

Play
S U D O K U
Turn to P19

SUNDAY
15 January 2006

> Highlights 6

> Music Zone 9

Discount
coupon!

> Comics Galore 12

> Interactive Fun 19

Photo by CHRISTINA KOH



Feel the passion

By fans, for fans

Welcome to Malaysia's first weekly anime and manga section in an English newspaper! From today, *StarMag-Variety* will devote three pages (for a start) to news, features, reviews, fanart and feedback on manga and anime every Sunday. And the best thing about our section is that it is written by fans for fans. Here's a quick introduction to the six young and not-so-young people who will be our anchor writers.

Max Loh, a college student, is an enthusiast with an unusual liking for characters in afros. He was first introduced to manga in the form of *Doraemon* and *Kimba the White Lion*. He is currently head over heels with the *Kingdom Hearts* series. Spends his free time collecting figurines, drawing manga, and reading. As a public service message, Max would like to point out that not all anime is pornographic material.



A convicted felon in the first degree, college student **Pauline Wong** constantly battles the bulge and struggles to find the ultimate chocolate éclair. Adores Orlando Bloom and enjoys reading, writing and haunting libraries. Armed with the knowledge that there was more to manga than robots from the future pulling gadgets from a pocket, she found herself catapulted into the wondrous world of manga, and has never looked back since.



Kitty Sensei, a journalist, made the almost unforgivable mistake of believing that anime was kiddie fare. After exposure to *Ghost in the Shell*, *Witch Hunter Robin* and *3x3 Eyes*, she recanted her misguided beliefs and is now an anime devotee. She likes moody fantasy, sci-fi or supernatural-leaning anime and manga with the more *bishonen* (pretty boys) the better. She's currently digesting *Bleach*.



Japanese *craze*, global mania

SEVENTEEN-year-old Sarah Yung Kah Yan thinks she has the coolest mum in the world.

Two years ago, the housewife brought home *Shaman King*, a Japanese animated series for her four children to watch, knowing they were all eager anime fans.

Then, wondering what the fuss was all about, a curious Goh Yee Mun sat down and started watching with the kids.

The family enjoyed the series so much that Goh would bring home new ones to add to their rapidly expanding collection. Titles like *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Naruto* and *Wolf's Rain* began holding pride of place right under the family television.

"Since then, we've watched a lot of anime shows together but Mum always says she prefers *Shaman King*," says Sarah, from Ipoh.

"She likes the characters and the concept of them competing in this grand contest for the title of King of Shamans. The story is something different to her."

Shaman King, by Hiroyuki Takei, is about a boy in a world of "shamans" who possess the ability to team up with ghosts and spirits, hence getting their powers.

It's a story virtually guaranteed to give an excuse for scores of shamans to whack the wonky stuffing out of each other every

A zealous CHRISTINA KOH explains the phenomenon that's anime and manga, a sometimes provocative art form yet truly addictive wonder.

episode, and yet surprisingly the premise offers some twists too.

What happens, for instance, if a reluctant spirit is forcibly merged with a shaman? What do you do if the thug who bullied you senseless turns out to have a heart after all?

Oh my Bebop

It surprises like these - plot and character developments you don't find in many average Western cartoons today - that have made anime and Japanese comics, known as *manga*, such a worldwide hit, including in Malaysia.

Last month, some 3,000 people attended the Comic Fiesta in Sekolah Sri Sedaya in Subang Jaya, Selangor, a huge fan-organised event focusing on anime, comics and video games. The year before that, the same number of people has been known to attend the fiesta.

To fans, anime and manga are *hot*. To everyone else, however, the fascination can be downright bewildering. Anyone



Wearn Chong, 29, feels people shouldn't scoff at anime on the mistaken belief that all has 'dubious' content.



Yau Mun Yip, 28, thinks anime has strong appeal because it reflects a slice of life.

new to anime and manga, for instance, might seriously wonder about the sanity of people who come up with titles like *Prince of Tennis*, *Fruits Basket*, *Oh My Goddess* or *Cowboy Bebop*, to name just a few.

Bizarre as the names are, these shows are just the tip of the iceberg of the cultural phenomenon taking Malaysia by storm. But just what is the big deal?

Anime fan Yau Mun Yip, 28, thinks anime has strong appeal because it reflects a slice of life, showing characters going through the trials anyone experiences in real life.

One example is *Getbackers*, about two young men who make a business of "getting back" whatever was lost or stolen from their clients.

"It's about these two people who might have special powers, but they're still on their own and can only survive by taking on jobs.

"Like us, they're trying to find a place in the world. The story deals with elements like teenage rebellion and the strength of friendship," says Yau who works in his family's foundry business in Perak.

Admitting that he also enjoys watching series like *Gundam* for the action and the slick art, Yau adds that anime has also taught him about the Japanese language and culture.

"The language is fascinating and the Japanese way of speaking is so

polite. I even picked up a few words of Japanese like *Ohayo*, basic greetings like that."

More than cartoons

It's been said before. Anime and manga are *not* just for kids.

In fact, some of them should definitely not be for children. But to anyone who's ever been curious about the phenomenon, it is worth checking out if you're looking for an alternative form of entertainment.

Like live-action movies, both art forms have a huge range of genres ranging from horror, romance, action, adventure, slapstick comedy to the philosophical. Here, the best anime not only entertains you, but raises questions that have you thinking.

For instance, *Ghost in the Shell* explores the nature of the soul in humans and machines, while Carl Macek's *Robotech* drove home the senseless reality of war for Malaysian viewers when the series aired around the 1980s and early 1990s.

A *Wind Named Amnesia*, a manga and later anime movie, asks what would happen to the world if something were to suddenly wipe everyone's memories away, even memories of how to talk or take care of yourself. Would this brave new world pave the way for a new utopia? Or would humanity degenerate?

"Anime is an eye-opener," says Sarah



Caught up in manga mania are Sarah Yung, 17, and her nine-year-old sister Sheryl Leigh.

Victor Yap, a tech-fan and college student, is a big *otaku* who got into anime late in 1996 with *Dragonball Z* manga. Thanks to the internet boom then, he found other shows like *Ranma 1/2*, *Tenchi Muyo* and to his surprise, the original make of one of his favourite shows, *Robotech* (previously known as *Macross*). He has probably watched more anime than all the writers here combined, so don't mess with him!



Christina Koh is a fan of character development, so *Gensomaden Saiyuki* was the show that first sucked her into anime two years ago. The journo was amazed that a so-called "cartoon" could pack so much emotion and depth, but she's not much for romantic "girlie" stuff. She likes her anime with style, story and food for thought.



Cheeky Monkey is very much into "romantic girlie stuff" and is not one jot apologetic about it. She got hooked on manga and anime nearly eight years ago, at an age when anime was so scarce that if you couldn't read the Chinese subtitles that most of the anime had, you had to download the English translation provided by helpful fans and read it while watching it. She is captivated by their exquisite drawings and stories and would just love to be *Naruto*.



■ Caricatures by Max Loh

● FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

who has been familiar with the creative twists of the art form since she was about 12.

Unlike most cartoons, she points out, anime tends to explore topics not often covered anywhere else, like mythology, dealing with death and taboos.

In *Fullmetal Alchemist*, one of her favourite shows, two brothers commit the worst taboo imaginable in their world - they try to perform human transmutation and bring their dead mother back to life.

"Now everyone knows it's not possible to bring the dead back to life in that society, and so the experiment goes horribly wrong," relates Sarah.

"One boy, Alphonse, loses his body, leaving only his soul attached to a suit of armour. Edward, the older brother, loses an arm and leg, to be replaced by metal limbs known as 'automail'."

The story turns into a quest to restore their bodies, with one brother struggling with the guilt of causing the accident and another facing the prospect of losing his humanity as time goes on.

The show teaches about sacrifice, says Sarah, pointing out Edward's

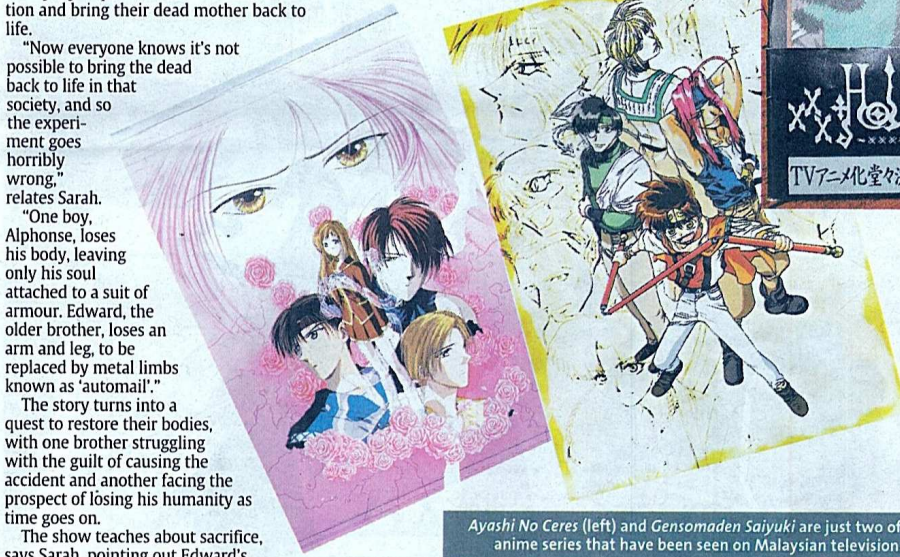
determination to join the military, albeit reluctantly, and restore his brother to his original body.

"I wouldn't rank *Fullmetal Alchemist* as a violent show, but it does have some scenes that count as gory. It's not for anyone below the age of 12, I would say," she muses.

Dubious content

One common grouse about anime is that it

● TURN TO PAGE 4



Ayashi No Ceres (left) and Gensomaden Saiyuki are just two of the anime series that have been seen on Malaysian television.

xxxHolic, far from being a *hentai* title, is a manga series about a witch who runs a shop granting wishes to whoever can give up the one thing they most treasure.

(Below) *D.N.Angel*, an anime/manga series about a boy with a 'phantom thief' for an alter ego.

WHEN I read that a certain award-winning journalist in a Malay daily equated anime with porn recently, I went:

"Wow! All these years I've been watching porn and I didn't know it! Cool!"

No, of course it's not cool. Porn is bad. *Baaaad*. Seriously! Say no to porn, kids!

Okay, but the point is anime is not porn. Anime simply means "Japanese animation". Calling anime porn is like saying all movies are comedy. It's also an incongruous accusation as local television stations - both terrestrial and satellite - have been showing anime for years.

But it's true that anime is not just for kiddies. Watching *Card Captor Sakura*, *Doraemon* or *Sailor Moon* doesn't even cover a slice of the anime pie. After all, there's so much variety out there: there are complex sci-fi stories such as *Ghost in the Shell*, or hilarious action comedies like *Bleach* or the heart-warming *Tokyo Godfathers*, an anime movie about three homeless people who find a baby.

It is, yes, also a medium for pornographic material - and the correct term for it is *hentai*. (The term, however, is not what the Japanese use to call pornographic anime. See box on the right.)

An issue to ponder

Anime is porn? When one Malay daily made that allegation, anime fans went berserk. KITTY SENSEI sets the record straight.

Fans have been riled up and understandably upset about the article. In message boards and blogs on the Internet, they brought reporters to task (which makes this journalist sweat a little), howled with indignation at the misapplication of a revered word and pounded their fingers on their keyboards, saying: "No, it's not porn. Not porn!"

I can understand their concern. If the Government believed the allegation, could it lead to the authorities restricting the choice of manga and anime coming into Malaysia? Will *otaku* have a harder time obtaining desired titles? Already the choice available in our stores, although not scarce, is not exactly plentiful.

Also, concerned parents, worried that their children may be watching something they shouldn't, may take the state-

ment seriously and end up banning their kids from watching all anime.

And that's heart-breaking as some children would miss the joy of watching shows like *Inuyasha*, the tale of a young girl who finds out that she's a reincarnation of a *miko* (priestess) and who gets transported to a world where demons wreck havoc.

Still, because anime is aimed at adults as well, there will be anime that is unsuitable for children. For one, children should not watch *Gantz*, the weird, surrealistic anime about resurrected people who are ordered by a black, singing sphere to fight aliens. Let's just say that if a train hits a person they don't fade to black. Why, one can even learn a lot about anatomy when watching *Gantz*, and that's not necessarily a good thing!

Therefore, parents have to monitor the anime and manga diet of their children, and exercise caution when choosing the material for the young and impressionable minds. It's just like in the "real world", where parents have to decide between *The Ring* and *Toy Story* to watch with their five-year-olds.

A good guideline to follow before purchasing manga or anime is to read reviews first - either here at *StarMag-Variety's* weekly manga and anime section, or on the many websites online. After all, one just wants to avoid the awkward conversation with Junior about the birds and the bees while watching anime.

Hentai

IN Japan, *hentai* means "pervert" or "perversion". It is rarely used to refer to pornographic material but to people. However, fans in the West have adopted the word for the former. Hence, pornographic or "adult" anime, manga and computer games are called *hentai*.

Coming Soon

So dark, so bright

Darker Than Black is a tale that illuminates with the conflict between humans and former humans.

By **CHRISTINA KOH**
otaku@thestar.com.my

DARKER THAN BLACK
25 episodes and 1 OVA (original video animation)

WHAT is it about assassins that are so fascinating in popular culture? Is it the guns? The brutality? The doomed life of sin and damnation?

Darker Than Black (Kuro no Keiyakusha) is not really about assassins, but it does feature a main character who is one such killer caught up in a world as conflicted and grey as he is.

Ten years ago, two alien phenomena emerged out of nowhere to literally swallow up whole chunks of territory. One manifested in South America and came to be known as Heaven's Gate, an irony considering that it would become the scene for a brutal war.

The other is Hell's Gate, around which the story revolves in a present-day and irreversibly changed Tokyo.

The arrival of the Gates led to the appearance of super-powered beings known as Contractors and Dolls.

Once human, these Contractors and Dolls were altered by the Gates for unknown purposes. They gain power and abilities, but at a price.

Contractors have apparently been stripped of their humanity, leaving behind coldly rational and amoral individuals highly sought after by governments and other shady groups for their unique skills. (And it just so happens that many Contractors have abilities that make them very, very good at destroying things. And people.)

Dolls, in contrast, are equally emotionless but seem to lack free will or even a personality. They are used as tools, able to carry out remote surveillance from a distance.

In the midst of all this is Hei, a ruthlessly efficient operative working for the Syndicate, one of the many factions scrambling to unlock the secrets of the Gates.

Let me make this clear. *Darker Than Black* is produced by Bones, a studio renowned for its animation quality and the strength of its characters. But do not expect straightforward answers in this anime. The questions you have may not be answered as easily as you wish, so if you can live with that, then sit back and enjoy a show that has generally been touted the best original anime of 2007.

Darker Than Black has it all: a dark and riveting storyline, amazing visuals, sympathetic villains, ambiguously aligned "heroes" whose actions can be unpredictable, and best of all, a sufficiently satisfactory ending.

It's refreshing to have a show that doesn't insult your intelligence, where everything is subtly done and the clues are all there for the viewer who pays attention.

The team

Hei is not acting alone. Helping him are a Doll girl named Yin, a Contractor called Mao, and the hostile Huang who relays orders from

the Syndicate to the group.

At first it seems that the four barely qualify as a team – Huang often threatens Hei if the latter ever disobeys the Syndicate's orders. But as time goes on, the characters' motivations and (most of) their pasts reveal themselves in emotionally wrenching episodes. My favourite moment was when I realised the kind of bond the team has later on, which is as fractured as these souls are.

The anime starts off with Hei's team sent out to locate a girl on the run after she was linked to a dead Contractor. They are not the only ones; the police and certain nasty types, too, are looking for her.

Incidentally, the police are also keenly interested in nabbing Hei – it probably has

something to do with him constantly bumping off their suspects, or something else equally annoying.

From there, the narrative scarcely pauses for breath and we see it all comes down to the plans various people have for the Gates.

Little is wasted and each episode always advances the plot in some way. For instance, one episode reveals the origins of a little-liked character, enough for us to sympathise with the person, which heightens the tension when the Syndicate orders Hei to take the person out.

The brilliance is in how the anime balances it all, sometimes juggling tense drama and gentle humour in the same episode even.

Hei is an enigma. As *bishonen* go, he is not

that spectacular looks-wise. But there's something morbidly fascinating about watching a guy blend in by acting like a bumbling exchange student one moment, and the next moment, react violently to a threat with utter coldness. Chilling.

At one point, I winced when Hei resorts to torturing someone, only for him to occasionally demonstrate some measure of compassion towards others ... unless, of course, all that is an act as well.

Viewers can spend many a fun moment guessing Hei's Contractor ability (as it is unclear at the outset), as well as try to figure out the price he has to pay for it.

You see, each time Contractors use their powers, they are compelled to pay a weird sort of remuneration. Some are plain bizarre, like having to eat flowers or arrange shoes upside down. Others are quite horrific; imagine having to break your own fingers (ow!). (This is the contract each of them must pay, making me wonder what happens if a Contractor doesn't.)

Part of the show's appeal lies in seeing a new Contractor and identifying what their unique remuneration is.

As time wears on, viewers will also start to notice changes within Hei. Despite his apathy, there are hints of indecision and even loneliness when this anti-hero has to mingle with the human race.

Is he really what he seems? When the answers come, one starts to realise what Hei represents to the Contractors and humans battling each other.

And this emotionless, seemingly soulless, man will be the anchor for everything.

Multi-faceted affair

It's hard to write about a show that has so many facets to it without spoiling everything. And I haven't even touched on the other interesting characters yet. Or the many groups that will clash with Hei's team one way or another.

With so much going for it and many questions about the Gates unanswered, it's frustrating to have the anime end so abruptly when viewers (like me) might be left demanding for a resolution between certain characters.

(After the series ended, an OVA was released some six months later around March this year. Sadly, it is not a sequel but more of a prequel. Nevertheless the OVA, known also as Episode 26, is mindless fun.)

At the end of the day, *Darker Than Black* might not raise deep philosophical questions a la *Ghost in the Shell* or *Evangelion*, but it is a gem of an anime that entertains, thrills and moves without resorting to cheap theatrics or explosions.

Watch it for the amazing fights and for its beautifully quiet moments – the night skies, the talks between lonely souls, the soft neon lights of a city on the edge of destruction.

Watch it and wonder at the differences between the "inhuman" Contractors, and the callous humans who send them to their deaths.

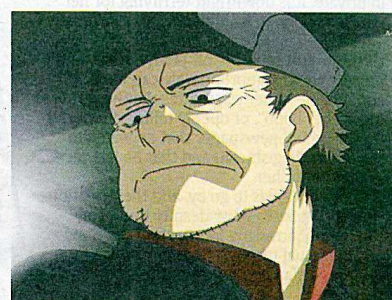
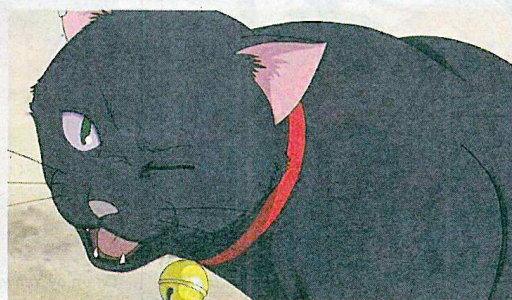
Watch it for the characters that give you that lump in your throat.

For heaven's sake, just watch it. Now, if only there was a movie...

■ *'Darker Than Black'* airs on Animax (Astro Channel 715) at 8pm on Tuesdays, beginning Dec 30.



Hei, the conflicted and enigmatic protagonist of *Darker Than Black*. Assisting him on his mission are (bottom, from left) Yin, an emotionless Doll; Mao, a Contractor in a cat's body; and the gruff messenger Huang.



Anime Review



The four wolves and their illusory human forms (from left): Kiba, Tsume, Hige and Toboe.

The company of **wolves**

WOLF'S RAIN:
The Perfect Collection DVD
Creator: BONES, Keiko Nobumoto
(30 episodes)
For teens and above

UNLIKE most anime with human or humanoid protagonists, *Wolf's Rain* is one of the few stories in which the "heroes" are actually wolves. Wolves that, well, "appear" like humans.

The story is set in the distant future when most humans have abandoned the once war-scorched wilderness for isolated cities controlled by the faraway and hedonistic Nobles. Most people live safe, stable, boring lives... that is, if they don't cross the Nobles who travel from territory to territory in airships.

Into the mix come the wolves, which have apparently evolved to an extent where they can "make" humanity believe they look like humans. The illusion is virtually flawless, as long as they don't touch anyone, and as long as people don't notice the shape of their footprints...

In one city, four wolves come together for certain reasons.

There's Tsume (Claw), the loner who actually leads a gang of humans that spends half its time stealing from the Nobles. He first crosses paths – or rather clashes – with Kiba (Fang), a white wolf that scorns stooping because it makes him look like a human until easy-going Hige (Whisker) convinces Kiba he can get into much less trouble that way.

You see, most people believe wolves have been extinct for 200 years, except for Quent Yaiden, a town sheriff who nurses a killing hatred for the animals that "destroyed" his life years ago.

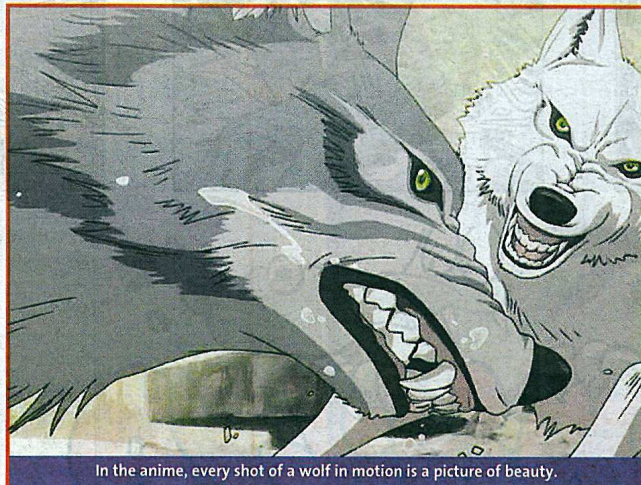
When things heat up with Quent being hot on their trail, Kiba is the one that brings the pack together. His dream of reaching Paradise, a place where wolves are said to rule and can only be found with the help of the "Flower Maiden", captivates the others.

Unfortunately, a Noble named Lord Darcia kidnaps Cheza, the said Flower Maiden, prompting the wolves to leave the city.

Together with Toboe (Howl), a young wolf once raised by an old woman, the pack sets off for Paradise.

There you have it, an intriguing story that straddles the realms of man and animals.

Wolf's Rain is not some post-apocalyptic



In the anime, every shot of a wolf in motion is a picture of beauty.

moral tale crying for a return to a time untouched by war or industry. At its heart is a personal journey of characters, both major and minor, struggling for a kind of peace.

Tsume, for instance, is haunted by an old guilt while the puppy-like Toboe yearns to be loved by the humans. Hige and Kiba, too, harbour their own secrets.

The human sheriff Quent may not quite be the villain as previously thought. There's a soft side to his steely character, as shown in the way he looks out for Blue, his canine companion. For years, Blue has faithfully helped Quent hunt down wolves but eventually even that loyalty is tested when the two are separated.

Then there's Cher, the scientist, and her ex-husband Hubb Lebowsky, a police detective. When the Nobles start upsetting the order of things, both try to reconcile their feelings in the face of a slowly dying world.

Among the lot, Cheza the artificially created Flower Maiden probably changes the least. Everyone wants her to lead them to Paradise, but she essentially exists for the wolves – the "earth mother" figure that awakens their primal instincts for belonging.

Wolf's Rain is a satisfying watch that's alternately heartwarming and heartbreak- ing. From the stares between Kiba and

Tsume asserting dominance in the pack to the threat of the Nobles, and even the connection between wolves and humans, there's rarely a boring moment.

Only a few things prevent the show from achieving perfection. The character designs can sometimes look a bit dated in this day and age, although every shot of a wolf in motion is indeed a thing of beauty.

The ending is also a bit of a downer (more on that later). And there are certain parts of the series when viewers clearly have to chuck logic out of the door. Like how wolves can leap and land from amazing distances (attributable to evolution?) or how the heck can an airship turn upside down and yet have its passengers inside remain miraculously upright? *Star Trek*-style stabilisers?

I won't even go into how an airship door can conveniently open right up when someone tries to escape through that door, in *mid-air*. Then again, we are talking about anime, right?

Narrative-wise, portraying the wolves in human form is a smart way to get viewers to identify with them. And you can't go wrong when the four guys are really easy on the eye.

But make no mistake. The story doesn't let you forget they're not human. They're on edge in the cities. They get hungry.

By Christina Koh



Starved of food, they talk about eating the "weaker" members of the pack as casually as munching on rat bones. In the very first episode, we even get to see one of them rip out a human throat in full technicolour glory. The occasional spurts of violence, however, are rarely ever gratuitous to the plot.

Notably, *Wolf's Rain*, with a soundtrack by Yoko Kanno, is one of the few anime with English opening and ending themes, although the opening theme can test the viewer's patience after a time. The lyrics of *Heaven's Not Enough* are particularly haunting, especially the Japanese version, while *Tell Me What the Rain Knows* is a gently melancholy tune that underscores everyone's longing for their utopia.

Throughout the series, viewers are left to wonder: Is this Paradise real? Are the wolves all chasing a myth? Often, you get glimpses of what Tsume, Hige, Kiba and Toboe want from their paradise, and the thought that it could be denied them seems rather cruel.

The series initially finished at 26 episodes, which tied off events pretty nicely but without any of the heroes reaching their destination.

Around February 2004, the last four episodes were released with a final ambiguous ending that left many fans fuming, scratching their heads or gobs-macked.

I, for one, thought the conclusion was just right, once you interpreted it a certain way. It might not be the perfect ending as some hoped, but it is an ending.

These are wolves, stripped of human pretensions, shown here at their proudest and most savage, most civilised, most noble.

It's the kind of story that stays with you, and you can't ask for anything more than that.

■ Christina Koh is a fan of *Genshaden Saiyuki*. She likes her anime with style, story and food for thought.

Vault of facts

FULLMETAL Alchemist started off as a manga series by Hiromu Arakawa and was adapted into an award-winning anime that ended its run in 2004 at a "modest" 51 episodes.

It went on to spawn a movie sequel, eight (count 'em!) video games, novels, graphic novels, a trading card game, scores of merchandise and even concert performances.

The ending of *Conqueror of Shambala* left many fans crying for more but there's hope.

The manga is still ongoing in the anthology magazine *Monthly Shonen Gangan*, and at last count there were 59 chapters as of this month. Bookshops here have stocked the title until Vol.7.

Now, did you know ...

1. Many of the characters have names tied to WWII or actual alchemists of the past? Havoc is apparently named after the Mi-28 fighter helicopter while Fuhrer King Bradley is named after Omar Bradley, a respected WWII commander of the United States. Other characters with historical roots are Fury, Mustang, Hughes and Hayate.

2. Romi Paku, the *seiyuu* who voiced Edward Elric, is apparently a third-generation Korean-born and raised in Tokyo. This talented *seiyuu* also portrayed, ironically enough, a fire-starter named Natsume Hyuuga in *Gakuen Alice*, and the sullen Tao Ren in *Shaman King*. (Source: Wikipedia)

3. Besides the video games for PlayStation 2, Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS, *Fullmetal Alchemist* even inspired a fan-made version by a group of Chinese university students. Called *FMA: Bluebird's Illusion*, the game has an opening theme that features sexy character shots and a killer soundtrack. Fans became very, very excited at scenes of Edward resurrected as a wicked-looking Pride in one of the game's possible endings. Sadly, there are only a few copies of the Chinese-language game in the world, and yes, *Bluebird's Illusion* is not official. Check out the fan community at community.livejournal.com/blubrdillusion/profile.

4. The website Not a Shrimp (www.notashrimp.com) lists 10 reasons why Edward Elric cannot be called a shrimp. *Classic*.

5. Edward and Alphonse's father gets his name from a town in Germany. It's also the surname of Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, more often referred to as Theophrastus von Hohenheim, an alchemist with the pen name of Paracelsus. (Source: www.fullmetal-alchemist.com)

6. *Fullmetal Alchemist* has a trading card game with several booster packs. One expansion is called *Blood & Water*, a reference to Red Water in the series and what makes up the Philosopher's Stone. Another is called *Artificial Human*, meaning the Homunculi. - By CK



Fullmetal Alchemist has spawned a popular trading card game.

The low-down on *Fullmetal Alchemist*

OtakuZone pays homage to one of the anime masterpieces of our time, *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

IMAGINE a world where alchemy has evolved. Gone are the bubbling flasks and the whimsical quest to turn lead into gold. Instead, alchemy has become a powerful pseudo-science that allows gifted men and women to create both wonders and nightmares at their fingertips...

These alchemists must remember one vital rule: to transmute something into another, they must sacrifice an object of equal value.

And there lies the foundation of *Fullmetal Alchemist* (Hagane no Renkinjutsushi), arguably one of the best-crafted, best-plotted and most popular anime-manga series around.

The anime starts off in horror, jolting viewers with the story of two orphaned brothers who are so desperate to have their dead mother back that they are willing to violate the biggest taboo around - use alchemy to bring her back from the grave.

As fans would know: Big Mistake.

In the ensuing accident, 11-year-old Edward Elric loses an arm and a leg, but some argue that he gets off "easy".

His brother Alphonse loses his entire body, and his soul ends up being grafted to a hulking suit of armour that has been lying nearby in the basement. Without a body, the boy exists only as an animated shell, unable to feel pain or even the warmth of another living being.

He ain't heavy

If you have to sum it up, *Fullmetal Alchemist* is essentially about the bond shared by the Elric brothers and how those ties are tested by the truths they come across.

But it's so much more than that, and kudos to the creators for skillfully weaving in a ton of plot elements and having it all come together in a rich, interesting world populated by characters with distinct designs.

From that disturbing opening sequence, viewers are taken on a heady rollercoaster ride of adventure, mystery, tragedy and yes, plenty of light-hearted moments to offset

what would otherwise be a dark and somewhat depressing show.

Burdened by his mistake, Edward leaves his village with Alphonse and sets out on a journey to restore their bodies. Their quest eventually takes them to Central City, where the brothers accept the offer of one Colonel Roy Mustang to join the military and become "State Alchemists".

As a State Alchemist, or a "dog of the military" as one character mockingly puts it, Edward will have access to resources and information normally inaccessible to him.

The brothers then embark on a three-year road trip to track down the elusive and almost mythical "Philosopher's Stone", an artefact that could be the answer to all their problems.

The Movie: *Conqueror of Shambala*

The story takes place two years after the end of the anime which would make Edward ... 17 years old? (My, at that age he still looks short ... ahem.)

Anyway, the movie continues where the TV series left off, with Edward trapped in an alternate world (our world) with very familiar faces in different roles. For instance, King Bradley, the military president in the other world, is apparently a filmmaker in this one.

The movie alternates back and forth between the "alchemist" world and the parallel world of wartime Germany. It's a grim time, set between two World Wars, and the film reflects this by depicting Munich in muted, washed-out hues.

Edward, resigned to the fact that alchemy cannot work in this world, befriends Alphonse Heiderich, an 18-year-old rocket researcher who incidentally resembles Alphonse Elric, and humours his stories about coming from another world.

Things become really strange when Edward meets a gypsy girl and follows a trail that could possibly lead him back home.

Meanwhile, the sinister Thule Society puts into motion plans to invade Edward's world

By Christina Koh



LIKE any good tale, *Fullmetal Alchemist* is chock-full of interesting characters - one of the TV series' strongest points. There's little chance of getting confused over which character is which here!

The bean and the walking armour

Cynical, whip-smart, and likely carrying guilt the size of a meteor, Edward Elric has to grow up fast and shoulder the responsibility as the big brother and the only family Alphonse has left.

Because of his "metallic" prosthetic limbs, Edward is given the title "Fullmetal" after winning recognition as the youngest qualified alchemist.

The problem is that although he is a year older than Al, Edward could never hope to match his height! Hilarity ensues whenever some poor innocent casually mentions something about Edward's height, or lack of, only to find themselves attacked by the pint-sized alchemist. ("Who are you calling a bean?!")

At 15 years old, this golden-eyed teenager is already a looker and strong fan favourite. One wonders what he would look like grown up? (Big hint to fan artists!)

Alphonse, despite the awesome size of his armour, is gentle, sweet-natured and constantly moved to pacify an indignant Edward. The invulnerable exterior, however, belies a fragile psyche: as time

Personnel files



(From left) Alphonse Elric, Roy Mustang and Edward Elric back together in *Fullmetal Alchemist: Conqueror of Shambala*.

goes on, Al wonders: would he even count for human anymore?

Miss fix-it

Winy Rockbell, the childhood friend of the Elric brothers, is completely mad on all things mechanical. When shopping, this spunky girl goes absolutely giddy ... in a hardware store. Don't underestimate this blonde: she is the one who makes and fixes up Edward's limbs!

Romance-wise, the anime and manga seem to nudge her towards Ed, although plenty of fanfictions have also paired her up with the shy Alphonse. *Sweet*.

Fire from fingers

The cunning Colonel Roy Mustang



The movie *Fullmetal Alchemist: Conqueror of Shambala* left fans crying for more. Picture shows (from bottom) Edward Elric, Alphonse Elric, Alphonse Heiderich, Noah the gypsy girl, Roy Mustang, Maes Hughes and King Bradley from an alternate reality, and Thule Society's leader, Dietlinde Eckart.

which they call Shambala – described as a “utopia with no war, disease, suffering or hatred”.

The film, with its high death toll, could be downright depressing if not for the many cameos clearly meant as a love note to the fans.

I dare anyone to not get all misty-eyed upon seeing Edward and brother Alphonse standing side by side again, fighting and kicking butt as they used to.

Fans of the anime series would have a ball spotting all the little surprises and the alternative versions of certain characters.

However, it is a case of too much or too little packed into 105 minutes of film. The invasion seems rushed and resolved too quickly, for instance, and like most movies, you don't get to see enough of some favourite characters. Blink “whoosh” and they're gone.

But what an ending! The movie's most poignant

moments are when the brothers are reunited, reinforcing a bond unchanged by time and distance, parallel reality notwithstanding.

Now if only there were another sequel, hmmm.

In the Fifth Tokyo Anime Awards this year, the *Conqueror of Shambala* won Animation of the Year, Best Music and Best Original Story.

● **Share your love for 'Fullmetal Alchemist'!** Who is your favourite character? What's your favourite episode? Any nifty trivia to tell? We want to hear from you! Send your e-mails, complete with your name, age, address and I.C. No., to otaku@thestar.com.my.

■ **Christina Koh likes her tales with style, story and character development, so anime like 'Wolf's Rain', 'Gensomaden Saiyuki' and 'Noir' came as pleasant surprises.**

romance. Oh well.

The absent father

Throughout the series, viewers got hints of the dad who abruptly left his wife and the Elric brothers and went missing for years.

Understandably, Edward nurses a king-sized grudge against the man while Alphonse simply looks forward to having a father to be loved again.

Apparently, the father is a renowned alchemist who passed on his talent to his sons.

In the anime, we found out the dad might have a connection to the Philosopher's Stone and the lethal creatures known as Homunculi patterned after the seven deadly sins.

So which is he? Sinner or saint?
– **By CHRISTINA KOH**

Shinra in *Final Fantasy 7: Advent Children* and Persia in *Weiss Kreuz*.

Where's the romance?

Lieutenant Riza Hawkeye is one of the few not impressed by Mustang's posturing and doesn't hesitate to kick the man to the ground if she reckons it's for his own good.

Although Hawkeye is not an alchemist, this soldier is one tough cookie. Remember how she house-trains the puppy she adopts? Guns are involved. Priceless.

Many fans hoping to see Roy and Riza getting it on were left wanting when the 51-episode anime series ended with just mere hints of what could be. Even the *FMA* movie, *Conqueror of Shambala*, barely touched on anything resembling a

Top 10 Anime

FOR week ending May 21, 2006:

1. *Naruto: The Movie 2*
2. *Bleach the Movie: Memories in the Rain*
3. *Magi O Ranger* (final episode)
4. *Mobile Suit Gundam: Seed Destiny* (special edition)
5. *Beyblade: G Revolution* (Vol.1-2)
6. *Bleach the Movie*
7. *Paradise Kiss* (Vol.1-12 end)
8. *Pokemon: The Johto Journeys Season 1* (Vol.39-40)
9. *Trinity Blood* (Vol.1-24 end)
10. *Beyblade: G Revolution* (Vol.3-4)

■ Weekly list compiled by **Tower Records Malaysia**.

Reasons to watch

CHRISTINA KOH gives you 10 reasons, in no particular order, why you should watch (or rewatch!) *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

1. **Major Alex Louis Armstrong:** There's a reason why he's known as the Strong Arm Alchemist. Hailing from an elite family with a long and glorious history, this bloke has the hilarious tendency to go bare-chested and flash those massive biceps (with little sparkles appearing around him as accompaniment). Whenever he does that, chances are people gape or turn white.
2. **Episode 13:** The duel between Edward Elric and Roy Mustang. When you get two hot-headed alchemists into the ring, the result can only be fire and mayhem. Funny stuff, though.
3. **Izumi Curtis:** This strong-willed, no-nonsense woman is the first to teach alchemy to the Elric brothers. In Episode 27, we learn how terrified the brothers are of their teacher, and Ed even tries to jump through a window to escape her!

She gives new meaning to the term “tough love”, but hers is a sad story too. Izumi has a secret that closely mirrors the brothers'.

4. **Episodes 1 and 2:** The brothers arrive at a desert city whose priest claims to perform miracles that suspiciously look like alchemy to them. In just two episodes, we learn about the main characters' personalities, the stakes and the kind of emotions involved when Ed sets out to publicly denounce the priest as a fake.

The best line is when Ed tells a girl: “Stand up and walk. Keep going forward. At least you have strong legs to take you there.”

5. **The Homunculi:** Never have the

seven deadly sins, or rather their character designs, looked so good, or so *bad*. Are they irredeemable? In Episode 35, a female Homunculus named Lust comes across a man in a town who claims to love her.

6. **Episode 37:** A date for Havoc. In a fit of generosity, Roy Mustang orders his men to find a date for his luckless-in-love subordinate, Second Lieutenant Jean Havoc. Unfortunately, Major Armstrong offers to introduce Havoc to his sister, which leads to some tragically funny consequences for the poor man. Pomato?

7. **Episode 37, again:** This episode has it all: plenty of laugh-out-loud moments, unforgettable one-liners and even a dash of mystery and suspense.

Roy and his men set out to unravel the riddle of a haunted warehouse and a case of buried bones. And a traumatised Havoc (see above) tags along.

8. **Maes Hughes:** This Lieutenant Colonel and devoted father charms us with his warmth, wry humour and tendency to flash pictures of his beloved daughter, whether the person wants to see them or not! A member of the Investigations Division, Hughes helps Roy in his goal to rise high in the ranks.

9. **Episode 5:** Terrorists hijack a train that the brothers are on, and this episode becomes one of the first sweet chances to show what the two are capable of to save the hostages.

10. **Roy Mustang, Edward Elric.** Need we say more?



Lieutenant Riza Hawkeye is one tough cookie.

must have won legions of fans for his wonderfully manipulative nature and the way he declares his ultimate dream once he becomes the leader of the military.

An ally to the Elric brothers, Mustang doesn't let that stop him from antagonising Edward nearly every time they meet.

Despite a certain smug streak, Mustang commands fierce loyalty and even love from his men. In the final episodes, viewers will see just how far he will go to protect his friends.

As an alchemist, he has the cool ability to spark fire from his fingertips.

Seiyuu fans might recognise Roy Mustang's seiyuu, Toru Ohkawa, as the same guy who voiced Rufus