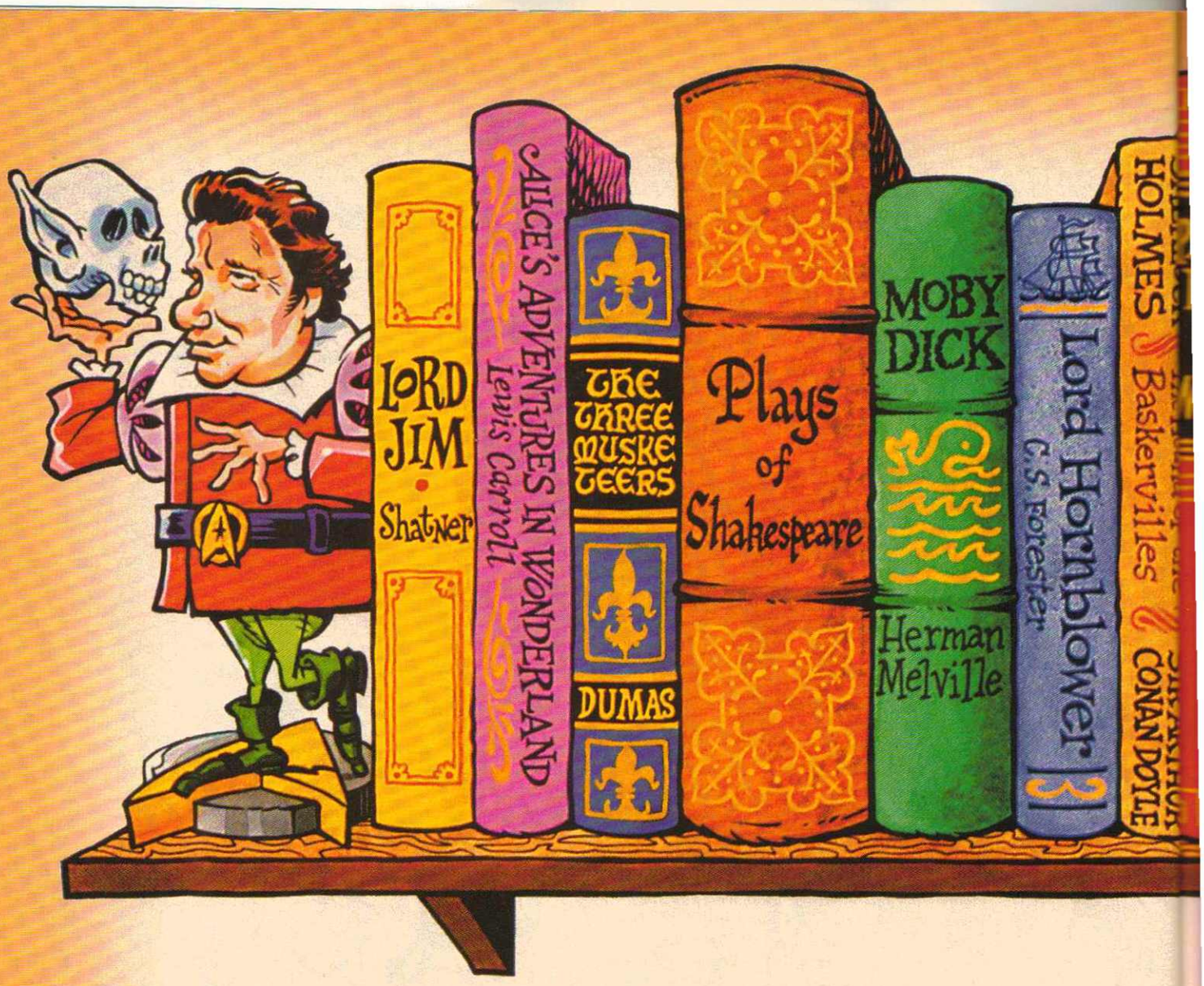
FICTIONAL INTERPRISES

The writers of *Star Trek* address the boundaries of fantasy in their fictional reality.

BY DAVID FLANAGIN/Illustrated by TOM HOLTKAMP

Anyone who has followed Star Trek *closely, from the original series to* Voyager, *knows the subjects of fiction and literature often find their way into the storylines of this popular and influential fictional universe created by Gene Roddenberry almost 30 years ago. The titles of 13 classic episodes are taken from literary works, many of them Shakespearean, and many of the adventures of Captain Kirk and crew seem lifted from the very stories they openly mention—take, for example, "The Apple" or "The Conscience of the King." And who can forget the Shakespeare-quoting General Chang from* Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country *or the Herman Melville-inspired Khan from* Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*? Captain Picard and crew also frequently refer to the world of literature and entertain themselves by going to the Holodeck where they role-play from their favorite fictional worlds. With their own "Holo-novels," crew members of the starship* Voyager *have already followed in their predecessors' footsteps and will likely continue to do so.*

When Star Trek *turns its attention to literature, is it just to fill up time or does the series have something to say about the importance of fiction in the world? Several series writer/producers have definite opinions about that question. Jeri Taylor (co-creator/executive producer of* Voyager*), Ron Moore (supervising producer for* Deep Space Nine*), and René Echevarria (co-producer of* Deep Space Nine*), who have been involved in the making of* Star Trek *since the third and fourth seasons of* The Next Generation, *recently shared their views on both their personal attitudes toward literature and the ways those attitudes influence the development of stories in the* Star Trek *Universe.*



STARLOG: Although few people would argue with the statement that literature is important to our world, people obviously have different ideas about *how* and *why* literature is important. As writers and as readers, could you summarize your thoughts on why literature is important?

JERI TAYLOR: I don't know that I have any particularly fresh insight. I've always been a great reader, and I feel I have accessed many worlds through reading. I think it's through literature that we expand our minds, we heighten our consciousness, we titillate our imaginations. It's a stimulus unlike any other, and I think it *is* a cultural necessity. It also embodies much of our history, our traditions, our myths—these are represented in literature and I think it's important for all of us to stay in touch with those kinds of things.

RONALD D. MOORE: For a writer, literature is basically a training tool. I read other authors' works and I can't help but think, "Could I have done this? How would I have done this differently? What don't I like about this? What *do* I like about that?" That's just something that goes on in the back of your head without your even really intending it to—in fact, sometimes it's distracting. I find that many times I have to really get into a book in order to fully enjoy it, because I just can't help mulling over description and trying to draw from that.

RENÉ ECHEVARRIA: Writing is a way for you to think deeply about a subject, to focus and to force yourself to dig deeply into whatever is interesting you. I guess some of the power of literature is in the possibility of people showing each other a glimpse of their world and giving each other an insight into how humans think and what makes them tick, and why things happen the way they do.

STARLOG: Sometimes people question whether we *need* to read literature—whether it's really that important or relevant to most of us. How would you respond to these kinds of questions?

TAYLOR: It's possible to exist in this world by experiencing life through television, by reading the newspaper or scanning through the comics and sports page, but that's such a limiting kind of life, and I think you are essentially saying, "I am willing to live a narrow life." Why would one *not* want to expand the limits of all his powers? Why would one *not* want to experience things that can't be experienced in real life? One will never experience anything like what happens on *Star Trek*. One will never experience anything quite like *The Odyssey*, and one will probably never experience the kinds of things that happen in a Shakespeare play. As I said before, literature is a way of enlarging one's vision, enlarging one's world, enlarging one's mind, and consequently living a life that is broader, more powerful and more enjoyable.

STARLOG: What qualities of literature do you personally find most powerful when you sit down to read a book or watch a film or television? In other words, what makes a particular work of fiction *good*?

TAYLOR: Stories that touch us at the deepest levels. I will relate this to *Star Trek*, although I don't mean this is exclusive to the show, but I believe one of the reasons for the popularity of *Star Trek* is that it has accessed some deeply felt needs among people of the

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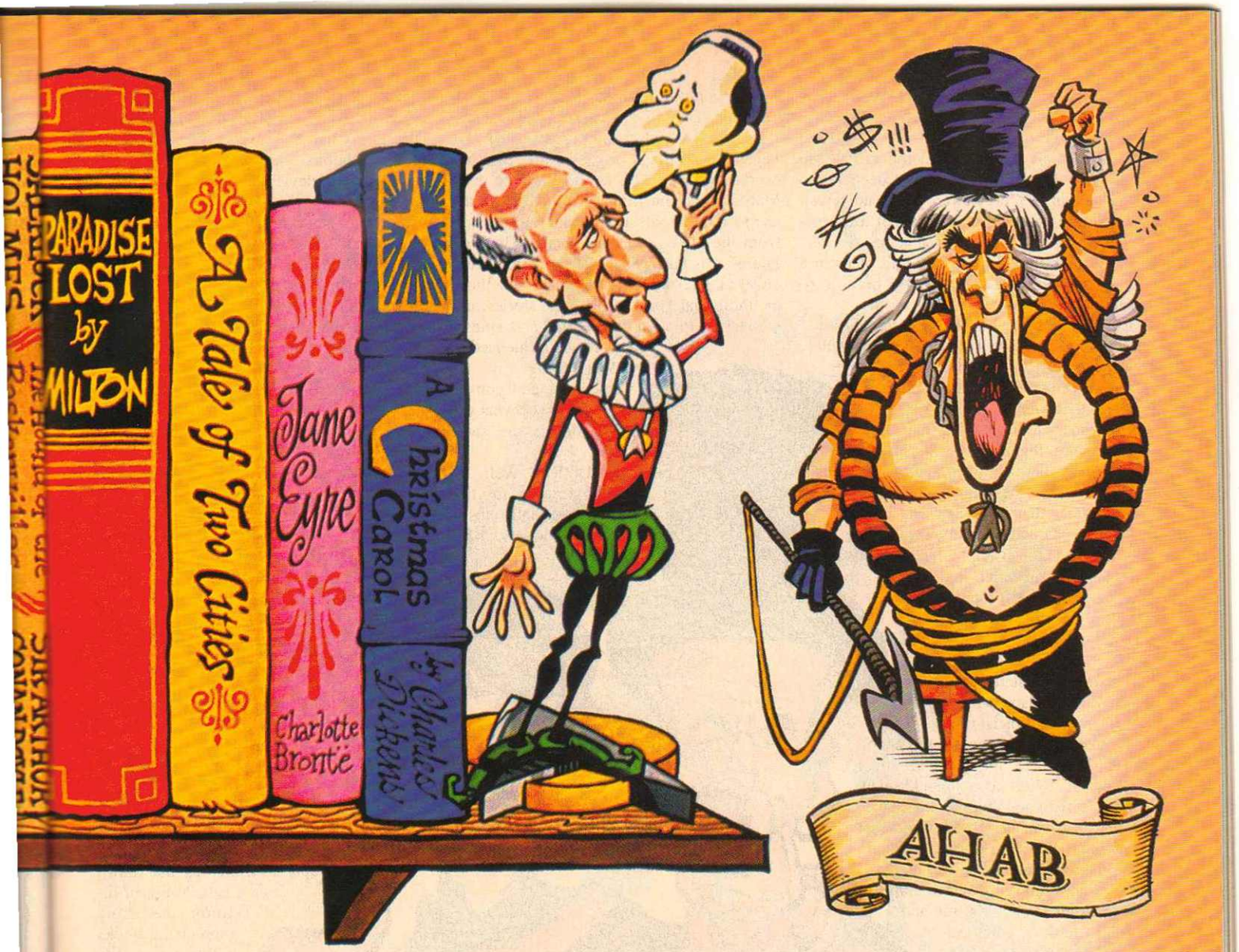

late 20th century. Again, there's that mythic connotation—stories of heroes, stories of a quest, stories of a search for something better, facing the unknown, facing dangers, fighting monsters, conquering or befriending them. Those are very ancient kinds of stories and tales that were once held very dear by people. In the modern day, we've lost track of those kinds of enduring myths and rituals, and I think that on an unconscious level, *Star Trek* and certainly other kinds of literary experiences help us to access them once again.

ECHEVARRIA: The best literature has characters who are behaving believably. But, at the same time, when I say that, I think, "What about magic realism and stuff like that?" What I admire most is literature in which things are not necessarily spelled out. That's what I hate to do in my own work, spell things out obviously. The worst kind of television is where people say, "I think this," or "I think that." That's the most dull thing. I want to see people interact and I want to see their relationships and thoughts illuminated in a more offhand way. That's much harder to do in any kind of literature.

MOORE: For me, it's the basics—a good story and a strong character. I really enjoy works that take you inside one character's mind for the course of the novel and that explore him or her and their views on life as they go through the story. I still love reading the C.S. Forester books—the Captain Horatio Hornblower series. I can read them over and over again and still get a great deal of enjoyment out of them, because it's such a very interesting character, carefully drawn and put in a very dynamic setting.

STARLOG: If we consider "literature" in a broad sense, do you believe there are ways in which films and TV series can be considered forms of quality "literature"?

TAYLOR: Yes I do, and I suspect that in the future they may become more commanding forms than books. I would consider this a sorrowful thing, but already we see a trend away from reading and toward experiencing life, education and recreation through television and computers. So, I think the distinction is going to become even more blurred in the future. The unfortunate part of that is books can do anything very cheaply. Once you get into film and television, it costs a lot of money, so there's a necessary curtailing of scope, of epic kinds of events, because those are expensive to produce. In a book, you can do it for free, and consequently you can explore a much wider range of events.

STARLOG: How does your attitude toward literature influence you as you write episodes or supervise development of stories for *Star Trek*?

MOORE: Well, you draw on it. When writing for *Star Trek*, I sort of draw on everything; movies I've seen, literature I've read, I draw on life experiences that I've had. It's just all part of the mix of what goes through my mind as I'm approaching scenes or stories or trying to understand a particular character motivation. I don't think literature alone has a greater influence on the work than the other elements—I think it's *one* element of many things that you draw on.

TAYLOR: My attitude toward literature has influenced me to a great extent. I've made, over the course of the years, studies of a lot of the world's great literature, and that has given me and other people on the staff, who

are also very well-educated and well-read, a wellspring of situations, ideas and archetypes that we've been able to tap into for our stories. We like to think that we are not telling small stories about the fad of the moment, but stories which cut deeper into the human psyche and are more universal. There are scenes we've had that are positively Shakespearean in their scope. So, certainly literature has informed all of us in a way that we would not really be able to function without it.

ECHEVARRIA: I try to tell my stories in a fresh way that isn't "on the nose" and obvious. I try to illuminate new aspects of these characters—characters that I *haven't* created—and I have to try to listen to their voices and make them richer and find depths to them that are consistent with everything that has come before. Sometimes that involves being truthful to a character you may not agree with. Worf, for example, has all sorts of cultural attitudes that I don't agree with, yet it's part of my job to illuminate him as faithfully as I can. I did a show a few years ago called "Birthright," where Worf goes to a kind of prison camp and, for his own sort of racist reasons, turns the place upside down. Some people would criticize the episode—they might say, "Worf came in and ruined a perfectly good thing," but that's what he *would* do. Besides, I'm not sure that it *was* a perfectly good thing—the Klingons on that planet weren't allowed to leave and they didn't know the truth, and Worf said those who want to leave should be allowed to. That's all he really did, and no one ultimately was hurt. But Worf's racist attitudes drove him and led him away from a woman he was attracted to. So, I try to keep in mind that my politics can't drive me completely. I have to be true to the characters.

STARLOG: Are there other ways, besides those you've touched on, that *Star Trek* is influenced by other works of fiction, whether they are books, stories, movies, or whatever?

ECHEVARRIA: Absolutely, it happens all the time. In fact, in Hollywood, people come in and pitch stories to producers as, for instance, a cross between various familiar movies. "You know, it's *Bridge on the River Kwai*," or "It's like *It's A Wonderful Life*." Doing that helps you see it in the largest sense, thematically, and it helps a writer keep from losing his perspective on the whole scope of the piece and how it will affect the viewer who doesn't know what's coming next.

MOORE: A lot of other movies influence us. *The Hunt for Red October* was an influence for "Face of the Enemy," for instance. *Raise the Titanic* was the beginnings of "The Pegasus." "First Contact" was basically everything from *This Island Earth* to every Martian invasion film from the '50s, but it spun a familiar tale around and told the story from the aliens' point-of-view. "The Next Phase" was basically a riff on *Ghost*. We're always interested in taking stories like those, or traditional "boy meets girl" stories, and then trying to put a unique *Star Trek* spin on them. You're influenced by other things in the medium, and you try to sort of see what you can do in the same vein.

TAYLOR: Well, I would certainly say that movies, especially classic kinds of movies, have sometimes given us a starting point, a scene, or a "it's like the time in *The 39 Steps* when..." sort of thing. Personally, I would have to say that I've always been influenced more by books and by literature than by either film or television. I was raised without television, so books were my access to outside worlds. I'm certainly a moviegoer, but in terms of the really profound influences, I am influenced much more by literature. I think in a general creative sense, I've been influenced by the same people that influence all of us, the people who have that magic capacity to weave the language in a way that gives it an evocative power. I still get a chill when I read someone who puts words together in a way that is fresh, with an ability to handle the language, the ability to carve out an insight in a chiseled kind of way.

STARLOG: What attitudes does *Star Trek* itself, as a TV series, convey about the value and importance of fiction?

MOORE: I think *Star Trek* has a tradition from the original series of being a very strong proponent of literature and of the influence of books upon people. In the original series, Kirk was drawn as a character who was described as a bookworm—"a walking stack of books" in his academy days—and there were books sitting on the back counter of his quarters on the *Enterprise*. The original series is loaded with quotes and metaphors from Shakespeare. They even performed Shakespeare once. They continued that down through the years. In *Star Trek II*, for instance, they had Charles Dickens and Melville all over the place. Captain Picard was also drawn as a great admirer of literature; he truly appreciated books and the physicality of them, holding and reading them.

TAYLOR: Picard, even in the 24th century when books are sort of anachronistic, keeps a volume of Shakespeare in his Ready Room and enjoys exploring the human condition with Data through Shakespeare. So, I think we are saying that even 400 years from now, almost 1,000 years after Shakespeare was writing, there is knowledge and awareness and insight to be gained from literature.

ECHEVARRIA: There's also the Holodeck, which is a glimpse into some kind of possible future type of literature. Presumably, people write these programs for each other and our characters participate in them. And then there's the show *as* literature—sometimes on *Star Trek* we do stories that we recognize as being mythic in their origin, and we realize that's what we're working on: "Hey, this is Oedipal!" or "This is

Lear!" or whatever. I don't think we've ever hewed to a storyline in order to make the parallels to an existing classic work too obvious. It's more an inspiration and having a take on it that's true to the *Star Trek* Universe.

TAYLOR: By its storytelling, *Star Trek* has the capacity to fire people's imaginations. We believe the story is everything. Stories have to be fresh and they have to be original; they have to be powerful. There are many requirements for the stories here, but we really try to tell the *best possible* stories that we can, because we think that's what reaches out and draws people in. And to the extent that people have responded favorably, I think they're responding to the innate power of storytelling.

STARLOG: Does science fiction provide us with anything more than entertainment?

MOORE: I think science fiction allows the writer to tell the audience familiar stories in new ways. The fantasy element of science fiction allows you to take a traditional story, really bend it and make it fresh, and approach it on a different level. Take time travel as a classic example. Maybe you can go back in time and talk to your own grandfather or someone who's dead. In the case of what we've done on *Star Trek*, in "Tapestry" we had an ability to take a main character back to a specific point in his life, have him re-live it with the age and wisdom of his later years, and then allow him to re-examine his early life experiences and change them. And science fiction allows you to do that in a different way than you would have to do it in traditional literature, where you might use a dream sequence or some other device that doesn't have the same immediacy and the same fun as the ability to actually say, "What if you *could* go back and do it yourself and have an omnipotent being like Q sitting around kibitzing with you?"

TAYLOR: Science fiction also gives you the ability to reach beyond what's possible now and to imagine the marvelous things that people might be able to experience in the future. Again, it has to do with expanding, with reaching outward, with enlarging one's vision. Some very effective and powerful stories can be told within a contemporary setting, but that is limiting. Science fiction takes off one set of those limits and allows you to stretch just that much further.

ECHEVARRIA: With science fiction, you have the liberty to create an all-new world. As the author, you have a lot of cards in your hand, because you can create a universe that illustrates something about human nature or about society that you think is important. However, that has a tendency sometimes to become didactic, obvious and heavy-handed. It's relatively easy to do parallels to issues like slavery, for example. But our challenge on *Star Trek* is that this is a show about *our* characters, these seven or eight people, and about *their* lives and how they interact with these other worlds. We try not to do shows about the "guest" planet and the "guest" culture and the "guest" star, and *their* problems and how *they* do things, where we are just bystanders. Good television is about the continuing characters—that's what people tune in for week after week. So, we rarely do shows where we, for instance, come to a planet where the men are slaves, because then our storylines just involve our continuing characters coming and showing the aliens the error of their ways and then leaving. With that kind of story, our characters haven't learned anything. The challenge is to keep it focused on *our* people.

STARLOG: It's interesting that not only does *Star Trek* say something about the importance of literature, but it often explores the relationships between fiction and reality. What are your views on how *Star Trek* has dealt with this relationship?

MOORE: The conflict of fantasy and reality is something we've always tried to play, and I think they have tried to play it in *Star Trek* since the original pilot, "The Cage." It has always been an interesting commentary on the show, too, that a series with a major cult following of people who imbue the show with more life than it really has, who really get involved in the fantasy, is also in a way saying to those people, "Don't get lost in all this—the reality of your day-to-day life is much more important and much more real,

and it's dangerous to lose yourself in these other worlds."

TAYLOR: Fantasy, I think, is an important part of all our lives. When I say that what science fiction gives you is the ability to stretch beyond what is possible and into the realm of what eventually *might* be possible, then that's a kind of fantasizing that's healthy and stimulating. There is a danger that people can be lured by fantasy—fantasy is beguiling, fantasy can be whatever you want it to be and can shelter you from the sometimes painful real world. We dealt with this in *The Next Generation* with Barclay and his addiction to the Holodeck. He wasn't living a very satisfying life, so he took refuge in the Holodeck. I think people can do that; they blur the distinctions between fantasy and reality, and when you cross a line to where the fantasy world becomes preferable, then you're in trouble. I worry at times about some of our fans who seem to blur that distinction.

MOORE: We always try to show the characters enjoying healthy fantasy lives and try to say that it's great to go and imagine things and role play and go on flights of fancy down on the Holodeck. But if you get addicted to it like Barclay did in "Hollow Pursuits," it's a bad thing. Or, if you go to planets where, as in the original pilot, you could just live in a fantasy in your mind like Captain Pike did and never return from it, you can be manipulated easily by outside influences. The show has definitely always had a point-of-view about fantasy in our lives, that it has a proper place, but that there are dangers inherent in it.

ECHEVARRIA: An episode I wrote called "Ship in a Bottle" also used Barclay as well as Professor Moriarty, a Holodeck character who had become self-aware. Moriarty realized that he was a fictional character and wanted to become real. It was a show in which, halfway through, our characters find out that they are still on the Holodeck, so we toyed with fantasy and reality—what *is* real? At the end, there's a little line where Barclay is alone, and he says, just to make sure he's still not trapped on the Holodeck, "Computer, end program." To me, one of the most interesting things about that show is the character of Moriarty realizing he exists. In "The Big Goodbye," there's a character in a Dixon Hill fantasy who says to Picard, "Hey Dix, what's going to happen to me when you leave? Will I still come home to my wife and kids? Will they still be here?" And Picard doesn't know; he can't answer. That to me is a more interesting take on the whole thing. It makes you think about in what sense these fictional worlds exist independent of us.

STARLOG: That's definitely another idea that seems to come up occasionally—that fictional worlds may in some sense attain their own "life" and their own right to exist. For example, in the *Next Generation* episode "Inheritance," Data's mother is allowed to continue believing the fiction that she's

human because the fiction is better for her than the truth that she's an android. Similarly, the *Deep Space Nine* episode "Shadowplay" involves an entire village that is actually holographic, and Odo and Dax decide that the people deserve to live and should be saved. Is there any kind of contradiction on the one hand saying that fiction can be taken too far, and on the other saying that fictional worlds are in some sense "alive"?

MOORE: Yes, it's an interesting contradiction between the two, and I think it just illustrates the dangers and the games of taking fiction and fantasy to a certain extreme. What we've played is that there *does* come a point where the fiction you've created in some sense does take on a life of its own, and then it has a certain right to itself. I guess the corollary that goes with that is, if you're caught up in it, you had better be aware of what's going on around you. Because when that happens, if you're so deep you can't get back out, suddenly it's going to have its own life and its own right to exist and its own sort of future and destiny, and you might get sucked along with it.

ECHEVARRIA: The idea that fictions have their own right to exist touches on notions that reality is a construct, that what we perceive as the ultimate reality exists only because we believe in it and only exists because we will it to be—those kinds of very metaphysical notions. When Data decided that it was more important for his mother to believe that she was human, he did it ultimately because of something Troi said to him. She said, "If you tell her the truth, you'll be taking from her the one thing you've wanted all *your* life, to be human." So, he decides not to tell her. And then, in what sense is she *not* human? If she believes herself to be, then why isn't she? Is the only difference between herself and Data that she believes it and he doesn't?

TAYLOR: With "Inheritance," we had many long discussions about what way to go with that. There were some among us, myself included, who felt that protecting someone from the truth is *not* the way to go, that this was not a good message to put out there—"we won't tell her about X because what she doesn't know won't hurt her." I am a believer in my daily life that this isn't a good way to proceed through life. The truth may be uncomfortable, it may be difficult to work through, but if it *is* the truth, you can work through it and get beyond it. When you're dealing with fantasy, you don't even have the opportunity to do that. I think it can be a very dangerous thing. Now, once again, SF gave us the ability to put a very different spin on it. This was, after all, a woman who was an android—we don't have androids in real life. This exact situation would not crop up. And so we were able to take a somewhat more sentimental view of it, and have Data conclude that he would be destroying a lot in this person by telling her the truth, and that the kinder thing would be to allow her to go on believing she were human.

STARLOG: Would it be accurate to say that, in general, *Star Trek* has explored the problems in distinguishing between fiction and reality but at the same time insists that the two are inherently separate?

MOORE: Yes, I tend to agree. Certainly we've played with the boundaries of reality and fantasy on the show numerous times, but we've never taken it to the extreme, or intended to take it to the extreme, of saying the two are indistinguishable. There's fun in blurring the lines between the two and in discovering places where they overlap, but at the same time I think the show has always had a real thrust that there is an objective reality that we all *do* live in. We all bring something to the table in that reality; we all have our own particular slant on it, the aliens have their particular slant on it, but I think we've always had a philosophy that there is a truth, there is something real, there is a right thing to do and a wrong thing to do in some sense. That has always sort of guided *Star Trek*. ★