoughts.

After three days, it seems strange to think that if I turn around and go back inside the buildings, there won't be some anime-convention-related activity still going on. The screening rooms are quiet and dark, the chairs folded up, ready for the next series of lectures scheduled for Monday. The vendors have collected their wares and returned to Seattle, Vancouver or wherever else they came from. The cosplay fans have reverted to publicly acceptable personas, stashing their flashy robes, shining tinfoil armour, cardboard swords and styrofoam muscles in their closets, content to carry their spiky rainbow-coloured hair around in their hearts for the moment. The Hentai aficionados have gone back to the anonymous internet, hoping that Canada Customs won't stop their next special order at the border. The shoals of giddy anime guppies, having eagerly devoured the wide and varied diet of entertainments on offer at the con, have broken up into their cliques, mentally gorged on dozens of episodes of fresh new series but nevertheless eager to return to their regular diets of Kazaa, Anime Suki and Bit Torrent.

I'd lay money that a lot of people are thinking, as I am, that this convention zoomed by too quickly. It was flashy, confusing and noisy...like being on the inside of a pinball machine. It was hard work, but it was fun too, and in the end – as so many kids will be telling their parents when the bank statements and Visa bills arrive in next month's mail – it was worth it.

When's the next one?



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