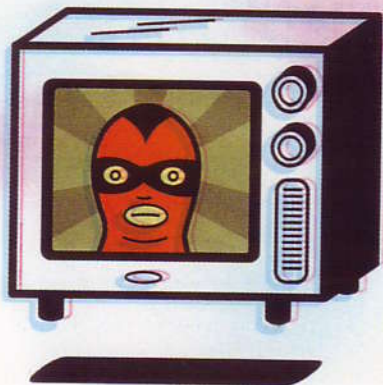


in a 10- by 12-foot cell. After all, the LaserMonks tagline is: "Real Savings. Real Monks."

In recent weeks, McCoy has been committing himself to being more of a monk and less of an Internet tycoon. He joined the order because he wanted to devote himself to God, not e-commerce. He chose the Cistercians because they have a history of transforming men into positive role models and, in some cases, saints.

Still, as he leaves the chapel today, McCoy wonders if his growing online empire might be the best way to lead a pious life. A portion of the proceeds go to good works, and customers can submit prayer requests with their orders. Since he and his fellow monks take no salary and operate as a non-profit, LaserMonks can offer below-market prices and, McCoy says, perhaps begin challenging industry heavyweights like Office Depot and Staples. "I hope we can take over the entire market," McCoy says. And with that, he shuffles down the hallway for another half hour of chanting and silent prayer. — **Joshua Davis**



REALITY TV

I Wanna Be a Hero

"HURRY UP!" AN IMPATIENT VOICE says. "I haven't got all day." The order comes from a gray-haired man who appears on a flatscreen television placed in the center of a Hollywood soundstage. A woman wearing a fur bikini and two utility belts stuffed with bananas approaches the TV and stops on a painted red X.

"What's your name?" the man asks. "I'm Monkeywoman," she says, then howls like a primate on crack.

"What are your powers?" he asks. "Superhigh sonic screeches, climbing, and banana weapons," she says. "And your catchphrase?" "Don't mess with my bananas."

Welcome to the first day of auditions for the new SciFi Channel reality show *Who Wants to Be a Superhero?* That deep voice on the flatscreen belongs to none other than Stan Lee, the 73-year-old creator of such legendary comic book characters as Daredevil, Spider-Man, and the Incredible Hulk. And Monkeywoman is just one of some 250 hopefuls waiting for their shot to impress him. Buster Balloon, aka Don Caldwell, is a vaudeville-style performer who fires deadly military-engineered balloons from his fingertips. Then there's Slimeball (29-year-old Bradd Fillmann), a pizza-delivery boy made of extraterrestrial ooze that gives him the power to crystallize his body into sharp objects. Fillmann has been perfecting Slimeball's backstory since he was 17. Today he has painted his entire body green and drawn large, squiggly, purple circles around his eyes. "I'll look like a jackass any day to meet Stan Lee," he says.

Earlier that morning, Lee walked the audition line and shook every outstretched hand. "Thank you so much for the Hulk," one prospective hero said. "You are my god. I love you," another gushed. Never humble, Lee shot back, "I admire your taste."

This tryout is just the first step for these super-wannabes. Lee will select 10 contestants to advance to the next round, in which they will take up residence in a secret lair (er, loft in LA) for two weeks and embody their super-personas 24/7. Lee will test them on "the genuine qualities that a superhero should have: integrity, courage, self-sacrifice, and honesty." All of the drama will be filmed and edited to air when the show debuts July 27.

Back inside the warehouse, Monkeywoman continues to plead her case. Lee asks the real-life opera singer-cum-property investor what her hero's weaknesses are. "Organ-grinder music," she replies. "Well," Lee says finally, "I think you've done a lot today for monkeys, wherever they may be." — **Erin Biba**



CRYOGENICS

Stuck Pig

MIKE DUGGAN, A VETERINARY surgeon, holds his gloved hands over an 8-inch incision in the belly of pig 78-6, a 120-pound, pink Yorkshire. He's waiting for a green light from Hasan Alam, a trauma surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"Make the injury," Alam says. Duggan nods and slips his hands into the gash, fingers probing through inches of fat and the rosy membranes holding the organs in place. He pushes aside the intestines, ovaries, and bladder, and with a quick scalpel stroke slices open the iliac artery. It's 10:30 am. Pig 78-6 loses a quarter of her blood within moments. Heart rate and blood pressure plummet. Don't worry — Alam and Duggan are going to save her.

Alam goes to work on the chest, removing part of a rib to reveal the heart, a throbbing, shiny pink ball the size of a fist. He cuts open the aorta — an even more lethal injury — and blood sprays all over our scrubs. The EKG flatlines. The surgeons drain the remaining blood and connect tubes to the aorta and other vessels, filling the circulatory system with chilled organ-preservation fluid — a nearly frozen daiquiri of salts, sugars, and free-radical scavengers.

Her temperature is 50 degrees Fahrenheit; brain activity has ceased. Alam checks the wall clock and asks a nurse to mark the time: 11:25 am.

But 78-6 is, in fact, only mostly dead — the common term for her state is, believe it or not, *suspended animation*. Long the domain of transhumanist nutjobs, cryogenic suspension may be just two years away from clinical trials on humans (presuming someone can solve

the sticky ethical problems). Trauma surgeons can't wait – saving people with serious wounds, like gunshots, is always a race against the effects of blood loss. When blood flow drops, toxins accumulate; just five minutes of low oxygen levels causes brain death.

Chill a body, though, and you change the equation. Metabolism slows, oxygen demand dives, and the time available to treat the injury stretches. “With the pig essentially dead,” Alam says, “we’ve got hours to fix it and play around.” By noon the team has stitched up the arteries and gone to lunch. It has become routine: Alam has suspended 200 pigs for an hour each, and although experimental protocol calls for different levels of care for each pig, the ones that got optimal treatment all survived. Today he’ll keep 78-6 down for two hours.

That afternoon, the team scrubs back in and starts pumping warm blood into 78-6, watching the heart twitch and writhe like a bag of worms as it struggles to find a rhythm. A healthy heart should feel like a rare steak, Alam explains; medium or well-done suggests muscle damage. He pokes it. “Medium,” he says, removing clamps to let it pump more blood. If he closes the chest too soon and the heart tires, he won’t be able to save the animal.

A few minutes later, Alam touches the heart again. “Medium-rare,” he says. “Looks pretty good.” But he admits he’s ballparking. “It’s the gestalt,” he says. “It’s not in any book.”

Over the next hour, the surgeons stitch up 78-6. Everyone leaves except Alam, who perches on a stool at her side. When he removes her breathing tube, she breathes irregularly a few times and he leans in with a hand ventilator, squeezing rhythmically and stroking her head. She quivers; her ear twitches.

By 6 pm she’s awake, draped in a blanket. Attendants roll her gurney into a recovery room with classical music playing on a radio and a healthy pig in an adjacent stall to keep her company. Pigs like that. Tests on other subjects – and postmortem examinations of brains – have revealed no cognitive damage from the procedure, but Alam will nevertheless stick around until 78-6 gets back on her feet, around midnight. “She didn’t look so great before,” he says, patting the pig’s side. “But she’s going to make it.” – **Bijal P. Trivedi**



SUBCULTURES

Meet the Geek Elite

AT FIRST GLANCE, THERE'S NOT much to distinguish Koota Umeda from the millions of other Japanese salarymen. When we meet for a beer in a Tokyo bar, the personable 23-year-old is wearing a smart new suit and presents his business card with impeccable manners (he works for a major Japanese tech company). But the unfashionable side part in his hair hints at secret proclivities. The proof comes when he whips out his digicam to show me photos of his enormous, meticulously organized collection of manga, which he keeps in his bedroom at his parents' house.

Umeda is a self-confessed *otaku*, one of Japan's growing legion of men obsessed with anime, comics, action figures, and videogames. And when Umeda claims *otaku* status, it's no idle boast. “Here's the real evidence,” he says, producing a certificate and ID that confirm his standing as “*otaku elite*.” He earned this rank by getting a very high score on a rigorous National Unified *Otaku Certification Test* last summer.

The exam was something of a Japanese obsession, despite having been available only as an insert in *Elfics* magazine, which features cheesecake drawings of scantily clad, underage girls on the cover. The 15-page quiz demanded a staggering knowledge of minutiae, from the names of obscure videogame villains to fluctuations in the stock price of toy-robot manufacturer Bandai.

Umeda breezed through most of

it, but he had to make a field trip to answer a question about a landmark in Akihabara, also known as Electric Town. Tokyo's shopping mecca for high tech gadgets is also replete with comics, videogames, action figures, and porn, and the term *akiba-kei* – a denizen of Akihabara – has become nearly synonymous with *otaku*. Umeda mailed in his answers, and two months later he had documentation proving that he had not only outscored all the other members of his college anime club but was among the top 100 scorers on the planet, the *crème de la geek*.

Umeda's command of pop culture trivia is astonishing. But what's just as surprising is the pride he takes in being *otaku*. When the word emerged in the 1980s, it was a pejorative for nerdy young men more interested in model kits and Godzilla movies than in girls and good jobs, a pariah class that had opted out of traditional male roles in business and family life.

But legions of dedicated *otaku* have turned what was once a marginal subculture into a thriving industry and a trendy lifestyle export. Umeda says he devotes about three-quarters of his disposable income and nearly all his free time to his *otaku* hobbies. A recent report estimated the value of the manga and anime markets in Japan alone at more than \$900 million.

“*Otaku* have joined the mainstream to become a major cultural icon,” says Tokyo journalist and social observer Kaori Shoji. “They've been lurking on the edge of hip for some years. Now they've gone completely legit.” In a recent column for the *Japan Times*, Shoji wrote about women who were desperately trying to land *otaku* boyfriends and the trouble they were having competing with the ultrageeks' preferred romantic companions – racy images of anime idols freely available online.

I ask Umeda if he has a girlfriend; he concedes that he doesn't, though many of his *otaku* friends do. But he's certainly benefiting from *otaku*'s new cultural cachet. When Umeda got his first job after college, he kept mum about his life outside the office. Before long, however, he discovered that his boss was also an *otaku*. “Now, if I want,” he says with a grin, “I can get a day off to go to the comics convention.” – **Tony McNicol**