

Don't Try This At Home



Selected Con Reports
DAVID LANGFORD

Don't Try This At Home

Selected Convention Reports

David Langford

Published by

Ansible Editions

94 London Road, Reading, England, RG1 5AU

ae.ansible.uk

Copyright © 1976-2014, 2015, 2018, 2021 by David Langford. All rights reserved.

This Ansible Editions ebook published July 2015; slightly expanded November 2018 and January 2021.

Original appearances copyright © David Langford as detailed under [Acknowledgements](#), which forms an extension of this copyright page.

Cover photograph: Nocturnal balloon activity in the Fan Village at [Loncon 3](#), 2014.

Ebook ISBN 978-1-913451-44-8

The right of David Langford to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by the Author in accordance with the British Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

No portion of this book may be reproduced by any means, mechanical, electronic or otherwise, without first obtaining the permission of the copyright holder.

This free ebook is exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

Contents

[Title/Copyright Page](#)

[Contents](#)

[Introduction](#)

[First Contact: Another Introduction](#)

[My First Ever Report: Mancon 5 \(Eastercon\), Manchester, Easter
1976](#)

[Cosmic Harmonee at Novacon: Novacon 6, Birmingham,
November 1976](#)

[Easter '77: A Novacon Action Replay: Eastercon '77, Coventry,
Easter 1977](#)

[What Has Fourteen Protons and Lives in Newcastle?: Silicon 3,
Newcastle, August 1978](#)

[Group Dynamics of Conventional Assemblies: Silicon 4,
Newcastle, August 1980](#)

[The Novacon Records: Novacon 11, Birmingham, November 1981](#)

[Back in the Jug Agane: Oxcon \(Unicon\), Oxford, August 1984](#)

[Mexicon Jigsaw: Mexicon 2, Birmingham, February 1986](#)

[Strange Vibrations: Conspiracy '87 \(Worldcon\), Brighton, August
1987](#)

[Microcon: "The Absolute Con": Microcon, Exeter, February 1988](#)

[Follies of '88: Various, 1988](#)

[Contrivance Memories: Contrivance \(Eastercon\), Jersey, Easter
1989](#)

[Several Days in May: Including Mexicon 3, Nottingham, May
1989](#)

[The Charity Con: Compute for Charity, Hull, July 1990](#)

[Conquassation: Various, 1991](#)

[Boskone Postcards: Boskone 29, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1992](#)
[The Illuminoids: Illumination \(Eastercon\), Blackpool, Easter 1992](#)
[Di Ex Machinis: Mexicon 5, Scarborough, May 1993](#)
[The Scottish Convention: Intersection \(Worldcon\), Glasgow, August 1995](#)
[Swan Song: UK Year of Literature and Writing, Swansea, December 1995](#)
[Six Day Warp: Intervention \(Eastercon\), Liverpool, Easter 1997](#)
[Things To Do in Docklands When You're Dead: World Fantasy Convention: London, October-November 1997](#)
[Minicon Diary: Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998](#)
[Pratchettcon: Discworld Convention 2, Liverpool, September 1998](#)
[Dreamtime Guilt: Aussiecon 3 \(Worldcon\), Melbourne, September 1999](#)
[Langford Meets Swamp Thing: Tropicon/Fanhistoricon, Florida, November 2000](#)
[Another Convention Diary: Torcon 3 \(Worldcon\), Toronto, 2003](#)
[I Was a Dunnikin-Diver: Discworld Convention IV, Hinckley, Leicestershire, August 2004](#)
[Potterdammerung: Sectus \(Harry Potter\), London, July 2007](#)
[Moose in Darkest Berks: Plokta.con 4.0, May 2009](#)
[Glimpses of Loncon: Loncon 3 \(Worldcon\), London, August 2014](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)
[Index by Convention Name](#)

Introduction

Over the years since 1976 I've produced an absurd number of SF convention reports, in styles ranging from the esoteric to the bloody esoteric. New readers should perhaps begin elsewhere. No, the marketing department says that won't do. New readers should perhaps not begin at the beginning. This is because the later reports (especially those covering larger conventions), from say 1987 to 2014, were written with at least half an eye on a broader audience rather than the manic in-group of British fanzine fandom that formed my target readership even before I'd been accepted by that gang of drunks and layabouts in the late 1970s. So much for wise advice. Be assured that even I no longer understand some of the jokes and spoofs in my early convention coverage.

Although generally adopting a seat-of-the-pants approach, I became briefly theoretical about this fannish literary mode in a talk delivered at the 1997 UK Eastercon:

... I should also mention the Chris Priest principle, which is that not everything that happens to an SF fan is worth writing about. This emerges with hideous clarity in convention reports, which are one of the great classic forms of fanwriting. In Shakespearean times everyone was sooner or later expected to bash out a sonnet or a blank verse drama, and the fanzine equivalent is the con report. I forget how many I've read that tell you in great and circumstantial detail how the writer travelled to the con hotel, often – a cunning narrative surprise – using some form of transport. Further astonishing developments include eating unlikely meals, drinking, overspending in the dealers' room, drinking too much, having remarkable and unique bowel movements, drinking far too much, staying up far too late, and being taken completely aback by a colossal hangover next morning. It's a real challenge to write a con report that avoids all of this – or even any of it. (*"Twenty Years of Uproar" at Intervention, Easter 1997*)

As to whether I ever rose to this challenge, my literary agent has advised me not to comment.

Let's note a few omissions. My inordinately lengthy account of the 1980 Worldcon in Boston occupies several chapters of my TransAtlantic Fan Fund trip report, *The TransAtlantic Hearing Aid* (1985; ebook 2015), whose full illustrated text is available free from the TAFF website at taff.org.uk. "You Do It with Mirrors" (1993) – a worm's-eye view of the 1993 Jersey Eastercon from the highly distorted perspective of running the convention newsletter – is collected in *The Silence of the Langford* (1996; ebook 2015), freely available for money. Several other sets of convention notes have been left out because they seemed overly tedious and/or ephemeral – the dustbin of history is lined with far too many one-paragraph summaries written for my newsletter *Ansible* – or because rereading them made me shudder uncontrollably. On the other hand, just to be on the unsafe side, I have included a spurious report on a convention I didn't actually attend and a searing exposé of a particularly bizarre book launch party.

Now read on. The reports are arranged chronologically, but first you get another introduction. The management, then and now, is not responsible. Safe when used as directed. But don't try this at home.

David Langford
July 2015

Don't Try This At Home was originally sold from the Ansible Editions site with a portion of proceeds going to the TransAtlantic Fan Fund. As of November 2018, for the sake of simplicity, it became a free ebook exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. The standard formula now follows: If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

David Langford
November 2018

The free ebook is still available at the TAFF site, but because I'd had so much fun putting together my fannish collection *Beachcombing*s during the long weeks of various COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, the temptation to create a trade paperback edition gradually became irresistible. See the Ansible Editions website at ae.ansible.uk.

David Langford
January 2021

First Contact

Another Introduction

I remember it was an alarming sensation, stepping cautiously into a London pub meeting jam-full of people – often strangely bearded people – who apparently all knew each other and were intensely chatting away. Which, if any, were the ones I'd corresponded with and who'd assured me it was all great fun? Dared I actually walk up to this or that group of evidently elitist bastards and butt in, risking a cold and hostile stare? Had I come too early, too late, or even on the wrong evening? Jitter, jitter. Then I was lucky enough to spot a familiar face at the bar and everything started to be OK....

All this took place in December 1994 at a gathering for users of the CIX bulletin board and Internet Service Provider, coincidentally held at the Wellington where the monthly London SF piss-ups occur. Oh dear: it's clear that after decades in fandom I'm still not quite sure how to make contact with any greater confidence than when I walked nervously into one of the very last Globe meetings *circa* 1973 or 1974. (By my next visit these London affairs had moved to the One Tun.) That time I'd come with a couple of university cronies, and don't remember talking to anyone else all evening.

But this had been just one of multiple "first contacts". Earlier there was the Alien Sphinx, a one-eyed, tentacled and intensely silly creature on what was surely an amateur magazine cover seen pinned to the college notice-board on my first day there. With characteristic fannish efficiency, this poster bore the magazine name – *SFinx* – but no hint of price or contact address. Thus my immense brain was able to infer the lumbering presence of the Oxford University SF Group, and presently I became the extremely shy person on the fringes of their meetings.

Had I kept a diary it might be possible to reconstruct my long slither down the insidious slope: writing silly stories for *SFinx*, arguing with other aspirants at the magazine's workshop sessions (including almost godlike figures like Rob Holdstock, who had *actually had a short story published in a real magazine*), tasting the heady wine of audience appreciation when I found OUSFG would actually listen to and laugh at my first SF series – the galaxy-

smashing adventures of Cosmic Agent Mac Malsenn (anag.: Lensman), finding myself mysteriously elected OUSFG President despite reciting the entirety of *The Hunting of the Snark* from memory at one notably drunken meeting....

Which in turn led to my being the group's cultural envoy to Novacon 3 in Birmingham, with a brief to buy lots of SF for its library. This mission was slightly skimped owing to a cascade of new First Contacts – notably Chris Priest, who made the mistake of encouraging me and next summer found himself at my mercy in a punt on the Isis. Returning from that first-ever convention to an OUSFG meeting that same night, I met a new recruit called Hazel who unaccountably I didn't get around to marrying until 1976.

In between came yet another important Contact. Besides much-appreciated SF review magazines like *Vector* and early issues of *Foundation*, the above-mentioned group library contained a few esoteric fanzines (one was called *Les Spinge*) which seemed almost deliberately baffling and hermetic. Rather like the in-joky “fanzines” I'd invented and produced at school, independently of the SF/fan world ... but that didn't occur to me at the time. It seemed a forbiddingly closed world. Then, around 1975, Leroy Kettle started giving me his own tatty gossip-leaflet *True Rat* at One Tun meetings, probably to make me go away and stop pathetically whining for a copy. *True Rat* was joyously scabrous and funny in a way I hadn't met before in fanzines: though largely about an in-group of London fans (“Ratfandom”) it exposed its subject-matter to the world, and after laughing yourself silly at Roy's mockery of the foibles of – say – John Brosnan, Malcolm Edwards or Greg Pickersgill, you also discovered that you knew the victims a bit better.

This was something I yearned to imitate; but I think we'll draw a thick and radiation-proof veil over my first efforts to do so. All I can say is, one thing leads to another – in my case, well over 200 fanzines [*as of 1995*]. One of these days I'll get it right.

My First Ever Report Mancon 5 (Eastercon), Manchester, Easter 1976

For the sake of sanity I'm skipping some early reports which, in the technical parlance of structuralist literary criticism, are a bit crap; but this first outing has a certain something. Indeed, several certain somethings which I have since thought better of.

I found the convention in Manchester very interesting but a little surprising. There were many interesting Science-Fiction events such as the B.S.F.A. annual general meeting, but few of the attendees seemed to take them seriously. In fact some people seemed to spend all their time in the bar, and I think it would be a good idea if this were closed during programme items at future conventions. To continue my complaints, the Guest of Honour did not speak about Science Fiction as I expected, but instead read some odd experimental literature which was very disappointing. And Mr. Robert Shaw's scientific talk was completely spoilt by antisocial people who laughed at his proposals.

On the other hand ...

The mighty engines surge with power ... the fabric of space is rent ruthlessly asunder ... and Fred – C-registration, M.O.T (Failed) is whistling up the M6. Really whistling: on either side, lace-like perforations sing in the wind and shed confusing clouds of rust into the eyes of pursuing police. We overtake an aeroplane which is being towed at 60mph. (It has no wings.) Surrealism is already setting in.

In the Mancon car-park (easy to find because I've been there before – a friend lived in Owens Park for a whole year – think of that before succumbing to self-pity for three days of the place) a student ghoulishly dismisses the possibility of any car sitting there unscathed for a weekend. “Even Fred?” I quaver. Yes, they even nick cars like Fred. Good grief.

So Hazel and I stagger under eight tons of luggage and food, plus uncounted

vital bits of Fred. Registering, I receive a colour-coded security badge (blue for B&B). Charles Partington insists on checking meal tickets, and snatches away the lunch and dinner chits which they gave me in error. Hazel's badge is white ("not staying at Owens Park"), but almost of its own accord the white bit falls off to reveal a red FULL BOARD badge. There's efficiency.

I'm halfway up this vast tower of tiny cells, huge and forbidding. It frightens Peter Roberts too: "I came into the grounds and it *loomed* at me."

It is 1pm; we've missed the morning spectacle of the programme failing to occur. After the dark Gestapoesque tone in the ultimate progress report, it's a relief to find the concom as engagingly incompetent as any other – nay, more so.

Discontinuity: I talk to people all afternoon (even listen to a few); can't remember a word of it. Lucky you. On every side loom T-shirts advertising Chris Priest, worn for an undisclosed fee by his admirers. "I am a Neo" badges are available from the thoughtful committee (whose efficiency varies inversely with the importance of the matter at hand) and naturally most Ratfans sport these. Graham Poole's sweater bristles nauseously with con badges of yesteryear, I am labelled, simply, DRILKJIS; two-thirds of fandom ask me what this means, and hoarsely I tell them. No need, therefore, to repeat it here.

– And a slightly premature party-time. The Nottingham group are brooding over an unbelievable amount of booze, and there I somehow stay, firmly fastened to a bottle of White Horse. Ratfans come, fill glasses, go. Andrew Stephenson holds forth to various young ladies. More whisky; Gerald Bishop materializes (rather than the more conventional pink elephants) and, ever on the alert for something to put down, confides that the makers of White Horse are the biggest producers of acetone in Europe. Ah, but I *like* acetone.

The leader of the Notts group looks horribly like a diminutive Kev Smith; tactfully I ignore this. Later, Ames spills the beans and blights the poor man's life.

The night and the whisky dwindle together. Roused from stupor by an urgent whisper, I hear – aargh! what dread news is this? – I have been ripped off. In a Cheltenham groupzine? Edited by Graham Poole? My superb Null-A trained mind goes feverishly into overdrive, and the solution strikes me like a

ton of wet cement: It's time for bed.

Discontinuity ... And the cold light of early afternoon.

Hazel solicitously provides paracetamol and biscuits, which boost me to the beer-drinking threshold and thence to normality. Graham Poole, when found, produces a copy of something called *Spaces*, which does indeed contain my *SFinx* 9 story, rebranded as by "Ian Trent". Mutter, mutter. Graham is aggrieved also, that he should have been deluded: "He wanted to run it under the pseudonym Dave Langford at first, but I found there was a real Dave Langford ..." (Thanks, Graham.) Rumour whispers that a certain Cheltenham Poly attendee is the villain, a gentleman called Timothy Apps, or as he was dubbed in Oxford ... "Was it Timothy Titwillow-Pseud?" I ask quickly.

"That sounds like him. A tall fellow – egotistical – generally weird –"

"*That* sounds like him."

But now the rampant reviewers at the front of the con-hall become loudly opinionated about books, and we shut up.

(Wheels within wheels and all that: "Ian Trent" proves to be the pseudonym used by yet another person.)

In the bar: "Who will rid me of this turbulent Titwillow?" I cry, still feeling slightly sick. Dermot Dobson and Mike "Mad Bomber" Skelding close in, evil gleams in their eyes. "Nuff said, boss." They vanish. I have been in the dock with this pair before ... wonder what Manchester cells are like?

The programme continues sporadically. Bob Silverberg reads the closing sections of *Dying Inside* and *Son of Man*, very impressive, very good. (Or was that on Sunday? Er, timeless, these cons.) Top billing as usual to Bob Shaw – biggest audience and laughs of the con – he looks a bit crowded out, actually, with half the committee sitting by him in the hope that some glory may reflect their way.

Creeping out for fresh air during the Silverberg reading, I find Dave Rowe giving small children piggybacks and whirling them playfully around. ("I'm sure Johnny's arms were shorter than that before ...") My just-another-big-kid thoughts die at the sight of his beard, which now looks harassed and irritable. Expressive beasts, these beards.

Horrifying shock of meeting people. Brian "The best part of *Drilkjis* was the

last page” Parker really is small and blonde, though he doesn’t write that way. Another failure for the Langford Theory of Appearance Revealed In Style. Greg Pickersgill writes clean-shaven. Pat Charnock, writing, gives me the strong impression that she wears no glasses. The Theory has just one success: Leroy Kettle writes like someone who looks like Leroy Kettle. Somehow.

A microfiche reader passes by, closely followed by George Hay. Before he goes, he claims to have nearly sold it to Terry Jeeves. There is no truth in the rumour that George is behind a con bid which failed owing to all the literature being in microfiche.

Keith Oborn accosts me with a plan for Rollerball in the nearby stadium. “We can use bicycles,” he suggests. Fool. Then Brian Burgess staggers by with a cardboard box containing – no, you’re wrong – books. “At midnight,” I fantasize, “there will be a mysterious flash and the books will turn into pork pies. And who knows what BB will become?” “A mysterious flash, of course.”

It’s a disconnected afternoon. (Oh, you noticed?) At the bar, waving an advance copy of *Andromeda* – “Don’t bother with the stories, look at the editorial bits” – Peter Weston holds forth upon the writing of SF. Punchy first lines are essential. In support of this he quotes in quick succession every Heinlein and Bester opening there ever was; with a hoarse cry I flee, unable to recall the first line of anything I’ve written myself.

Hazel, with Peter Roberts, is apparently forming Obscure Language Fandom. Peter seems almost animated as he describes the peculiar beauty of Mongolian script.

A burst of charm strikes me and I step back. It is Rob Holdstock, swaying and flashing erratic smiles into the surrounding gloom. “Science fiction,” he says, “is just a hobby with me now. I am a writer of historical fiction. Historical fiction about this luscious barbarian nun with long blonde hair and enormous tits and a sword of steel, who carves her way from bed to bed through a sea of blood.” Tears fill my eyes as he mentions the money involved.

Next, Lisa Conesa and Bryn Fortey, who are slumped over a huge mound of fanzines. “Gimme, gimme,” I shriek, asserting my rights as a WAHF. Bryn

sorts through the pile. “This is your great fannish initiation –” he picks out an addressed envelope – “you are about to receive Pete Weston’s copy of *Zimri*.”

At intervals we eat. Sometimes at the “Canadian Charcoal Pit” (Canadian Cess Pit to the locals) across the road, where piratical cries of “Skewer me kebabs!” resound; more often in the Owens Park tower. At secretive gatherings Coral Clarke’s Guinness-cake is scoffed, with Liese Hoare’s toasted sandwiches and my exotic tea. The committee do indeed provide tea, coffee, sugar; this is such a surprise that I slip a few scurvy coppers into their begging bowl.

Meanwhile, with intending picnickers seduced away to the Charcoal Pit, innumerable plastic bags of provisions rot peacefully away in the car park.

I give Gray Boak a *Twill-Ddu*. He does not give me a *Cynic*; all his spare copies are at home. “Oh, Dave Langford,” he says: “I’ve seen your name in fanzines.” Why, how nice, someone has noticed me. Borrowing Martin Hoare’s *Cynic*, I find a vehement attack on my *K2* article (“pretentious twaddle”). Yeah, he’s seen my name.

Greg Pickersgill recommends *Zardo*, which is annoying since it’s now half over. Suddenly, the proximity detector registers fewer than three people in earshot, so my automatic reflexes offer drinks. Greg has a drink. Simone Walsh explains that she would have bought her own, but can’t afford it, and can’t accept one from me because she doesn’t know me. I make conquests like this all the time. Seeking beer, I discover hordes of barmen and girls (easily outnumbering the putative drinkers); all but two of these are chatting together or standing with backs turned on the obviously contemptible customers.

Some are born rats; some achieve rattishness; the rest have Ratfandom thrust on them. “Help, I am totally surrounded by Rats.” The horde is suddenly about me, with friendly urgings to seek parties. “FUN!” says Leroy. “We are going to wreak FUN!” Up, then, through the labyrinths of the tower, with people mysteriously appearing from and disappearing into lifts, stairwells and trapdoors. Somehow I rediscover the Oxford party, and Vernon Brown’s retsina, an excellent infusion of pitch-pine chips in surgical spirit. All around lie dire bottles, full of things made in dark places by Brian Hampton: one sip and you nervously peer into the bottle, expecting to find some anatomical

specimen. A half-eaten sausage droops obscenely on a beer-can. There is a bottle called *Spanish Fly*; actually the second word is *Dry* but I only discover this later. This is the eighth floor. Reality keeps slipping gears and depositing me further down: I finish the retsina at the Gannet party, where everyone is packed into a weird mass and Peter Weston shrieks inaudibly at whosoever comes too close to his dark doings.... (“Sorry I told you to fuck off,” he says to everyone next day. So that’s what it was.)

“Hello,” says Hazel, appearing suddenly. “I’m going to bed,” she explains, vanishing again. I suppose I must be talking still, for a spherical American tells me I am “horrifyingly articulate”. Trying to refute this, I find myself saying “I repudiate your unjustifiable generalization” or something similar.

(This Langford normally speaks fast: when half-incapable he can’t think quickly enough to keep up, and must compensate by choosing words that take longer to say.)

In Florence Russell’s oasis of calm, yet further down, there is food and reviving bottles of Scotch. Thank you, Flo.

Further down, down, down into confusion. Memory returns sometime after 5am: long conversation with Malcolm Edwards on the second floor amid a riot of fallen bodies. As I depart, a nasty grey light is oozing up the sky. The lift won’t go up; it contains Martin Easterbrook who takes it down (look, a double-entendre, this makes me a *real* fanwriter) ... under his insidious control, the lift does yo-yo impressions for some minutes. Eventually he goes and – the MEN WITH BIG STICKS burst in. One seedy store-detective type, one octogenarian security guard in a peaked cap. The latter would make a great team with one of the [Gerry] Webb “dogs”.

“You’ve been up and down twice,” they snarl. “You lot go on like this and this lift will be bust like the other one and then where’ll you be?”

“On the stairs,” I suggest. The rubber hose strikes – once – twice – finally they release me with a reprimand. To bed, to bed, there’s knocking at the liver....

(Discontinuity.)

Now this is ridiculous. Something must have happened on Sunday morning: memory insists otherwise. I only recall great shouts of feigned astonishment (subtly mingled with relief) as the Star Trek Bloopers fail as usual to appear.

Timothy Titwillow is about; apparently uninjured, he lives, moves, has his being – though my judgment is impaired since I myself do not score too highly on any of these counts. He is doing something with the microphones; later it turns out that rather than mix with hoi polloi he is using a radio-mike which transmits the programme to his room. Good grief.

Dermot looks less murderous now, and in response to my frantic queries (“Look, you’re not going to injure Titwillow *much*, are you?”) contents himself by inviting people to jump from the balcony into his glass of squash: “Don’t worry, it’s a soft drink.” The Authors’ Panel grinds on amusingly, pontifically, inconsequentially. Again and again there rises the eldritch wail of rutting loudspeakers. Harry Harrison keeps falling over. Michael Coney says not a word. Ian Watson suggests that SF is now obsolete, since man has now advanced scientifically to the point where there is nothing to speculate upon. The audience boggles.

I have my periodic paranoid twitches. There is a rumour that someone was arrested on Saturday night for hurling explosive things from windows. I ask Dave Rowe about this: “Ah, the Swedes?” he says. On Sunday evening police pour into the bar and interrogate the staff. It would have been nice had they come to investigate the metric beer-taps, which give half-litres instead of pints.... But presumably this is just a routine call for protection money; the service does not improve.

The banquet, says Martin Hoare, was very boring. Thanks, Martin; pass me another bunch of sour grapes, there’s a good fellow....

Greg Pickersgill, Don West and others now form the *Astral League* (sic). “HANDS ACROSS THE GALAXIES! ONLY 50p! Know the mysteries of the universe through BOAKISM the secret art of seeing only one side of everything.” The manic persistence with which a glazed Don West demands 50p is amazingly similar to Andy Nimmo trying to sell ESA (whatever that is) memberships for a mere £5. Would have been a better spoof if Don were to give up after a few hours, actually, but he seems immersed in his role (among other things).

The maddened crowd surges up to the con-hall. Yawn. It is, once again, Exhibitionism Time, and the committee have forgotten to give Harry Harrison his bromide.

Coral once again varies the disposition of holes in her undrapery, failing to look particularly epicene as “Gold the Person”, and receives her inevitable prize. Hundreds of Sheffielders go as vegetables inspired by Bob Shaw (it’s a noble sight, Bob inspiring vegetables). Q: Why is one important veg. missing? A: A marrow escape.... Brian Burgess gives us another chance to admire his guts. Vernon Brown, as a grandfather clock with Moreau-manufactured attendants, wins. Can’t think of anyone who doesn’t win, actually. Pleasant-looking but ill-coordinated dancing girls follow. Then Jan Finder removes his socks with slow significant motions and, clad in USAF surplus underwear, leads a horde of Sabine Women against Pete Presford. Disgusting scenes ensue.

(Later on, we take pity on Jan’s unclean self-image, and try to feed him into one of the showers. Didn’t know Jan could run so fast.)

The Man Who Fell to Earth! H’m. Dim picture – lousy soundtrack – and a pretty dull film withal. After three (widely separated) reels, we give up.

In the bar it transpires that Timothy Titwillow has been tracked to his room (labelled MANCON STUDIO 1: DO NOT DISTURB and adorned with a complete stereo outfit to ward off ennui) and “remonstrated with”. TT apparently said “I didn’t do it but Graham Poole’s reputation is far more valuable than mine and I will admit it if necessary to save him.” Wow.

(I no longer have any sympathy with Titwillow. He’s also changed the story round and deflated half the jokes. But ... I’m too spineless to take proper action, such as throwing him from the top of the tower. I decide to write a LoC [*Letter of Comment*] to Graham Poole and simply Expose him.)

The Oxford party is going again, as though it had never stopped. Lifts full of Ratfans surge endlessly up and down. Suddenly one stops and Pickersgill, Holdstock, Peyton etc. fall out. All but Rob burst into hysterical laughter. Rob has just said something incredibly vile about Chairman Presford. Mrs Presford was in the lift. When Rob realizes this, he bangs his head monotonously against various unyielding objects.

Don West is looking for booze. I offer him a bottle of undrinkable Scotsmac. He takes it away, returning to pinch a litre of wine. His designs on a third bottle are rudely frustrated by Liese, who Says Things to him. He does not return.

Water-filled balloons fly from the windows. Explosions sound outside. Mike Skelding gives me some nice high-class whisky and reveals that he has consulted Graham Poole about little Timothy. Sinking feeling. Mike's voice is like snapping wood: "It is out of your hands, Dave. He has lied to Me. It is no longer a time for meaningful dialogue, it is a time for applying boot-polish to his goolies." I clutch convulsively at the whisky-bottle, and sidle away. Meanwhile, Dermot is warned by Timothy that he'd better watch out: Timothy has *friends*.

In the same lift as Brian Burgess (who has been caught by a water-balloon and is seeking the culprits), I discover the eighteenth, the ultimate floor, where Rats and Gannets are indiscriminately sprawled. Corridor windows are sealed from the 11th floor up, to stem the urge to suicide induced by these surroundings; thus it is fearfully hot and redolent with the rising effluvium of fannish doings below. In the centre, a spiral staircase leads up to a locked door. Climbing it, Peter Roberts maintains, is an existential experience without which no party is complete.

Rob Jackson hovers voluminously, gloating over his acquisition of the Bob Shaw speech for *Maya*. Leroy Kettle denies that he is writing a con-report, or indeed that he has ever written one. It's too hot, I try to flee – but one lift is locked open, up here at the top, and the other won't come. Brian Burgess is trapped; I run athletically down ten flights of stairs and suffer a mild heart-attack.

Mike, now drinking my whisky, is planning his next trial. He claims not to have been tried by a jury of his peers: "Six out of twelve couldn't even read the oath right!" Since he anticipates a hangover, I reveal my secret pick-me-up, copious whisky-and-dry-ginger.

He shudders. "But it's so *noisy*...."

(Discontinuity.)

As I estivate, herds of ever-watchful security men roam the corridors. Caught in the very act of spreading his sleeping-bag on the tenth floor, Ian Robinson is taken in charge and – despite his fevered claim to be President of the Oxford group – ceremoniously thrown out. A later attempt (6am) to establish himself in the car park is foiled by a whole carload of such officials: "Ah, you're the fellow we found on the tenth floor. What can we do for *you*, sir?"

Ian decides abruptly that Monday's programme is not worth it. "W-where's the bus station?"

They tell him. He leaves.

And I'm up for breakfast, all three breakfasts which I've paid for, in fact. Only manage to get 2½, but wotthehell. Nothing remains but boring items; time to fade away to the book room – where after an hour I'm tapped on the shoulder. It is Mike. "We've been and gone and done it!"

"Timothy ...?"

"Yes." He brandishes the boot-polish and the very stiff brush. I cringe.

... Later, Timothy is loading a car. He walks a trifle stiffly, I fancy. But he's already telling cronies that this rumour of his being blackballed is a foul lie.

(Must restrain the gang next time. They want to make it a tradition and do it at every con. H'm.)

The con is running down. People fade mysteriously away. At the auction I acquire several pounds of fanzines and *Weltschmerz*, also a joke about John Brosnan making auctionable statements. This I discard. The final (or possibly penultimate) film *Mighty Joe Young* is rather good, all about this HUGE gorilla who goes into showbiz and runs amok when cruelly persecuted later, on the run from the fuzz, he comes upon this burning orphanage and ... but I mustn't spoil it for you.

In the evening we drive to York, where Hazel discovers a book of 826 tongues and dialects. Eat your hearts out, obscure language fans, I myself do homage at the birthplace of Guy Fawkes (1570): Young's Hotel in High Petergate. Mike will be pleased.

People I forgot to mention ... a very quiet Walt Willis (could the harp be out of tune?); Pat White, Jim's daughter, first lady member of the Persons of Average Height (no-one under six feet need apply); Andrea Lucas, who lives at Boundary Hall [*my Civil Service hostel address at that time*] and I never knew it; Alan and Elke "Tell all your friends about the *BSFA Yearbook*" Stewart; Roy Tackett – didn't actually meet him but it wouldn't do to miss out the TAFF rep, would it Peter?; Howie Rosenblum, who said something quite witty which I forget; Keith "You've been ripped off" Plunkett, rightful owner of the Ian Trent pseudonym; and Adrian Smith, who wasn't at Mancon

but heroically put up with me and Hazel for the rest of the week.

Cosmic Harmonee at Novacon Novacon 6, Birmingham, November 1976

At this time I was involved in a bid for a UK Eastercon to be held at Heathrow and called Skycon. This became the 1978 national convention, but first had to win the popular vote (at Eastercon 1977) against the rival bid Channelcon. The opening paragraphs which follow were, I remember, a spoof of something in a contemporary fanzine. What I don't remember is which one.

Take a sheet of graph paper. (Carefully: the store detective may be watching.) Place a dot in the middle to represent Mancon. Tear the graph up and throw it away.

The dots for Skycon (in ink) and Channelcon (faint pencil) go on another page. Keep the rubber handy.

On your third sheet, draw horizontal and vertical axes, and put in two dots: Seacon and Tynecon. Draw a line between them. Somewhere not actually on this line is the position of Novacon 6, This doesn't mean a lot, since we haven't labelled the axes – but you get the idea. Or perhaps not.

Novacon was like that.

*Oh Astral Leauge, oh Astral Leauge,
Oh Leauge it is of thee
I sing this song of Astral Praise
And Cosmic Harmonee.*

Driving up on Friday, I was lulled by the comforting sounds of the slipping clutch, the loose silencer and the death-throes of Martin's stomach as it writhed in the grip of post-Tun pre-Con depression.

I thought about writing a con report.

Interesting things had already happened at the Tun: Chris Priest coming out with deathless lines like "Harlan is the only person in the world who wears

two pairs of elevator shoes – one for his feet and one for his mouth,” while Tom Perry tweaked my nose and Simone Walsh denied having just said “I almost hope Skycon wins the bid so I won’t have to organize a con!” Moreover, I had just been *chosen* by D. West for the Astral Leauge; fumbling with the pin of my Leauge badge, I noticed a runic message on the back. It translated as *Hope you stick it in yourself*. Lots of interesting material, yes, but ahead lay the struggle with the cruel forces of Channelcon.

“Are we now to see *real* bids for the next few years,” suggested Joseph Nicholas, “with battles in the corridors between rival members of the committees, with poison-tipped flyers for the cons wafting into fans’ bedrooms as per the darts in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*? Will there be armed guards to protect the sanctity of committee-members’ persons against the wanton assaults by crazed death commandos inveigled into their suicidal attacks by the promise of free drinks should the rival bids succeed? Will each member of each committee have a personal food-taster to protect him/her against sneak poison attacks ...?”

“Heathrow versus Brighton!” he continued. “There will be bloodshed! Murder! Mayhem! Violence! Stupendous courage, foolhardy heroism! An epic to rival even Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Bits Of Stone Hewed Out Of The Side Of A Mountain By Unnatural Forces From A UFO Parked On The Dark Side Of The Moon!!!*

“And now we all know what to expect,” he concluded, “we can all sod off to the con bar and leave them to get on with it.”

This could be serious: the idea of a conrep was cast aside like a used copy of *Fanzine Fanatique*, as ’78 politics displaced all else. This was the time of trial. This was the hour which would separate the smeerp from the thoats!

Almost immediately, I woke up on Monday morning with a fistful of beer-stained scribblings. Don’t blame me, blame the autopilot....

*The Astral Leauge shall overcome,
False BoaKs and foes shall flee,
And Astral Peace shall rule us all,
And Cosmic Harmonee.*

But where – you ask – does the Astral Leauge come into all this? Only D. West knows for sure. I failed to recognize him on Friday, for he seemed

taller, less glazed and possessed of more hair than the West of last Easter. With something very like affability D. told me what a twit I had seemed at Mancon. Soon, producing an empty glass, he uttered a League invocation: "Give! Give!". Hypnotized, everyone in range fumbled for shillings. Joseph, under suspicion of having donated tuppence only, was severely questioned by D.... Presently the Master had enough for a drink, and the transformation began. In the course of an hour his eyes became glassy, his hairline receded and he began to lean.

It was uncanny. No ordinary man can safely lean at such strange, unEuclidean angles. ("I can," said Ian Williams. "I have a low centre of gravity.") One current theory is that West's spiral oesophagus sets his beer spinning as it slithers down; the whirling fluids within act as a sort of gyroscope. This makes him one with the gods and gives him the fabled ability to pee with circular polarization.

(Dave "I was a Worldcon BNF" Rowe learnt without enthusiasm that according to Kev Smith, he is another messiah of the League*: the Revealer Of Wisdom Entire. D. says that this is fallacious.)

* A misprint, of course.

Turning to less cosmic matters, I discovered David Lewis – Suffolk's answer to Mike Glicksohn – the man whom Tom Jones refuses to admit is editing the next BSFA yearbook and thus leaving Alan and Elke Stewart free to devote all their time to postponing *TTCCH*. With him and Ray Harrison (Daventry's answer to David Lewis) we sought out the Oxford room party, and found Real Scrumpy. I smelt; I tasted. The way it swirled in the glass somehow suggested circular polarization. Your editor opted instead for some Chateau Pis-de-Chat wine, and talked himself into a stupor while staring blankly at the floorshow of Andrew Stephenson and Liese.

Saturday morning. Throughout Tom Shippey's talk, the lobes of his Gosseyn-like extra brain throbbed visibly as the tide of erudition poured forth. Then, attempting to regain his image as a secret master of authoritativeness, Peter Nicholls told the world that Dr Rhine of parapsychic fame is a doctor of botany. I crept away for a super-cheap meal (bread and cheese in my room) and ingeniously missed the GoH speech of which Tom Shippey later said, "Dave Kyle caused my testicles to retract in horror!" The horror was induced by a red-blooded-all-American stand against New Waves and that sort of

thing:

“The Beat Generation and Mainstream Fiction are evil! Moral SF is good and immoral SF is bad! Anyone who disagrees isn’t a member of the human race! Adolf Hitler spoilt a good idea by taking it to extremes! Stamp it out! Tolerance and mercy are not virtues! This new SF seduces you into wallowing in mud!”

The rabble failed to be roused.

BBC men drenched the bar and con-hall in blinding light, in order to get the goods on John Brunner; the thread of his talk was broken as sunstroke cases thudded rhythmically to the ground. We drank more grossly overpriced beer (for cooling purposes alone) and asked Fred Hemmings why he wasn’t the Channelcon bid treasurer any more. He didn’t know. But throughout the weekend the dread con-politics seemed remote: never a hint of massacre on Joseph’s bloodthirsty scale – some mealy-mouthed canvassing was all. And John and Eve Harvey are nice people, it’s not their fault that their bid isn’t as good as Skycon or that all these riff-raff have fastened onto them – oops. Talk about something else quickly, Langford.

After a fine banquet, strange things continued to happen. D. West offered Hazel a snail. Tom Shippey refereed a game in which one has to name a book which everyone but you has read....

Kevin Smith: “*The Hobbit.*”

Tom: “Good grief.”

Others: “I’ve read that –” “So have I –” “We all have –”

Tom and Others to Kev, very loudly: “BOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Not a game for weak hearts. And then, of course ...

THE CHARNOX ARE HAVING A ROOM PARTY ... SEE PAT CHARNOCK BATTLE 100 FEROCIOUS SHREWS CLAD ONLY IN CAMI-KNICKERS! SEE PETER ROBERTS DO AMAZING THINGS WITH A GLASS OF GUINNESS WHILE OTHER RATS DIVE FROM A GREAT HEIGHT INTO SEVERAL GLASSES OF BACARDI AND COKE! HEAR THE WILD JUNGLE RHYTHMS OF VERA JOHNSON WAFTING THROUGH THE VENTILATOR SHAFTS! CHEST-HAIR

EXTRACTION UNDERTAKEN TO ORDER BY THE
FABULOUS D. WEST! SEE THE RITUAL CASTRATION OF
AN ENTIRE BBC CAMERA CREW!

The strangest thing was the pigeon, Graham said it had been sitting on the window-sill all day; it would not move. Greg opened the window viciously, hoping to knock it off, but it ducked and sat there ruffling its feathers, gazing into the night. I think the Charnox smeared glue on the ledge in order to trap them a conversation piece; either that, or they gave it one of those cigarettes.

Leroy sat in a corner, immobilized by a rush of wit to the forebrain. “Tell us some cocktails, Rog!” he said to Mr Peyton. (Applause.) “I don’t care about bloody conventions,” he said after a little. “John Steward supports Skycon?” he said: “Rubbish! I can put *pressure* on him.” Pressure was promptly put on Leroy, by Greg, who sat on him while we explained to Eve Harvey that she couldn’t be a trufan without a breath of scandal. She looked at Greg and decided the price was too nigh. “Someone,” quipped Leroy, “is annoyed about your quoting him on the Nova Award.” “Who?” I said in bafflement. “Can’t tell you now.” I was stricken, but Leroy’s conversational powers did not fail him. “Hey,” he cried, “John Wyndham died quite recently!” Then he argued awhile with Liese and announced “She’s a woman who knows her own mind, just like me.” He paused. “When she can find it.” How long could he keep this up? We never found out; Peter Roberts pulled fannish rank and took Leroy’s chair, and in burst the Astral Leauge Male Voice Choir, and they sang –

*When Dinosaurs did rule the earth
The Leauge was yet to be,
And now we stretch from Pole to Pole
In Cosmic Harmonee.*

At 6am on Sunday morning, I decided against finishing my latest glass of rum, and went to bed. Hazel poured the drink away before I woke up, because she didn’t like the smell. Thriftless woman.

The Authors’ Panel effectively destroyed that hoary myth, the Sense of Wonder.

“A sense of wonder,” said Chris Priest, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

“Sense of wonder is the last refuge of the incompetent,” agreed Andrew

Stephenson.

Something beautiful had gone out of my life forever. I struck out at the cruel world and photographed Tom Perry, who immediately revenged himself by reviving OMPA. Following this, I pointedly did not photograph Jake Grigg; *his* vengeance was wreaked upon Rog Peyton, who found himself unable to auction Grigg SubPrimitive Art as fast as Jake could draw it.

In the course of flogging some arty T-shirts, Rog pulled one over his muscular gut: “It’ll fit anyone now,” he grunted, half-suffocated, as he peeled it off. A voice cried “Sell it to Tent-con!” Rog glowered, a thing he does rather well.

The N*O*V*A A*W*A*R*D was given to *Maya*, amid tumultuous yawns of surprise. Rob tottered proudly awry, secure in the knowledge that his fanzine had utterly defeated the Trekkiezine *Alnitah*, and the Cambridge group’s newsletter, and *Twll-Ddu*. (All other nominees had, said hearsay, been withdrawn.) “It was very boring of Maya to win the Nova,” said Kev Smith afterwards: true, but Rob did deserve it. Then Malcolm Edwards came shaking a beermug of cash. No-one, he said, could fail to contribute to the BEST Award!

“The best *what?*” said Kev.

“The *BEST!*” Leroy told him. “It’s for the BEST! You can’t say fairer than that!”

They shambled away.

D. West appeared a few minutes later, jingling the money in his capacious pockets.

“Glad I only put in a penny,” I said a little too audibly.

He leaned in several directions before internal gyroscopy brought one pale eye to bear on me. From a range of two inches he gritted through clenched nostrils:

“You tight-fisted sod.”

*From Star to Star the Astral Leauge
Is there for all to see –
Galactic Empires live in peace*

And Cosmic Harmonee!

Harry Bell summed it up. “D. West,” he said, “is Different.” In silent agreement I fled to Reading, which seemed a good place for a nervous breakdown....

Easter '77: A Novacon Action Replay Eastercon '77, Coventry, Easter 1977

Every sense hints at disaster as I steer to the north. There is a scraping sound in the clutch, still unexplained; a sickly smell of petrol where I overfilled the tank; visible through the windscreen, a wooden wedge barely prevents the bonnet from taking flight; at every turn or stop there comes a free-fall sensation caused by our massive inertia (five people, luggage for six) and the ageing tyres, not bald but receding – not quite Brian Hampton but way past Kev Smith. Admittedly I can *taste* nothing more ominous than the aftermath of last night's One Tun; but for the rest, I'd be happier driving a sensory-deprivation tank. It occurs to me that with Kev, Martin, Liese and myself aboard, a car crash now will leave no bids at all for Eastercon '78. I shiver slightly but dare not mention this aloud: there is no wood to touch. Except the wedge, which is out of reach.

In Coventry, waiting for a travelling rep of Brunner Fact & Fiction Ltd to clock in, we look in vain for specimens of the famous Eastercon T-shirt which aren't grossly distorted (Pauline Dungate and – less interestingly – Rog Peyton) or shrouded in Big Oz denim. Con booklets are pressed into our hands; this year they preserve a dignified reticence about fanzines, fandom, SF, hotel layout and suchlike trivia which have cluttered past versions of this Work.... Very soon all motion in the foyer is barred by an iron line of fans determined to register; I percolate through the queue, distributing benevolence and *Twill-Ddu* 6 alike. Pat Charnock smiles graciously and permits me to buy an *Astral League Yearbook*. Made overconfident by this success, she tries to sell me several more, an endeavour which continues throughout the weekend.

The Fan Room is instantly the heart of the con. Decorated with an enthusiasm hitherto reserved for bog walls, and an agglomeration of fanzines previously unheard of outside Toronto, it makes just one concession to olden days: the

token derelict duplicator is there, and remains typically unused. Astral Leauge tapes blare. Sounds like any other music to me, but shocked aficionados assure me there is a difference. Much detritus accumulates upon the Graffiti Board, some of it about me: have I finally made it into fandom? My sense of doom lessens. But already, as Asimov would have it, the dead hand of programming opposes the living will of the Fan Room. Liese babbles that Greg has asked her to be in a fannish panel due in minutes:

“He said there were three reasons. I’m a newish fan, I’m female, and I’m an opinionated bigmouth.”

Greg! How could you?

On the panel, Chris Priest looks tired, though not as tired as Carol Gregory’s drawing of him for *GHAS*, in which he also looks about fifty. Liese looks more like seventeen. Chairman Pat Charnock, as usual, looks bewildered, Rob Jackson slightly pompous and Peter Roberts slightly pained. Keith Freeman looks anywhere but at the audience, and manages to be serious. Too conscious, perhaps, of the neos present, they all try hard to avoid raving fannishness: the note is introductory with historical asides, enticing each panellist to seem less interesting than he/she really is. Greg is disappointed. “Aw, fuckit” is his melancholy summation.

Weeks before Easter, Pete Weston phoned me with hints that he was seeking quiz victims and now required a volunteer from Reading to balance things in some occult geographical fashion. He paused meaningfully; I volunteered without delay. One doesn’t kill the goose that lays the golden contracts.

Now, as spotlights focus on an obvious hot-seat, certain misgivings arise. Is big Mike Brown carrying a length of rubber hose as well as a stopwatch? Why does Pete smile that glittering smile?

“It’s all right,” someone reassures, “they’re doing it just like on *Mastermind*.”

“I never watch television,” I moan.

The fixity of Pete’s rictus increases as he selects a paper bearing my name. I trudge forward, fail to hear questions, drive Pete almost to tears and don’t even know the first editor of *Astounding*. Malcolm Edwards notches up some tremendous score – double figures yet. Aagh. Kev Williams does as badly as I, while Gerry “short-notice-so-don’t-expect-much” Webb does worse. Modified aagh.

It is time for the Special Subjects. I have picked Lensman books as something I could read up quickly – and should I do badly, the mere appallingness of the subject will hint that I’m playing it for laughs etc. Pete scoops me: “Dave Langford will now answer questions on his *favourite* books ...” Aaagh.

The questions prove easy, and I can even hear them. (The paying-off of Leroy, who set them, is described below.) Great stuff. I am now known to all fandom as an expert on Lensmen. Aagh. Malcolm wins anyway, hot tip Kev Williams receiving slightly diabolical questions, and as runner-up I solemnly shake hands. This Mastermind’s recent haircut makes his head seem several inches narrower, causing people to enquire “Who’s that tall slim chap who looks a bit like Malcolm Edwards?”

Film shows are almost a relief despite friendly Pete, who drapes his arm round Hazel to tell her the joys of childbirth and paternity, though he has only experienced one of these and Hazel is averse to both. (“Weston’s sat next to you,” says Greg next morning. “That’s the black spot. There’s nothing worse.” Hazel thinks Greg has a lovely voice.)

In the bar I unwind to the point of total flaccidity, and am thus unprepared for a meeting with D. West and Brian Parker on the fifth floor. Brian struggles with a translucent beard and a cardboard box of scientific-looking bottles: they contain white liquid, slightly viscous.

“Telepathic slime mould,” he explains.*

* 2018 note: Some kind of thixotropic fluid, as I remember. You had to force it by sheer mind-power to become *more* viscous, the secret being to shake the bottle.

D. leans at me and says “Have you been initiated?” Yes – Brian initiated me with a pole last year. Talking of initiation with a pole reminds me of an Edwardian tome of Hazel’s called “Diseases of Women” which, not content with vomitous illustrations, suggests such things as split lengths of firewood for use in domestic intravaginal surgery.... Less fearsomely armed with a telescopic pole, D. snaps “You have to do it in less than ten seconds. Look!” With a flourish he extends the rod; a foot-long piece comes off in his hand. Uttering strange oaths, he jams it together as we all enter the lift. The rod does not wish to be reassembled. D. tries to subdue it by vicious jabs at the wall: thud! thud! Other occupants of the lift, thinking he is staging a breakout, huddle against the far wall with gestures of protest. He ignores

them and begins to attack the floor. The descent is interminable. Everyone seems glad to leave the lift, even Brian, whose exuberance is such that he instantly drops a bottle. Telepathic slime mould spreads whitely across the floor. Seeing that one of the hotel staff is watching without enthusiasm, Brian rushes over and gladly reports the accident.

In the bar, things degenerate. Colin Fine does dialling tone impressions and is told by barmaids to shut up. The temperature rises, Greg presents D. with a curried chicken-bone, a little something to show Ratfandom's appreciation. A strange female in shorts, boots, a plastic mac and lurid pink tights wanders around. "A punk rock fan," is Kev's diagnosis. "One of Gray Charnock's groupies?" I offer. "Rob Holdstock said she was a reporter from the *Telegraph*." We boggle mutually. A series of jerky transitions, and it is Saturday morning, ushered in by gunshots which later prove to be some idiot with a whip.

Bob Shaw's talk is as usual colossal and stupendous, but this year ends with less of a bang. Brian Burgess somehow comes into it near the end; the sight of him shambling down the aisle and across the front deflates almost everyone. It doesn't quite deflate Bob, but the tone has been perceptibly lowered. The one obligatory programme item is now over.... Wrong! there is also the bidding session. I shiver slightly and avoid the con hall all day, not apparently missing a lot. With the Brum Group in charge, I expected this Easter to be Novacon writ large: instead, it is Novacon spread thin.

The Fan Room continues to hum. In the absence of Peter Roberts, Eve Harvey chairs a discussion and contrives to provoke response from the fannishly apathetic audience. Appearing later, Peter merely requests opinions and does not receive many. Eve is a better chairman: Peter excels in exposition. (Did you object to the word "chairman" there? I object to non-essential neologisms*, which tend to the inanity of BSFA *Matrix* announcing that the Reading Group is "ably chairpersoned by Martin Hatfield".) At this point Martin Hoare announces that *TD* is his favourite fanzine – good man! – mysteriously adding that it is a Reading-group local fanzine, mostly about himself and Liese, and that many of the jokes are inaccessible to You Lot. This perturbs me. Perhaps my basic joke about Martin's great slimness is akin to the esoteric, in-group gag concerning Ian Williams's great height, appreciated only by Gannets and a few Secret Masters. Meanwhile, Simone pours out a tasty and lethally alcoholic punch. "Simone's punch is great," I

hiccup, and am warned that it's Greg's too. The basic concept is entirely his. He is very hurt when people call it Simone's. Be careful.

** 2018 note: Oh dear! Well, it was 1977.*

The Pink Panther Party in Dai Price's room is made a roaring success by his star turns of Glenlivet and J&B. These high-class drinks do not go down well with chips, yet this is the very blasphemy which Dermot and Keith Oborn attempt. Fortunately the hotel saves them by refusing to admit the chips. After many minutes of deliberation Keith works out how to smuggle some in for Liese: he will hide them under his coat! Keith is a Lateral Thinker. I absorb more malt and mutter at Daio about quizzes, "Easy stuff," he slurs. "Just a matter of thumbing through the odd bookshop."

Downstairs, Bob (no relation) Shaw of FOKT (Fans of Kettle's Tales) is cracking a whip at waiters and others, demanding that everyone come to his Glasgowcon which will be at some peculiarly inconvenient time next year. Gaz Belka (a new fan who has the drunken enthusiasm to go far) borrows the whip and assaults D. West with it, only to be cowed by the power of Will.

Upstairs again, Colin Fine and henchmen are wittily proposing SF titles altered by one letter: "Dupe!" (roars of laughter) "Slag!" (hysterical laughter) "The Lagged Orbit!'" (they are going to hurt themselves it is not good for them to laff so much). I propose Delany's contraceptive epic "Time Considered As A Helix of Semi-Precious Stopes" and flee to a proper party, there to trip over a young Swedish lady who looks a bit like John Brosnan. The name – Ewa something – rings a bell: she is Brian Parker's woman of two years ago. Paling, I drink a huge gin-and-tonic – a mistake, as I become practically helpless. At the eleventh hour, meaning the fourth or fifth hour of next morning, Kev saves me from a fate worse than the Doc Weir Award by frogmarching me away.

In the pallid light of Sunday morning comes a wave of guilt as I find my Welsh Fandom badge missing – but a pleasant surprise awaits. On the table is another large gin-and-tonic, abandoned a few unconscious hours ago. The bubbles are still extant; I sip gratefully. Swallowing pills, we disorganise a Skycon meeting, to which I contribute great skill in the cutting up of forms. (We artistic cutters of forms have long ago abandoned the straight line as an outworn convention ... you probably noticed this.) Billions of leaflets are scattered across the con hall. Kev takes the stage, spasms of nervousness

convulsing every fibre of his beard.

“Um,” he says. He repeats this a couple of times before Positive Thought sets in and the hushed audience is told that Heathrow is Great in '78. No other bids, despite a great muttering and urging of D. West to get up there with his slogan “Bradford is heaven the year after '77”. Questions are asked, beginning sensibly and descending to “Is there central heating?” and “What size staples will you use in the con booklet?” – at which Greg shouts down all discussion and there is the Vote. Kev is applauded. I am permitted to read a few hastily scribbled words about our Fan Guest of Honour:

“For the Fan Guest of Honour we thought we’d choose someone to surprise you all. A man whose talents are second to none, though fourth to many. A man so warm-hearted that we can absolutely guarantee that he will buy a drink for every con member, or at least *accept* a drink from every con member. A man whose knowledge of SF is legendary, and whose deep insights into fandom are just as small. Can I please ask for a sitting ovation of your most enthusiastic boos and hisses for this amazing and unmitigated publisher of fanzines, hemidemisemiprofessional writer and connoisseur of lavatories the world over – Leroy Richard Arthur Kettle!”

Leroy springs up with an excellent counterfeit of surprise and delight. The audience roars. Everything goes black....

Bryn Fortey appears on Sunday. I have to mention Bryn because of Welsh Solidarity. Brian Parker is annoyed with him, but somehow Bryn survives this.

Behind a thick wall of secrecy on Sunday afternoon, a band of picked committee members makes the controversial decision to hold Novacon 7. At once I dash to the Fan Room for Dave Bridges’ *Little Moving Blot Machine Competition*.... The machine – “Destruction Derby” – is a very silly one. You are supposed to be driving a big car round the TV screen, ruthlessly crushing little cars which, however, have a phenomenal dodging ability. Wrecked little cars are great impediments to progress. Spinning the wheel, wiggling the gears and stomping the pedal, Malcolm and I fight bitterly only to score the same tally of destruction. Twice. The third time my training of Lensman books finally tells: in the pretence that I am smashing planets *à la* Kinnison

(Pow! That was Jarnevon. Zap! There goes Ploor.), I surge ahead. Who can stop me now? Steve Gould, that's who: this hitherto obscure OUSFG member wins the jackpot, leaving me with second place and a vitamin-C-crazed Dave Griffin with third.

Rob Hansen is now bemused by the increasing numbers of Welsh fans – he has discovered Dewi (OUSFG again) Williams, Daio and several more. “Why,” he pleads, “do they all come from Newport?” Centre of the universe, Rob lad, centre of the universe....

By and by Brian Parker reminds the intrepid *Drilkjis* editors that he is drawing a cover for our fourth issue: “I imagined a picture of the two of you sort of conjoined.” Kev's eyebrows rise first, but mine go a shade higher.

A banquet mood emerges, and the more punctilious fans vanish to return resplendently clad, some of them looking uncomfortable. Oz “Big Mike” Brown falls into this latter class. “You look uncomfortable,” I suggest wittily. “I feel uncomfortable,” he wittily replies. Perhaps he is wearing blue denim underwear.

Since it is my birthday I miss the banquet by way of celebration and follow Kev to an Italian restaurant he knows of. It is closed. Eventually the Langford family, Daio and Kev find themselves in a hugely empty Chinky, where the waiters (already unnerved by wild gestures of summoning) examine our badges, muttering darkly and Orientally “East-East-Eastercon?”

“The 28th British Easter Science Fiction Convention,” I recite with a winning smile. The inaudible reply is doubtless a Chinese oath.

We eat too much. We return to the hotel and the inevitable Burlingtons. Little brother Jon has won the Ken McIntyre Award in my absence, Martin has accepted it for him, and Dermot has stood revealed as Pete Weston's major henchman and thug. Good grief. Moreover, the bane of the Doc Weir Award has descended upon Keith Freeman.

“Old 2pp Freeperson must have driven the poor, huddled starving masses of the BSFA to the ballot box in a tumbril.” (Jim Linwood.)

At the dance Greg is again hurling people into the action, keeping Simone supplied with partners of all descriptions. “I'm a catalyst,” he says with

careless pride. Arm in arm, Leroy and John Harvey do the can-can. Hazel does it on her own. Brian Parker repeats the Parker Fling, a hazard to all in sight. Pauline does that which must be seen to be disbelieved. I drink a lot.

When Mr Charnock's strange sounds cease, I can no longer feel my feet. A room party is the only answer, and there I have a congenial time telling Leroy what a great writer he is. This may not sound congenial, but there is a counterpoint of pissed Leroy telling me what a great writer I am. From time to time the name Gray Charnock does rear up, and briefly we snarl what a great writer *he* is.

In Greg's room is a gathering of by now tired and under-emotional Ratfans. Greg himself, arriving belatedly from the bar, achieves the incredible by crashing out *before* reaching his own party: the scene of his collapse becomes a place of wonder, and a small viewing fee is charged.

Again I slide down the entropy slope into blankness. Reality slips into focus just before dawn, as I lean from the window gaping at massive buildings across the plaza: there is a cool eerie light around them which reminds me irrationally and alcoholically of certain stills at the start of *2001*. I am deeply moved and just refrain from throwing up. "Awake!" I suggest in slurred tones, "for Morning in the Bowl of Night / Has flung the Stone which puts the Stars to Flight –" This is not well received. ("What the hell are you on about?" – Hazel.) Removing a few clothes at random, I go to bed.

In the morning my foot is bruised and I can only limp. I am limping industriously, giving little attention-drawing moans, when Eve tells me the Harveymobile has been ripped off, driven into various things – police cars not excluded – and smashed up. This depresses me so much that my foot feels better. (But Andrew "Nice Guy" Stephenson is taking them home.) Later I find John's con badge on the car-park steps. It looks forlorn.

Our own departure is late and undramatic. Every sense is malfunctioning as I drive to the south.... Have you noticed how stereotyped these con reports have become? Always I begin by driving north and end up driving south. Next year the dynamic, innovative Skycon committee will change all that.

"You're not playing Destruction Derby now," is the only thing said in the first hour – I am experimenting with various pedal positions to alleviate foot-ache. In Oxford we visit Mike Rohan, Deb Hickenlooper and Mike's advance

copy of the *New Atlantic Desk Encyclopaedia* containing my article on fusion power. Even the subtitle added by the wretched US publishers – “Energy from the sea” – cannot dim my enthusiasm.

On Tuesday we remain glazed. Hazel refuses to get out of bed. Kev and I try cheery conversation – “A year ago no-one knew us! And look at us now!” We gaze in the mirror. “Oh God.”

I pull out Eric Bentcliffe’s questionnaire on fan humour, and show it to Kev. “I think that’s a silly sort of question to ask, myself,” he mumbles.

I make a great effort. “Do you often ask it yourself?”

“... I can’t cope ...”

I pull out BSFA *Matrix*, always good for a laugh, and discover the word *recepies* in the editorial. These, you will understand, are sets of instructions for cooking food. Further down is the singular form: *receipy*. We become delirious and visit the pub, where I remember my worries about the possible motorized annihilation of most of the Skycon committee. On hearing this, Kev buries his beard in his hands. “Oh God! I never thought of that. *Dermot* and *Keith* running a convention! Oh God!”

It takes him three pints to recover.

Best slogan of the weekend: IMMANENTIZE THE EASTERCON.

What Has Fourteen Protons and Lives in Newcastle? Silicon 3, Newcastle, August 1978

ANNOUNCER: Viewers are warned that the following programme contains a certain amount of content and also dialogue, which may be offensive to some. Better to switch off quickly and read a good book –

[But already we are into the standard SF opening montage. An Apollo rocket boosts into the night ... King Kong wobbles threateningly at it from the top of the Devil's Tower ... a radiant Erich von Daniken slowly rises above Stonehenge ... old *Astounding* covers show tentacular aliens ravishing Dave Kyle ... the Phantom of the Opera hums a few bars from *Also Sprach The BBC Radiophonic Workshop* ... Patrick Moore's eyebrows signal across interstellar space and Darth Vader eats the *USS Enterprise* in a telephone box.]

NARRATOR [through electronic warbles and “Woo Woo” noises]: This week *World Inaction* probes the phenomenon of science-fiction conventions such as Silicon 3. Are these events really a forum for literary discussion?

[Cut to MIKE DICKINSON studying *Big Isaac's SF Adventure Magazine*: he turns paler and paler, and faintly murmurs “Oh my God.”]

Or are there stranger goings-on of which the general public knows nothing?

[Cut to Dave Cockfield bestowing a passionate kiss on Dave Cobbledick. Cut to Joseph Nicholas bestowing himself *again* on Helen Eling. Cut to the next day's *News of the World* with the headline MY 16-YEAR-OLD HUNK OF MAN, SAYS 33-YEAR-OLD HOUSEWIFE....]

NARRATOR: Some say that curious rituals take place at these secret meetings.

[Cut to Rog Peyton and Helen Eling in destructive frenzy on the dance floor. Cut to Rob Jackson uneasily fingering a water-filled balloon. Cut to Leroy

Kettle delivering great chandelier-rattling blows to those who have displeased him, with a whole fistful of balloons, as the manager stands aghast. *]

* Harry Bell's lucid explanation of this was: "An element of silliness crept in."
The manager nodded silently, almost as though he understood.

NARRATOR: Some say that mind and body alike can be endangered in the weird initiations of "fandom".

[Cut to Dave Cobbledick's missing finger. Cut to mounds of strange gastric produce dotted about the floor. Cut to Bob Day, who suddenly falls over and is dragged away. Cut to David Wingrove.]

NARRATOR: But what does the typical "fan" think of it all?

TYPICAL FAN [face in shadow]: Well basically it's, you know, a challenge, you sort of pit yourself against it all, I mean, I followed Rob Jackson's directions to the hotel and I felt I'd really, you know, achieved something when I got into an arrival situation only four hours late.

NARRATOR: Did you discuss SF then?

T.F.: Oh yes ... there was a lot of that going on. [He shudders. Fade to crowded bar –]

IAN MAULE [casually]: Bought *Andromeda 3* in Newcastle today.

PETER WESTON: Bloody hell, have they published it?

[Closeup of *Andromeda 3*, showing long uncredited quotation from *Dot*. Sound of Kev Smith's teeth grinding in background.]

JOHN COLLICK [with an evil and ingratiating smile]: Hey Dave – how d'you kill someone with a laser?

DAVE LANGFORD [hereinafter "DRL"]: Well, you crank it up to immense power and turn it on and allow the searing beam of radiation to blast through the hapless victim's unprotected flesh ...

JOHN: No, what I meant –

DRL: ... crisped and carbonized tissues, the intestines boiling and gouting forth their noxious effluvia –

JOHN: No, Dave, I mean is it efficient, is it economical to kill someone with a laser?

DRL: Of course it bloody isn't.

NARRATOR: I have here a postcard sent by Collick to Langford ... [Reads:] "Our little natter on Friday night was most informative, since then I've managed to kill at least 43 people and haven't been caught since." I think that speaks for itself.

HAZEL: John Collick does look more outwardly wholesome than D. West, but ... [Fade back to bar.]

JOE NICHOLAS: Ah, you've got *Lord Foul's Bane*.

DRL: No, just a hangover.

JOE [withering contempt]: Don't know why you bothered; it's just another typical fantasy conflict between externalized good and externalized evil ...

DRL: You've read it, then?

JOE: Not yet. Perhaps I will before I review it for *Vector*.

GREG PICKERSGILL: Look here Dave, your wife has been sitting there knitting and no-one's spoken to her for an hour and a half ... [DRL rushes to Hazel.]

DRL: Greg is worried about you, so I thought I'd come and talk to you. Nice weather, isn't it? What d'you think of the situation in the Middle East? Have you seen *Star Wars* yet?

HAZEL [eyes on knitting]: Don't want to talk to anyone.

[Meanwhile, a closeup:]

JOE NICHOLAS: We limp-wristed fans ...

[Cut to Joe at breakfast, holding cutlery in limp-wristed mode. The suspense is agonizing as he gradually saws through his bacon.]

NARRATOR: In attendance were outwardly respectable people such as Chartered Accountants and Civil Servants. What did they have to say about it all?

KEV SMITH: I think the neatest review of *Canopus* would go "Can of what?"

DRL: Gosh, that's clever. I wonder if I could make a joke about how Dave

Wingrove's editorials are more to be pitied than censored?

HAZEL: No.

[The scene shifts to Cobbledick and Graham England, who are devouring vile faggots from which spurt clouds of mephitic vapour. DRL, downwind, is talking to Darroll Pardoe....]

DRL: You know, [sniff] there's something [sniff] ... oh, I see. For a moment there I was afraid you had bad breath.... [They turn to survey the sulphurous faggots.]

MARTIN HOARE: Close encounters of the turd kind.

NARRATOR: Let us move very quickly to the serious programme items in which world-famous SF pundits Mike Dickinson, Evel Yn-Harvey and Kevins Williams and Smith will expound something or other. Another famed pundit, Greg Pickersgill, has chickened out and can be seen sitting halfway down the room.

DRL: [*sotto voce*, in front row of audience]: Glad I'm not up there, I'd only make a fool of myself – as, with luck, Kev is about to ...

KEV [the rat]: ... But I think Dave Langford can tell us something about *Isaac Asimov's Rejection Slips Magazine*.

DRL: Bloody hell. Well, I've got this vast collection – they send you three or four big sheets of paper every time they reject something – you get a special envelope for subscribing to *IASFM*, and an essay on how to type manuscripts – good stuff that is, full of hints like putting in a ribbon and how it's essential to use symbols not found on British typewriters.

MIKE DICKINSON: I especially liked their useful tips about stopping typing before you reach the bottom of the page.

DRL: The best thing is their essay on "Futility". It seems that all the readers are typical Americans with huge mortgages and acute depression who've just paid for expensive car repairs and whose wives don't sugar their coffee properly, so when they read *IASFM* they only wish to hear of rich future people whose spaceships run well and whose wives sugar the coffee properly, and stories where everything doesn't go right for the hero are called futile and get rejected.

SUSAN WILLIAMS: Why don't they sugar their own coffee?

DRL [nonplussed]: What kind of wish-fulfilment fantasy is it where you have to sugar your own coffee? ... Anyway, *IASFM* also has special little slips for special cases. I sent this Frank Herbert parody which Joe Nicholas liked, so it can't be much good; it started with the quotation *Versatility is the ability to swim on unknown ground* ...

[Baffled laughter; perceptive murmurs of "He's pissed."]

DRL: ... The rejection said *OPAQUE*, meaning they couldn't understand it at all. Maybe they'd never heard of Frank Herbert.

UNKNOWN VOICE IN AUDIENCE: Wish *I'd* never heard of Frank Herbert.

SIMONE WALSH: This is boring, let's talk about the BSFA.

[Confusion. Frenzy. Whetting of knives in background. Cries of "Silence for the BSFA!", "Death to the BSFA!", "What's the BSFA?", "I'm going for a drink", etc.]

MIKE DICKINSON: That's no good, we can't say rude things behind their backs when some of them are here.

NARRATOR [as fighting breaks out and chairs begin to fly]: This exemplifies the taboos of this strange folk. To utter the fatal name is (as John Dickson Carr put it) like whispering "Asbestos!" to a gang of pyromaniacs. Yes, the very mention of the BSFA –

[A weighted balloon strikes him and he falls unconscious.]

ROB JACKSON [sitting on floor at front]: No, wait. We've got some quite sensible BSFA people here – there's Dave Cobbledick and Dave Wingrove, both of whom will listen to every criticism we make and will surely be as putty in our hands....

DRL [calling to Dave Wingrove at the back]: That's Rob Jackson talking about you, Dave, in case you were wondering.

DAVE W: Thanks. I recognized the voice.

DRL: Bland, isn't it?

[Slow fade to black. A message appears.] *IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT:*

THE ROLE OF DAVID LANGFORD IN THE EVENTS OF SILICON 3 HAS BEEN GROSSLY DISTORTED BY HIS INABILITY TO RECALL THE COUNTLESS BRILLIANT THINGS SAID BY OTHER PEOPLE. THIS SLANTED PRESENTATION CANNOT BE HELPED. DO NOT ADJUST YOUR SET. DO NOT ADJUST YOUR CLOTHING. DO NOT PASS GO –

NARRATOR [with bandaged head]: Well, what makes these fans tick? Their ways are strange: for example, after *Isaac Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine* had been denounced at length by the panel you have just seen, Roger Peyton's stocks thereof sold out at once. This is what psychologists have called the "nerd instinct". And anthropologists have still not fully analysed fans' curious rites, their perverse humour and warped ideals ...

[To the bar –]

SIMONE: I still think there's hope for Ian Garbutt. I mean, he's only *sixteen* or something. Now there's no hope at *all* for Robin Hughes, he's *twenty-five* ... [A shudder runs through her at the mere thought of such age and decrepitude.] ... and he thinks Greg is some sort of *barrier* between him and fandom, he's *hardened* in his attitude and *despises* John Collick for being accepted in fandom ... but Garbutt's practically *adolescent*, he can still *grow up* and become a real fan ... surely ...

[Silence]

[Silence]

[Silence]

JIM BARKER: I met Ian Garbutt at Faircon.

ALL: No! Good grief! What's he like?

JIM: Well, he's sort of ... um, well, you know ... Tell you what, I'll draw him.

[He draws him.]

ALL: No! Good grief! He can't be like that!

[Laughter]

DAVE WINGROVE: No, that's pretty flattering. [He rushes off to denounce Ian Garbutt to the BSFA High Praesidium.]

DRL [rapidly]: Make a good filler for *TD*, that picture –

ALAN DOREY [more rapidly]: I'll be publishing sooner than you!

DRL: Oh yeah?

ALAN: Have a pint.

DRL: The picture's yours.

JIM: Don't I get any say in this, then?

ALL: No. [Little do they know that although the wretched Dorey will rush out a *Gross Encounters* within the month, he will utterly fail to include Jim's priceless artwork. Next time DRL will be less indulgent.]

[Fade to charades, with well-known cretins miming other well-known cretins. Rog Peyton has just borrowed a comb with which he simulates a starkly rectangular moustache. He clicks his heels – raises a clenched fist –]

ALL: Peter Weston!!!

[In another part of the bar:] DRL: Hey, Harry, remember that when you were pissed at our party you promised a *TD* cover?

HARRY BELL: No.

[Fade to Intellectual Quiz:]

QUIZMASTER COCKFIELD: And that picture came from the cover of Philip José Farmer's *The Mad Goblin*! [Tumultuous shouts of hysterical laughter from all present.]

NARRATOR: This quiz was largely about SF films, music, artwork and the like, causing such authorities as Kev Smith to dismiss it as a *sci-fi* quiz.... [As he speaks the fatal words a bound volume of *Tangent* strikes him down.]

[Fade to an Indian restaurant filled exclusively with ravenous fans. A fear-crazed Rob Hansen flees to eat Chinese nosh with his fingers on a draughty pavement –]

HAZEL: Thank you – that was very nice food indeed.

INDIAN WAITER: Oooh ... say that again!

HAZEL: Very nice food.

WAITER: I like the way you say that.

HAZEL [outside]: I suppose he doesn't hear many cultured southern voices up here.

[Fade to a damp and insalubrious park, where football is being played. Disapproving figures watch from nearby allotments. Dave Wingrove looks peculiarly fetching in a slinky football jersey which, totally concealing his shorts (if any) gives a mini-skirted appearance. John Collick falls over with unusual adroitness and frequency. Jim Barker hefts toilet-rolls, but has no notion of the subtle physics of actually throwing them, which is expounded at length by a passing *Twll-Ddu* editor. Eventually a direct hit is scored on Ian Maule, who unsportingly does not fall over. Limp wrists abound.]

[The football game mercifully over, the Gannet Surprise is unveiled, with Wernher von Firth producing home-made plastic rockets which will symbolize the soaring intellectual power of SF as they zoom high over Newcastle. The second missile is the most successful, actually twitching whole millimetres into the air before it melts and droops obscenely. Certain fans leave in haste –]

SIMONE: It's disgusting. They could come down on anybody.

HAZEL: Dave thinks that if the police turn up they'll arrest him.

DRL: Well, one's practically bound to shoot through the window of a passing police-car if I'm in sight. And they always *do* arrest me. Mind you, I think I know what's wrong with those rockets ... the solid fuel's probably damp and needs to be dried out. Now if they put them in the hotel oven –

ALL: Shut up.

[Cut to Bar. Silicon is nearly done. Fans about to depart are studying photographs from America with confused remarks:]

"Gosh, aren't they all huge."

"Look, that's Joyce Scrivner. Looks like Pat Meara inflated with a bicycle-pump."

"And there's Terry Hughes. Christ, he looks like a male Joyce Scrivner!"

"Who's that other huge fellow?"

"Ssh, that's Rob Jackson!"

DRL: What *is* Ian Garbutt like?

DAVE WINGROVE: Well, don't quote me, but ** ** * ** * ** * ** * ** * ** * ** *

***** ** [etc*t*r*, etc* t*r*].

SIMONE [aside]: Wingrove is but a flea on the dog of humanity.

[Brief flash of the Narrator being wheeled off with concussion, culture-shock and alcoholic poisoning, before the credits begin to go up over Mike Dickinson's quintessentially fannish summary ...]

MIKE DICKINSON: I've just woken from a dream of Ian Williams being whipped by marmosets.

#

ANNOUNCER: The next item will be a party political broadcast on behalf of the BSFA Committee.

SOUND HEARD IN LIVING-ROOM: *click*

What The Critics Said

BOB DAY: Certainly, there was plenty of falling over; and that even before Roy Kettle arrived! Of that, the less said the better.

JOHN COLLICK: Did you know that in the trial flying bombs, that used test pilots, a break in the fuel lines during flight produced an acid or enzyme which totally dissolved the poor Luftpilot? Not a lot of people know that.

CYRIL "BOGMORTON" SIMSA: My best rejection slip came from Ian Garbutt. It said: "*Tangent* is not a market for crap writing or literary masturbation."

IAN GARBUTT: It was interesting to see you refer to me as Ian Grabbutt, such fannish humour, Mr Pongford, is seldom to be found in British fanzines ...

DRL: My apologies, Ina – but surely the ironic tone must have hinted that I was wittily quoting Kev Smith?

JOE NICHOLAS: I enjoyed Silicon, although I have to confess that I didn't feel myself to be enjoying it as much as last year. Why, I have no idea – perhaps it was because it was the second Silicon I'd been to, and a repeat of a particular convention is never the same as the first. And perhaps it was because I had less money to spend than last year, which is always something

of an inhibition. It certainly didn't have anything to do with being parodied by Rob Hansen in the charades; I did, in fact, have a sneaking suspicion that I might be due for such treatment long beforehand. After all, anyone who wears crepe gorgette scarves, uses lipstick salve and drinks Cinzano must be pretty fair game for that sort of thing. The only trouble was that I missed it! I went out to the bar to get drinks for myself and Paul Kincaid during the intermission, and the very first thing he said to me on my return was "We've just done you." *Wordless snarl of rage* Although I understand that somebody else's (was it Alan Dorey's) mime of Malcolm Edwards was at first mistaken for a mime of yours truly. Poot. I wish to state, quite categorically, that there is no resemblance whatever between myself and David Pringle. None! None! (Shrieks of limp-wristed hysteria, and all that.)

DRL: Now that's odd about the con: I enjoyed it much more than Silicon 2. A really good weekend ...

NUJ REPRESENTATIVE: Excuse me, Mr Langford, but this section is quite clearly for *TD* critics and correspondents. You are a mere editor and should know your place.

DRL: Sorry.

HARRY BELL: I still don't remember promising to do this cover ...

Group Dynamics of Conventional Assemblies

Silicon 4, Newcastle, August 1980

1. Eschatological Morphology

The Investigators, hereinafter referred to as “we”, “us” or “that deaf twit Langford”, infiltrated a typical ethnic gathering of Terrestrials, termed Silicon 4. The highly typical nature of the gathering was confirmed by numerous “British fans”, thus utterly refuting numerical estimates of previous investigators who claimed attendances of several thousand at ritual “conventions”: Silicon was attended by some 60 entities, at times perceived by “ourselves” as 120 or more (see Appendix A[iii], “Visual Aberration In Terrestrials: Possible Causal Links With Beverage Absorption”). A standard infiltration was performed, the recording filaments permeating the forebrain of a local entity (see Appendix C: “That Deaf Twit Langford”) whose admittedly sporadic mental processes indicated that it considered itself a wholly normal and typical specimen, all other “British fans” being eccentric and weird. Investigation later demonstrated this attitude to be characteristic not only of “fans” but of most other subgroups of Terrestrial “life”.

The Report is set out more or less chronologically as recorded, any imperfections being due to the chaotic state of the forebrain concerned: see also Appendix A[vi], “Gonzo Journalism: Possible Causal Links with Beverage Absorption”.

2. Semantic Breakdown at Transfinite Entropy Levels

Approach to the Silicon locus (Newcastle, England, August 1980) was uneventful, apart from a clinically interesting increase in the subject Langford’s habitual alarm and paranoia on being confronted with the sign

SEMI-AMBULANT TOILET. The chauffeur-being, designated Kevin Smith, displayed similar symptoms on studying a Newcastle route map which later proved to have been copied by one Kevin Williams from the incorrect map distributed two years previously for Silicon 3. (Mr. Williams's response when later confronted with this fact gave our linguistic analysers a ritual form of Terrestrial apology: "Ho ho.") On arrival at the convention, highly formalized conversation patterns at once emerged:

Of 60 attendees, approximately 75 said to Hazel Langford, "Why aren't you knitting?" (Fugal variation noted: "Why aren't you bloody knitting?") A similar number asked one or both Langfords (who apparently awaited deportation under the cruel TAFF regulations – see Appendix G, "Funny SciFi Words And Their Epistemological Significance"), in the uncouth words of Graham Charnock, "Why aren't you in bloody America?"

Most attendees also said: (a) "I must give you some money for *Ansible*, Dave." (b) "When are you flying, then?" (c) "Not gone to Noreascon yet you bloody globetrotter?" All these phrases seem frequent enough in their usage to be recommended as standard conversational items on Sol III. The same cannot be said of the following samples, not yet fully analysed by the Linguistics Department:

•

D. West; "Yes – I'm starting a course in Interdisciplinary Studies at Bradford U: psychology, literature, philosophy and bloody sociology, making a right Stableford of myself. At least it's better than signing for the dole. And I got a three hundred pound Arts Council grant to write Significant novels, and I'm doing a book on Georgette Heyer for Borgo Press...."

Kevin Smith, subsequently: "Bloody hell, I'm pissing pink!"

Unknown hotel roommaid: "I do hope you can keep Mr. Pepper the hotel owner up till dawn every night – it's great, he sleeps to 11 or 12 and doesn't pester us...."

Rob Jackson: "I still remember your Silicon 3 report, Dave, that bit about me 'uneasily fingering a water-filled balloon' ... yes, I was having vaguely mammary thoughts."

Member of hotel staff: "Dr. Jackson is needed urgently on the telephone!"

Rob, subsequently: "... my mother wanted to know if I'd be free on Tuesday."

Mr. Pepper, 5:30 a.m.: "I think I'd better go to bed ... will you turn the lights out when you've finished with the hotel?"

Kevin: "D. West's allegations? What's he alleging?"

Dai Price, around dawn: "I can *tell* Martin Hoare must be tone-deaf like you. I mean, his singing proves it."

Far too many entities, around dawn, to the tune of Monty Python's Drunken Philosophers Song (see Appendix F[i], "Mass Psychoses of Sol III"):

Oh, H. G. Wells made some fearful smells
And Verne was a champion farter
Fred Pohl, Fred Pohl, blows flames through his hole
But he can't out-fart Lin Carter!
Arthur C. Clarke with a single bark
Could demolish half the Gents
And L. Ron Hubbard had to do it in the cupboard
Or he'd overload the vents.

Harlan Ellison does smellies on half a can of beans ...
Asimov himself has a valve let in his jeans.

Arnold Akien at breakfast: "Have I told you about lumbar punctures? They make you put your knees in your mouth as you lie on your side and they stick this thing like a knitting needle into the relevant place in your spine. If the doctor isn't very experienced that can take some considerable time ... probing...."

Everyone else at breakfast: *various indescribable sounds, possibly onomatopoeic.*

Brian Smith: "Alan Dorey hasn't got what it takes any more. Alan Dorey won't be BSFA chairman much longer. The bar's been open an hour and Alan Dorey is still drinking ... coffee!"

Brian Parker: "BSFA – they're the famous cassette makers, aren't they, ho ho?"

Alan Dorey: "Did I ever tell you how I was writing SEWAGE FARM WORKERS

ASSOCIATION on the SFWA door at SEACON, and Marion Zimmer Bradley came up behind me and said ‘I suppose this is jest yore British humour’ in a voice of indescribable menace ...?’”

Fan whose name (just like the rest of him) was garbled in the record: “Did you know the Cambridge U. SF Society has a drink called a Bloody Tourist? It’s for offering to tourists: coke and tomato juice. CUSFS members have been known to drink this....”

Greg Pickersgill: “Rob Hansen’s an odd lad. He’s staying with us, to the end of the year at least – goes around humming to himself with this big inane smile, or he’ll be in the upstairs room and go suddenly silent until after a pause he shouts ‘Ouch!’ or ‘Gosh!’ or ‘Wow!’ ...”

Kevin: “Time for the great fannish football match – going to come and watch and take photos of Me?”

Langford: “No.”

Kevin: “*Poot.*”

Greg: “*I’m* not playing. I’m old, tired, ill.”

D. West: “I’m busy lying down.”

Langford: “Oh, hello, Mr, Hansen: I thought you were over there.”

Rob Hansen: “I *am* over there.”

Langford: “Did you notice you can see 28 empty bottles of champagne substitute in the back yard if you stand by the bog window and happen to be over six feet tall ... No, you wouldn’t.”

Rog Peyton: “This is going to be the great Space Invaders game of the year. I’ve spent bloody twenty quid just practising. I tell you, sometimes I wake in the night dreaming of new strategies to zap them all with a single shot....”

Langford: “Ah, hello, Kevin – as *Ansible’s* new football correspondent, do give me a blow-by-blow account of what happened at the football match.”

Kevin: *sound of teeth being reduced to powder.* “We lost.”

Langford: “Ah, hello, Phil – as *Ansible’s* new aerospace correspondent, do give me a blow-by-blow account of Andy Firth’s latest display of mighty home-made orbital rockets on the football field.”

Phil James: “I turned round for half a second and in that time Wernher von Firth’s rocket had fallen over at 45 degrees and gone out. They had to stick it together with Eve Harvey’s sticking-plaster when the fins fell off....”

Langford: “Ah, hello, Rog, there you are again. As *Ansible*’s new Space Invaders correspondent, do give me –”

Peyton: “I bloody lost by bloody ten points! Knocked out in the bloody third round by bloody Neil Hepple! I’ll get him though; he’s got a lovely girlfriend, oh those *hips*, everything’s just right. I’m going to seduce her while he’s busy in the final....”

Eve Harvey, over curry: “I knew someone who had an *ingrowing hair* at the base of his spine and had to have it removed. It’s *far* more painful than it sounds and he couldn’t sit down and the *hole* in him had to be packed with gunge so it could heal slowly from the inside out –”

Kevin, weakly: “Anybody want my Bombay potatoes?”

Langford: “You be careful where you dispose of those potatoes, they’ve got a half-life of 20,000 years and give you ingrowing –”

Hazel: “Never mind.”

Eve to Hazel: “Did you know your husband picked up my husband at Novacon and used him as a battering ram? It ruined his trousers.”

Langford: “This is a contemptible lie, a calumnious imputation, a –”

Pat Charnock: “What did his trousers have to do with it?”

Eve: “Imagine what would happen if somebody picked you up suddenly.”

D. West, falling over: “This proves it!”

Langford: “This proves it?”

D. West: “No. No, you can’t say that. It’s ...
copyrightAstralLeauge1977donotimpingecopyrightortheAstralLeaugewilltake
I am the sole prop-pop-pop-pop oh bloody hell. Owner.”

Eve, overheard in poolroom: “I can’t get the thing out, John!”

John Harvey: “It’s bloody stuck in!”

Rob Jackson: “Actually, they were talking about a jammed coin in the Space

Invaders machine.”

Langford: “Spoilsport.”

Kevin, 4 a.m.: “Now let’s play Finchley Central –”

Harry Bell: “It’s half-past four, Langford, and you’re still making sense. This is not good enough! Hic.”

Langford: “Look, it’s dawn. Time to play Residents and Security Men.”

The Dawn Chorus:

John Brunner, John Brunner, what a drippy old runner
It doesn’t sound much, but the stench is a stunner.
When Fredric Brown took his trousers down
He could shatter all the windows for nine miles round.
Jack Vance, Jack Vance blows holes in his pants
And Disch makes a first-class stink
And Eric Frank Russell had a rectal muscle
That could toot through “Lily The Pink.”

Oh Asimov himself is a man of many parts:
A stinker of a writer and a stinker when he farts.

Stan Eling, over breakfast: “Peter Weston does nothing these days but grow vegetables.”

Helen Eling: “He’s slowly *turning into one*, a swede or a giant cabbage.”

Phil James: “I’ve been reading a book on strange customs in the desert.”

Langford: “What do they do in the desert?”

Phil: “It’s not so much what they do in the desert as what they do with their fingers.”

All: “Eh?”

Phil: “They wipe their greasy fingers on their beards, or on the tentflap. The greasier your tentflap the more hospitable you are....”

Hazel: “Of course, the Tuaregs wipe their fingers on their feet.”

Langford: “Don’t look now, but Jim Barker has just come in wearing an Ellison-style glass hand with one of the fingers up his nose....”

Joe Nicholas: “This is the book, *Karma* by Arsen Darnay. Let me read you the incredibly awful passage about the giant telepathic rabbit.”

Kevin Smith: “Of all the harebrained ideas.”

Pat Charnock: “Here’s a copy of the new Astral League cassette for Terry Hughes. You must tell him *not* to play the *Get Down Jacqui* track anywhere near Jacqueline Lichtenberg –”

Barman, pointedly, to Langford: “I suppose you want a *soft drink* –”

Mr. Pepper: “Who’s written ARNOLD THARG WAS HERE on my roller-towel? How do I get it off, then?”

All, rapidly: “Been a great convention ... goodbye ... goodbye...”

•

A logical interpretation of the above terms and phrases is currently being derived by exhaustive computer analysis. Meanwhile, see Appendix F[ii]; “Mass Psychoses In The Linguistics Department.”

3. Interactive Modal Structuralism

The exosociological team achieved considerably more significant results than the linguistic investigators (see Appendix F[iii], “Relatively Mild Psychoses In The Exosociology Department”) and the following subclasses of ritual activity were isolated:

3.1. The Quiz Game

This is an intellectual struggle between curiously designated teams – in this case “The Peter Weston School Of Gardening” (members of which wore artificial moustaches of a ritual nature, and on their entry performed the ceremonial dance of the goose-step), “Welshfandom: Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch Division” (it was noted that non-Welsh persons laboured under a taboo against the pronouncing of this name in full), “The Astral League” and “L’Academy De La Chronically Effete De La Surbiton”. The holy man presiding over the ceremony puts highly formalized questions to the teams – typical ones generated by our computer from the existing pool of data are “Who wrote Somtow Sucharitkul?”, “Have you ever heard of John Brunner?” and “Is

there *anybody* here from Oregon?” – and in due course ignorance and unbelief are ritually defeated and the prize given to the Welsh team. Further attempts to analyse the full religious significance of the questions and responses are discussed in Appendix F[iv], “Mass Suicide In The Linguistics Department.”

3.2. *The Twenty Questions Game*

Here a concept is chosen, e.g. “A Brian Burgess Pork Pie”, and contestants attempt to deduce its precise nature by asking up to 20 questions to be answered “yes” or “no” only (local terms roughly corresponding to our Altairan phrases “Your warts ooze with mine” and “Your spawn is mildewed”). Evidence of clairvoyance in Sol III natives was noted when the subject Langford, watching this ritual, remarked “I’ll bet they’ll have to guess my hearing aid next.” Instantly a concept-designation card was held up to the audience, and on it was written LANGFORD’S DEAF AID. The Paraphysics Department is investigating – see Appendix A[xxv], “Psi Ability: Possible Causal Links With Beverage Absorption”. A further concept, “Rob Holdstock’s Weapon”, caused embarrassment during the guessing sequence and may have some painful religious significance.

3.3. *Presenting “The Richard E. Geis Memorial Award”*

This involved a convention member, Alan Dorey, asking for votes for this possibly coveted award and in the same breath murmuring “The fix is in for Joe Nicholas.” In due course the native called Joseph M. Nicholas was required to receive his trophy (an ornamental bust carved with great artistic inability, the property of the hotel); he demurred, pretending he was not worthy; there were ritual cries of “Is there anyone here from Pimlico?” and the entity D. West took Nicholas symbolically by the forelock and dragged him to the waiting cameras for the presentation. The trophy was slowly brought down upon the head of J. Nicholas amid much camera-flashing. We have not fully analysed the motives and prestige associated with this award.

3.4. *Charades*

The natives of Sol III have brought the art of mime to a high level of ineptitude, and this was demonstrated in their “charades”. The creature D. West, for example, enacted the phrase *The Fallible Fiend* by first falling over a good deal and subsequently making hideous faces and gibbering at his interlocutors. It later transpired that this formed his entire repertoire of mime, though sometimes it would be interspersed with vicious kicks aimed at some

suitably small and helpless victim (Graham Charnock). We are uncertain of the symbolism by means of which the entity Jean Frost eventually conveyed the phrase “Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid”: in passing we note that when she’d succeeded in doing so, the subject Langford’s wife instructed him to “apologize to Jean Frost for writing that story!”

3.5. Finchley Central

An informal game of skill and strategy wherein several natives sit in a circle uttering in turn the names of London Underground stations which may or may not possess religious or sexual connotations. The first person to say “Finchley Central” wins. To say “Finchley Central” too soon in the game is to lose face and become the object of withering scorn. The as yet unfathomed strategy of this game appears to involve great subtlety, or – to verbalize our alternate hypothesis – no subtlety at all. A variant version, “Heinlein”, substitutes the names of works by the Sol III artist Robert A. Heinlein (whose art involves the making of marks on “paper”, a disposable form of cloth) for those of stations; to win one must say “*The Number Of The Beast –*”. To refrain from saying this is a great point of honour among natives.

3.6. Polymorphous Perverse Activities

We merely record pool, drinking beer, darts, drinking gin, football, drinking whisky, rocketry, drinking rum, watching illicitly made recordings of *Demon with a Glass Hand* and *The Peter Weston SEACON Show* (edited version, without Peter Weston), drinking lager, conversing (see section 2), drinking water to wash down aspirins (the only use of this unclean fluid permitted by the religion of “British fans”) and playing Space Invaders – a species of war game not likely to promote good relations between Terrestrials and we natives of Altair 5. For notes on the beverages mentioned above please see the 500-page Appendix A[i], “Drinking: Possible Causal Links With Beverage Absorption”.

4. Conclusions

4.1.

The planet is unfit for colonization.

4.2.

Study of behavioural patterns at Silicon 4 suggests that we should proceed with caution, since several alien infiltrators are obviously conducting

investigations similar to our own. The most blatant of these is the entity D. West, whose aspect and activity most closely resembles that of the native form of we Toads of Altair 5.

4.3.

No rational reason for the natives' attendance at these enfeebling and soul-destroying "conventions" can be advanced.

4.4.

Very much more research is needed. See especially the whole of Appendix A, "C₂H₅OH For Fun And Profit".

4.5.

The author of this paper therefore requests permission to conduct further investigations at Silicon 5, Silicon 6, Silicon 7, Silicon 8, Silicon 9 and Silicon 10, to begin with.

Glossary

THE ASTRAL LEAGUE: A misprint.

BSFA: British Science Fiction Association; Bromley Silent Farting Association; Brian Stableford Fanzine Article.

FINCHLEY CENTRAL: Found on the Northern Line between West Finchley (to the north) and East Finchley (to the south).

THE FLATULENT SF AUTHORS' SONG: by Nick Lowe, who is not responsible.

THE PETER WESTON SEACON '79 SHOW: see Peter Weston, now to be found on the BBC's cutting-room floor.

PIMLICO: London district now largely inhabited by Joseph Nicholas.

SURBITON: London district notorious for pub meetings of that almost famous fan group the Surrey Limpwrists.

The last two Glossary entries are long outdated.

The Novacon Records Novacon 11, Birmingham, November 1981

This was written for Malcolm Edwards's legendary fanzine Tappen, which had been running a series of fans' Desert Island Discs selections....

To write the one true convention report you must evoke the stark reality of it all – hypnotically regress yourself to that pre-civilized state of mind, and call the Convention Spirit from the vasty deep. I concentrate on the trigger-words: *Novacon 11 ... Royal Angus Hotel ... Angst ... Paracetamol...* Shimmering and numinous, the vision of Novacon takes form. I have only to re-enter this vision, relive the convention –

– and once again I find myself too plastered to write a report. There still seem to be a few bugs in this method. Besides, what new things can you say about a Novacon? Secretly I am hurt that Edwards lumbered me with this arid topic instead of letting me list the eight favourite records I'd take with me to a desert island. Nay, stare not so: we deaf fans have record collections too. We merely fail to play them very often. Or at all.

Here's the box, covered in those filthy cobwebs that look so much less realistic than the exquisite draperies of web in horror films. Here are the records, and I know right away which ones would follow me to the remotest corners of the South Seas: all eleven of the damned things, plus five flexible free-gift discs which don't really count. Each time I've moved house I hoped to lose them in transit, but no: they pursue me with the inexorability of the Ruum in that skiffy story, mocking my inability to hear them or – since Hazel dropped the turntable – to play them. Actually I can't even remember what they are ... let's have a look.

Ah. Alone among what Martin Hoare would call the floppy discs, *The PRACTICAL ELECTRONICS Record of Electronic Sounds and Effects* (“You are now about to hear a Pure Tone at One Thou-sand Cycles”) represents a one-time interest. In those long-gone days I built my own turntable out of

endless little bits, not suspecting what fate the future held for it. I think I even had vast audio-visual plans based on teaching myself to recognize musical notes on the oscilloscope screen. Now, old and tired, I leave all this media stuff to John Collick. Or try to: it seems unfair that the second appearance of our “Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid” slide show, at Novacon, should have caused even more worry than the first. Were we really expected to perform to the bleary, jaded, and above all nonexistent audience of 10am on Sunday? “Yes. Well, maybe 10:30. Well, suppose we schedule it for 10:30 and you start late ...” Were there enough carousels for all the slides? “Yes.” “No.” “Maybe ...” Would J. Collick go into meltdown as his fevered brain envisaged slides springing apart to jam the projector, a maddened yet nonexistent crowd attacking him in a frenzy of boredom, the script catching fire, the hotel collapsing? At least the hotel failed to collapse, being cunningly held up by that off-centre pillar in the con hall – whose alarming asymmetry always suggests the N.I.C.E. and their sinister Objective Room. Possibly this hotel too is designed to strip away the decent values beloved by C.S. Lewis: quite likely, really, when you consider the end results.

At last the not very describable “Sex Pirates” performance was over; I’d barely had time to murmur “Never again” when Naveed Khan confronted me and said, “Good stuff, bwana.” (He has been addressing me thus ever since I accidentally did it to him. This is very demoralizing and all Alan Dorey’s fault.)

“Never again,” I said feebly.

“In two weeks’ time at Cymrucon,” he told me firmly.

The strangled sound emanating from my throat bore a surprising resemblance to Effect No. 2, Square Wave At Four Hundred Cycles.

Next from the box are a couple of floppy Reader’s Digest Free Audition Discs, parental discards. I wonder what’s on them? If there were any Sinatra stuff it would conveniently lead me to GoH Bob Shaw’s bet with Rog Peyton. Handing over six Sinatra biographies, Bob wagered that the whole batch couldn’t be auctioned for more than a quid. “Done,” cried Rog, only to find the books were in Japanese. Rallying his forces with many a quip (“Bram Stokes has sold his shop ... to the Inland Revenue”), he made an all-out assault on the bemused audience and – as anyone might have expected – ended up with more than ten pounds for six utterly unreadable books.

Hurling the Reader's Digest Free Audition Copies aside, I suddenly remember the *Omni Book of the Future* Free Audition Copies. Andie Burland was handing these out dispiritedly, explaining between times that her girlfriend Jane had been kept from Novacon by an urgent need to take the budgie to the vet. All the long Novacon lounge was littered with *BotF* samples discarded by bored fans (Greg Pickersgill): I took tighter hold of my own copy when I found the almost smiling face of Langford inside, listed as a contributing editor. "Why did they keep it as a surprise till now?" I wondered. "Nobody ever told me I was a contributing editor."

"Nothing would surprise me about this thing," said Andie wearily.

But I was prancing towards the bar shouting "Fame! Power! Money!" I bought people drinks for several seconds, and the Glasgow Bob Shaw made up a badge from a cut-out Langford photo, and Hazel insisted on wearing it. Andie, slightly miffed by this desecration, would not be mollified until provided with a companion badge showing contrib. ed. Bernard Dixon. It takes all sorts. (I am reliably informed that there is no picture of David Bowie in the *BotF*, Dixon being but a second choice.)

Still two *Private Eye* floppies left. *Teach Yourself Heath* is the sort of educational disc you do not need to cope with "University Challenge", where the long-undefeated Surrey Limpwrists crashed to ruin before (a) some dark-horse team of neofans, and (b) hard questions like "Who wrote *The Shadow of the Torturer*?" or "What does the R in Gordon R. Dickson stand for?" To me, Rupert Bear will never seem the same again. Roz Kaveney and I sat sneering at the back of the hall, swigging whiskey and intoxicated not so much by that as by our ability to answer all the questions long before the struggling participants. Except when they were too quick on the button. "In which book did –" *Bzzzzt!* "The precognitive Joseph Nicholas will now answer my uncompleted question ..." "Er um well ..."

Unable to bear very much of this reality, I presently slipped away – forgetful of the whiskey bottle. Some time later, an infinitely pathetic figure might have been seen crawling about the con hall wailing, "It was *there*, I know it was there ..." Kindly hands restored the bottle to me just before an embarrassed Stan Eling could page it over the hotel tannoy and bring down the wrath of corkage upon us all.

Hullo Sailor: ah, another *Private Eye* freebie, and sure enough I did go out

one night to the Gaylord Indian restaurant, there to find to my mild alarm that Roz knew the plots of *all* the obscure detective stories I drivelled on about. “You two are on the same wavelength,” said a helpful David Pringle; but I was worrying about the fact that in addition to the incredible amount of trivia in my own mental archives, Roz also seems to have read *everything else*, including millions of morally sound and socially triffic works whose mere mention causes me a dull pain in the temples. Must scan that copy of *General Relativity: An Einstein Centenary Survey* (not available on record) and gain some kind of moral advantage. Real soon now. If I can understand it. Sometimes I wake up in the morning firmly convinced I’m still essentially a fifteen-year-old and that all these hard subjects are *Strictly For Grown-Ups*, the title of a Paddy Roberts EP which once boosted my ego by the clarity of the singing: I could actually hear all the words. This was not true of Bob Shaw’s Novacon speech. Normally I can follow him by sitting right at the front if not slightly more so, leaning forward with ears ludicrously cupped, and screwing up my eyes (which for some reason seems to help), but this year time and chance and the Novacon PA system combined to defeat me.

The Roberts title suggests a vague and spurious naughtiness which may or may not have been present at the great Pickersgill Halloween Party, where (according to this notebook) somebody called Pringle was being fingered by somebody called Atkinson even as somebody called Edwards was fingering Chris Donaldson, now the spouse of famous Novacon chairman Paul Oldroyd, who failed to comment. Is “fingering”, in this notebook’s context, an euphemism? Answers on a plain envelope, please, to me c/o *Tappen*. The Pickersgill bash was also noted for ruthless bouncing of cretins as the night wore on – or so I am informed by several reliable cretins – which brings me neatly to the private party that again disposed of my occasional dreams of fame and power. Through its open door I caught a glimpse of Andrew Stephenson; I waved; he waved; our two hearts beat as one; but as I moved forward there arose an obstacle called Marsha Jones who firmly closed the door in my face. Relegated to mere cretindom, I slunk away.

Now this record, Ravel’s *Bolero*, still rouses a feeling of real guilt. I borrowed it, you see, back at college – inflamed by these descriptions of its compulsive and maddening beat, descriptions possibly written by Robert A. Heinlein. The actual sonic experience was something else again, muffled and fuzzy and not all that dissimilar to Practical Electronics Effect No. 4:

Unfiltered White Noise. Perhaps it isn't a very good recording; perhaps, like the electricians of the Royal Angus, I never managed to build a very good amplifier. (Some people say that with a claimed 5-watt output, even I shouldn't have had to press my ear against the speaker to hear anything at all. Can this be true?) At Novacon I naturally avoided the compulsive, maddening beat of the disco – which in any case tends to silt up inside the famous hearing aid, filling it with waste noise which needs to be cleaned out after even a short exposure. Must give that record back sometime: if only I could remember who lent it to me....

Here are some LPs, that great technical innovation foretold in 1939 by James Joyce. (This feeble attempt at cultural credence results from the fact that like everyone else I've looked at the first and last pages of *Finnegans Wake* – if only to check that Joyce lifted at least one narrative cliché from *Dhalgren* – and sure enough, the last sentence but three reads “Lps.” This proves it.) *Marty* is inevitably a compilation of Marty Feldman sketches, leading subtly enough into Lisa Tuttle's firm refusal to repeat her Big-Mouthed Frog impersonation – the talk of this year's Milford conference. Oh, those rolling eyes, that almost dislocated jaw! It is as well that Lisa remembered the vows of marriage before reiterating such blandishments.

In similar vein we have a couple of *Monty Python* records, one of which I was awarded for the unlikely achievement of second-best performance in a sponsored Silly Walk from St John's to Magdalen College (first prize being voted to the six-foot-nine policeman who had paced this dubious procession along the High). I was the one on the left whose academic dress was supplemented with sunglasses and a smallish stuffed crocodile. Alas, despite the genuine John Cleese signature on that particular record, the whole thing now leaves a faintly rancid taste in the mouth: pleasant sums may possibly have reached the charity in question, but this and similar events proved to have been organized by a tedious student called Nick Field-Johnson for the very tedious purpose of advancing his political career. Once he'd achieved notoriety and a position on the legendary Oxford Union Library Committee, all such Pythonesque activity ceased. I do not draw any fannish parallels.

Meanwhile, prime sillywalker D. West failed to do anything memorable this year. “You know nothing about anything,” he told up-and-coming fan Phil Palmer, who happily added these words to his collection of such dicta as “You're quite sensible really” (D. Langford, or so Phil insists at the most

embarrassing moments).

But it was time for incorruptible Langford, Bell and Nicholas to lock themselves away in heady isolation – cf. this record of Hubert Gregg as Jerome K. Jerome reading *Three Men in a Boat*, another one I’ve never played. It was time to count ballots for the Nova Award. Behind the closed doors, Joseph unbelievably read out the foolish choices of each voter while I totted up points on a cleverly provided calculator and Harry did his famous Harry Bell impersonation. The victories of a certain fanzine and its lady-fanwriter-in-residence will no doubt be chronicled at great length elsewhere, but just for the record I’ll mention that Pete Lyon snaffled the fanartist category. Next year, Joe and Harry are replaced on the Nova committee by dynamic new talent Chris Atkinson and dynamic old talent Greg Pickersgill: the secret room will no doubt echo to cries of “Have some fudge before you start counting,” and “Bloody hell, this cretin’s voted wrong...”

At this point the record collection gets a mite surreal. Who will believe that I have here the second and third sides (only – possibly the first side covered two sides?) of the Trinity Choir in *Processional to Calgary*? This is the real thing, I tell you, “His Master’s Voice” 78 rpm with that dyspeptic dog wondering how to get the fudge out of the gramophone horn, and sleeve ads for The Greatest Advance Ever Made In The Science Of Musical Reproduction, endorsed by Sir Edward Elgar, OM – something to do with the improved handle on the side of the pictured player, it would seem. This might reflect the gorgeous ceremony of religion (cf. Bob Shaw’s home-made stained glass windows in the art show – no joke, I had to carry one back home for forgetful buyer Garry Kilworth), but somehow I imagine a certain grim and Calgaroid austerity, as when John Brunner proposed with a straight face that one possible venue for his 1984 British Eurocon might be an out-of-season holiday camp. Big Butlin Is Watching You.

Ah! Moon of my Delight, I very probably overheard the swiftly-consoled Rob Holdstock saying to someone, though not to Katie Davies, who this year favoured us with a Servalan outfit displaying an interesting yet somehow anaphrodisiac cleavage at lower rear. Rob, meanwhile, pretended great outrage at having been quoted in *Ansible* yet again on the subject of his all-encompassing love life. I can’t think why this happens to him. With some fervour he explained *why* you should paste a white dot on the dashboard of your car. It seems that you then take some unsuspecting lady on a country

drive, and she asks why you have this bloody silly white dot on the dashboard of your car, and you come back with a spiel about how it stands for *cleanliness* and *purity*, and after many more highly formalized moves in what we shall call Holdstock's Gambit Declined you are in a position to ask, "Are you a virgin?"

Rob didn't say what happened after that.

Oh, sorry: *Ah! Moon of my Delight* (Tudor Davies, whoever he may be) is another inexplicable 78, and on the flip side we have *On Wings of Song* from the same chap. Manifestly this should have won a Hugo.

Next comes a bit of slapstick, for my third and last 78 is nothing less than the celebrated Goon Disc *My September Love*, whereon "Miss Freda Thing" – a thinly disguised Jackie Lichtenberg – attempts high notes only to be pitilessly interrupted by the famous Eccles, a thickly disguised Chris Priest. (Chris's anarchic prowess was also well shown by his crashing of a Novacon games machine – whose screen threw up endless rows of incomprehensible text, like an automated Barry Malzberg.)

Merely recalling the scratchy screeching of this disc is enough to bring on a nosebleed, latest in the new succession of Langford leakages which began literally over breakfast on Novacon Monday. That particular attack was dealt with by ever-sympathetic Arnold Akien, who seized my nose in the crushing grip known only to third-stage initiates of John Collick's obscure Oriental discipline Clint Eastwu. The ensuing scenes are better not discussed, like this Benny Hill single (bloody hell, Benny Hill!) which my parents once acquired by the simple process of presenting a record token and then advising their bewildered son what to spend it on.

Novacon finished on the usual note of gentle euphoria, enlivened by that lad Collick's vivid account of the lost video epic *Bollardes*, occasionally based on 2001. "You see this primitive D. West emerging from the sewers, and in the road there's this Significant black bollard ... and he *touches* it and *strokes* it and *fondles* it in ecstasy, and then he starts to evolve.... And the vasectomy scene, that was good, he's chained to a lamp-post and this woman comes at him with a sickle. I wanted just a tasteful trickle of blood on the ground, but everyone thought that was too tame and instead this great mound of stuff comes splattering to the ground, meat and bits of plastic and disgusting things all covered in tomato sauce, heaps and heaps of it. And he does the Astral

Pole to the tune of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.... In the ending he's an aged aged man in the hotel room just like *2001*, eating chips, and we got him to *take his teeth out* for the last scene where he's lying there and the mysterious Black Bollard appears at the foot of the bed, and painfully he reaches out his withered hand to it and gasps, 'Fuck off ...'”

Perhaps inspired by this, by Jean Colique's forthcoming video project of a fannish *Christmas Carol*, and by the shooting at Novacon of *Clinto* (A Japanese Noh Play, featuring many stylized gestures such as the pushing of cigarettes into Joseph's mouth and the grinding of a Collick boot on his instep), several other fans muttered of audiovisual projects. Could this be the end of fanzines as we know them? Could this be how we crowd stuff like *Superman II* off the ballot for the BSFA Award (Dramatic Presentation category)? One shudders at the thought.

One shudders, too, at the end of each Novacon, remembering the horrors that must inevitably follow it on the calendar. Yes, the last of my desert-island collection to go back in the box is indeed Marty Feldman singing *Christmas is a Joyous Time of Year*. Up the creaky steps once more, to thrust this unmusical assortment away for another five years, or ten.... The advantage of a nice stable record collection like mine is that whenever the time comes to go through it again, you can be certain of getting the mixture as before. Just like Novacon, really.

It should perhaps be mentioned that Malcolm Edwards's Tappen (in which this was to appear) and Chris Atkinson (then Mr Edwards's partner and a connoisseur of mind-altering fudge) won the Nova Awards for best fanzine and best fanwriter respectively at the 1981 Novacon misrepresented above.

Back in the Jug Agane Oxcon (Unicon), Oxford, August 1984

1984 marks the tenth anniversary of my Oxford finals, of blowing up portions of Brasenose College during the summer ball, and of various too-hideous-to-relate consequences resulting from this vile naughtiness. “The lad shows spirit,” said the Ministry of Defence and happily loosed me on the nuclear nasties of AWRE, little suspecting that 1984 would also see my rude exposé of, ahem, *somewhere not at all like AWRE in The Leaky Establishment....* Ah, what a cornucopia of nostalgic recollection. How could I fail to spend the August bank holiday weekend at Oxcon 84? Besides, we didn’t have enough money to make it up north for Silicon, chiz chiz chiz.

The damp, miasmal city was the same as ever. There were the same old bookshops (but Thornton’s, whose upstairs layout resembles the library in *The Name of the Rose*, has had all its upper floors condemned: you have to decide what book you want, and the manager ropes himself to a couple of assistants before braving the dangerous North Stairs in search of it). The same coachloads of Japanese tourists with camera lenses longer than themselves, marching in highly trained squads from landmark to landmark, sixty shutters clicking simultaneously at the guide’s crisp command. The same old Turf Tavern, famous for being hidden down obscure and unknown back alleys, and more bulgingly crowded than ever with tourists who’d read about its legendary obscurity in their guidebooks. And beyond all this, a particularly soggy bit of Oxford concerning which even the guidebooks are discreetly silent: St Catherine’s College, venue of the con.

St Catz, Hazel tells me, regularly appears in books illustrating Great Low Points of Sixties Architecture. It’s a sprawl of damp-stained concrete, tinted glass (full-length curtains are obligatory along a whole wall of each bedroom) and, inside, walls and floors of naked brick. The most striking bit is a towering conversation-piece suggesting a cross between a guillotine and an egg slicer, apparently a specimen of High Art. Space-fillers at ground level include weird little parallel grids of many five foot walls alternating with

five-foot hedges, with just enough room to walk on the pointless paths between. I only visited the place a few times in the old days, most significantly when by dead of night a team of BNC students nicked a gigantic water-buffalo (front end only), and – for what at the time seemed like excellent reasons – hung it on the gate of the Museum of the History of Science in Broad Street.

Of course a con doesn't need a tasteful venue of great architectural merit, merely some fans and a bar. Arriving on Friday afternoon, the first thing we discovered was that in a daring and unparalleled feat of negotiation, chairman Hugh Mascetti had arranged for the bar at St Catz to keep normal pub hours. "It's all David S. Power's fault," Hugh explained carefully. "Everything that goes wrong is his fault. The Committee agreed it by vote." (Oxford has *certainly* changed since my day. You used not to be able to cause widespread screaming, retching and fainting merely by intoning in a crowded bar the runes "David S. Power.") Awestruck audiences were later seen to gape and boggle as speakers like Brian (Guest of Honour) Aldiss and yours truly held forth in the con-hall with no throat lubricant but a mug of coffee.

An added joy was that the college, invited to provide snacks, had offered a choice of (a) sit-down meals to be booked and paid for several weeks in advance, the number of persons eating to be previously notified in writing and sworn to by the entire Committee in the presence of a Commissioner for Oaths, or (b) nothing. Several Oxcon members whom I later interviewed in the Radcliffe Infirmary following their college breakfast confirmed that (b) had been the right choice. But whenever one crept off for an emergency transfusion of pub grub, the enjoyment was poisoned by the knowledge that one was wasting the rare, coveted Oxcon opening hours....

Waiting with Hazel for the magic time 6:30pm and scribbling the notes for a talk (having been lured into giving a reading from my latest masterpiece, I found that as a special surprise the Committee had billed my bit as a lecture), we met Famous Monster of Fandom Ken Lake, who for the first time had lured his wife Jan to a con. She and Hazel developed a vein of conversation about the weirdness of fannish husbands which said menfolk found disconcerting, if not seditious. Wits jolted by the three-day crash initiation, Jan later admitted that fans were actually human and fun – though on mature reflection after Oxcon, this was amended to merely "fun".

Of course there was fun, though with a small con rattling round in a big college like a mere few pints inside Martin Hoare, the fun was sometimes in odd places. Several people opined that it might have been an idea to squeeze everything into the bar area and environs, and forget the classy lecture hall located in that part of St Catz known as the Distance. The most crowded spot during the long, dead, barless hours was often the computer room, where one could peer over people's shoulders watching them make wallies of themselves, while marvelling at the collection of several hundred £5-£15 game cassettes owned by people who "never buy hardbacks because they're too expensive." Other spectator sports included Jan Lake loosing a fearful tirade at her hubby for wearing his naff kaftan come Fancy Dress time; a determined fan group's efforts to survive the afternoon on endless pints of beer from lunchtime (left in the open outside the bar, these reserves made excellent fly-traps); famous TV star Mike "Resistance is useless!" Cule summarizing the entire plot of *V* in 90 seconds including voice impersonations and dramatic gestures; envious tooth-gnashing at the bottle of whisky I'd thoughtfully secreted in my bag; Ken Slater's impassioned book-room lecture on *Why Interzone Is The Wrong Size*; random contingents of filthy pros including Chris Priest, Lisa Tuttle and Bob Sheckley (who like Frank Herbert had shaved off his facial hair, and like Rob Holdstock didn't get front-page coverage of the event in *Locus*); and, so I am reliably led to believe, a programme.

In the lecture theatre, people were trying to raise laughs by talking about the most unpromising subjects: me on the everyday routine of civil service life ("so during the tea break he came sprinting past me with the important bit of Polaris wrapped in his lab-coat and it occurred to me that by merely sticking out my foot I could trip him and ..."), Niall Ross on black holes, Hugh Mascetti on guns and blasting the shit out of anything that moves, and Brian Aldiss on Brian Aldiss. Brian was also much in evidence at the auction, making crazed bids to keep certain editions of his books from the light of day – tearing them up to enormous public acclaim – making further and even more crazed bids when a sadistic Brian Ameringen started auctioning the bits....

"Look at *this* blurb," said the wounded GoH afterwards, flinging a dearly bought copy of *The Eighty-Minute Hour* at a passing Langford. "The buggers declared a finish to my career. 'You may have to wait until 2001 to read a

better Aldiss. But don't count on it.' Bloody insulting. It's not as bad, though, as what they put on *The Male Response*: 'Every woman in the city was his!' And did you see that thing I tore from limb to limb, that pathetic emaciated object, *All About Venus*, all that was left of *Farewell Fantastic Venus* when those infant-butchers at Dell had finished with it...."

So it went: charades, pool, a particularly tortuous Astral League initiation session with only a mop available as the ritual pole, long treks across uncharted Oxford to battle the thronging tourists for such scraps of food as might remain in far-off restaurants, a Business Meeting at which the black spot was handed on to a prospective Camcon in (guess where)....

It was all pretty much OK, but despite heroic feats of booze-smuggling the bar problem was a severe blow – not because fans want to spend the whole time getting pissed ("Speak for yourself!" cries the distant voice of Martin Hoare) but because those empty periods left Oxcon with no compelling focal point for the key activities of Sitting, Nattering, and Committing Character Assassination. When on Saturday afternoon it all got too much, I must confess the Langfords sneaked furtively off to have some rarefied fun in Oxford's innumerable bookshops until the evening came. This was not as extreme a gesture as that of Chris Suslowicz, who went away to Bisley for his Sunday treat and shot things.

As a con it may have been a bit so-and-so; as a weekend in wonderful Oxford with interludes of convention fun, it was jolly triffic. Besides, any event at which I sell out of copies of *The Leaky Establishment* (plug, plug) must be good. Except of course for the unlucky buyers.

Next year ... Camcon or Silicon. Which shall it be, Passworthy? *Which shall it be?*

Mexicon Jigsaw

Mexicon 2, Birmingham, February 1986

All you need do to win one of a galaxy of colossal star prizes is to rearrange these pieces in order, so that they form a coherent picture of Mexicon 2. Winning entries will be judged by their closeness to the definitive version, as unanimously decided by a hand-picked panel of Michael Ashley, Joy Hibbert and Ken Lake. First prize: a copy of the next *This Never Happens [the fanzine where this piece first appeared]*, to be read during a luxurious weekend for one in the privacy of your own bathroom. Second prize: two, er, shop-soiled jokes from old Langford fanzines. The editors' indecision is final.

1.

This is like Nick Lowe's brain-rupturing challenges of SF ability to improvise *in extremis*. "You are on a Saturday panel beginning shortly after dawn. Having been instructed that Neil Gaiman is chairing it, you have made no notes whatever about Science Fiction's Stupid Ideas. Little do you know that Neil, David Garnett and William Gibson have been told Dave Langford is in the chair! A microphone is thrust in your direction. As the convention hall slowly spins before you and turns black, all you can remember is an old cartoon of a banquet seating plan. **TOP TABLE. SEA OF HOSTILE FACES ...**"

2.

Nobody ever explains why the con's overall symbol is a not particularly Mexican cuttlefish. Why is a cuttlefish like written SF?

- (a) Both have a surface fishiness and a hard core.
- (b) Cuttlefish like fresh water the way SF hacks like the mainstream.

(c) Tentacles are a vital part of their iconography.

(d) Whether thrust between the bars or lining the floor, both are used in budgie's cages.

3.

Interesting Mexican diseases: John Clute's cold, in keeping with the dominant ideology, becomes *everyone's* cold but especially mine. Wandering gastric 'flu interrupts the course of true love as Dave Bridges and Linda Blanchard (United At Last!) alternate their days of groaning on a hotel bed of pain. Hazel traces her morning desiccation to heating pipes cunningly placed to send a deadly all-night sirocco up her nose. Martin Hoare has hurt his knee and never makes it to Birmingham at all: rumours escalate round the con until a Novacon ex-chairman who shall be nameless asks, "Is it *true* about Martin coming home blind drunk and falling over Katie and breaking both his legs?" (Martin, unknown to us all, lies in the Royal Berks Hospital with Warfarin anticoagulant trickling through his veins. By the time we visit him, even he is bored with jokes about rats and clots.) On Sunday the hotel helps fans appreciate the joys of hypothermia by its witty old Novacon trick of turning off the heating. We leave early, in a haze of germs: the 1815 to Reading is later dubbed the Plague Train and for days is decontaminated in shifts by biowar experts from British Rail Travellers' Fare.

4.

Greg Pickersgill, "fandom's answer to Sotheby's", has a fanzine auction technique all his own. Flogging good stuff bores him: "Some issues of *Mainstream* here." Audience, excited: "Which ones, which ones?" Tossing the potential complication aside, Greg seizes on a run of Pete Presford fanzines. "Now this is a truly amazing example of how to produce a highly ambitious magazine of fanwriting, fiction, and poetry ... *very badly*. You would not believe the heights of ineptitude scaled by Presford in this sustained, matchless performance which may be unique in fandom as we know it," etc. etc. Nobody buys them.

5.

Euphemisms of Mexican. When a fan is inclined a few ethereal degrees from the true vertical, and tends to stare happily past your left ear at the coruscating lights of infinity (we do not mention Phil Palmer, we do not mention Bill Gibson), the full and unanswerable response to your curiously raised eyebrow is, “I’ve ... been in ... Ted White’s room.”

Ted White spends a lot of time in Ted White’s room.

6.

This can’t be happening. I stopped entering quizzes years ago. “Brain of Mexican”, indeed. The luckless finalists (Davies, Edwards, Headlong, Illingworth, Langford, Mullan, Scott, Wareham) huddle in the con-hall doorway and say rude things about Kevin Williams. Kev’s semi-impossible qualifying test involves spotting hordes of SF lines (several of them not from Jack Vance stories) assembled into a patchwork of plagiarism. All the most hauntingly elusive phrases prove to be spurious Williams insertions – bits of literary Polyfilla. There is no justice.

7.

Chris Priest looks a little strained. Leigh Kennedy looks a little strained. For only the second time in recent memory, Leigh (live-in client of the mighty Priest literary agency) is in the same room as Lisa Tuttle.

Man-mountain book dealer Jim Goddard, who’s lately switched his hair-dye colour to black, injects good cheer: “Gosh Chris, I think Leigh’s really wonderful.”

“Er, that’s nice, Jim.”

“No, I mean *really* wonderful, really.”

“Er, yes Jim.”

“No, *really*, I *really* mean ...”

What does he really mean?

8.

“Er,” I say compellingly, everyone having utterly run out of words some 45 seconds into the panel. “Er, you can get things you might call ‘stupid ideas’ even in rather good books.” In an feeble attempt at controversy I quibble with the description of lethal computer programs in chapter three of *Count Zero*. (If it takes sixteen countem sixteen seconds for the dreaded “black ice” to “eat into your nervous system” and stop your heart, a simple dead-man switch would presumably offer complete protection.) A savage argument fails to develop. “Uh,” ripostes the master of cyberpunk, and we all remember from our SF reading that “Uh” is American for “Er”. “Uh, I never thought of that ... don’t know how I’d get round that ...” He sinks into a tortured, forty-minute reverie.

I feel extremely guilty and reprehensible.

Afterwards, Bill heads rapidly for Ted White’s room.

9.

Very late Saturday night, Geoff Ryman and Rachel Pollack announce their life-enhancing Celibacy Training Programme. Their strength is as the strength of ten because their parts are pure. Fans try hard to repeat such catchy slogans as “Celibacy Liberates” twenty times in quick succession. After several pints of resolute refusal to contemplate all this, I decide there are things with which I was not meant to stop meddling.

10.

Behind me I overhear a low, insinuating whisper. “A hundred and fifteen thousand words!”

John Clute is dribbling slightly, caught as though by the gaze of a cobra. Chris Priest leans closer: “And don’t forget the *thesaurus*.” A shiver of potent emotion passes through JC’s coryza-racked frame. He is a man visibly weakening.

This is complicated. The week before, Chris and I accidentally became dealers for an exceedingly expensive word processor. We wanted to play with it: by careful misdirection we steered the saleswoman away from the realization that we were mere *authors*. Authors pay £425 a go, plus VAT.

Dealers get shop demonstration copies for a nominal sum. Nudge, nudge.

Chris now hopes to make a few bob by actually *being* a dealer, unerringly picking a logophile victim whose weak spot is the built-in thesaurus and spelling-check dictionary. “A hundred and fifteen thousand words ...”

From Clute, a low and lustful moan.

11.

I find Hazel in a corridor, looking fraught. “Roz Kaveney has just spent half an hour telling me all about her emotional problems with her teenage masochist girlfriend. She makes me feel horribly boringly normal. I can’t cope....”

Perhaps there is something in celibacy after all, for other people.

12.

In a searing poll whose results I largely forget, the Nigel Richardson Award for the fan one would most like to see in mini-skirt and suspenders goes by a landslide to slinky, sensuous Ashley Watkins, with runners-up Nigel Richardson, Geoff Ryman and Joy Hibbert.

(True Confession: actually I’ve never fathomed why fishnet stockings and suspenders are supposed to be sexy. Some hangover from days when any legwear less redoubtable than a half-inch barrier of woolly barbed wire automatically spelt wantonness?)

The lady who actually is wearing the prescribed get-up proves to be one of the group of Hitch-Hiker fans ... “towellies”, as Alex Stewart enthusiastically calls them in a fan panel, with sundry comments like “If it wasn’t for you lot this con would be at the Strathallan Hotel!” (Mexicon 2 has been relocated from the Strathallan for confused reasons, following a Hitcher convention.) Waves of spontaneous towelled indignation erupt from the audience. The debacle is as usual handled by G. Pickersgill, his personality in no way attenuated by being at the back of the hall without a microphone.

As the panel fizzles, Alex fades hastily away to the bar. There, ashen-faced and trembling, he is heard to say “Of course that was just a *ploy*, you know,

to liven up the discussion....”

13.

Great moments in Mexican food. Friday night: Hazel and I feel like (a) being alone; (b) not venturing into blizzard-ridden Birmingham. We madly escape into the expensive hotel restaurant, leaving a thwarted Arnold Akien to the horrors of cheap convention snacks resembling special effects from a splatter movie. Saturday: same feeling, same procedure, but Arnold has spent the day arranging a second mortgage and tags along. I tuck into a succulent piece of dripping red, rare Carvery meat. I don't think you're supposed to cook pork like this. Sunday: the convention lunch is the Living Slime That Ate Manhattan, on rice. Fans trained in forensic analysis deduce this delicacy to contain flour, water, and red and green bits, but are unsuccessful in isolating a taste. Memo: living for a day on soup and alcohol is a less successful cold treatment than I hoped.

14.

On the grubby projection screen, a second piece of jigsaw is revealed, showing ... a tiny arc of what could well be a bald head. The previous wisp of revealed truth, in the bottom left corner, resembles cobwebbed coconut matting. This is another Kev Williams labyrinth to baffle the Mexican Brains of us experimental rats: an identification quiz. Which famous SF personality is bald and looks like a coconut?

Well, you get three chances. “Damon Knight?”

“Bloody hell,” cry feared foes Edwards, Headlong and Illingworth, discovering too late that the first lucky guess has just eliminated half the competitors including them.

I don't remember much more beyond the fiendish Williams's cunning jigsaw of some white-haired person who appears to have a heavy five o'clock shadow. “Um ... Keith Roberts?”

It is Kate Wilhelm.

Nevertheless I am forcibly draped in a poncho saying BRAIN OF MEXICON 2. Sue Hepple, creator of this high-class garment, follows me around

watchfully to make sure I don't take it off. Somehow I end on the fan room floor with the added glory of a silly Mexican sombrero. Linda Pickersgill says things to me. I fail to hear them. Everyone (i.e. Lilian Edwards) asks what my hands are doing underneath the poncho. Fans are not as original as one might wish.

All evening, I nervously avoid Keith Roberts.

15.

Best one-liner from the con newsletter *Cactus Times*, tucked away in a LOST AND FOUND column: "In the small hours of this morning, The Grand Hotel, Birmingham; please return to Toby Roxburgh."

16.

The Harveys are chatting amiably about Lee Montgomerie.

John: "She used to go up to London for the weekend and come back pregnant occasionally."

Eve: "We never *did* find out who was the father of her child."

John: "Did she?"

Clearly this is the ugly face of Café Society Fandom. How glad I am to inhabit the austere and unscandalous world of *Ansible* address lists. Let's see, D. West (though not Ann) has moved to Keighley, Dave Bridges is moving to Texas, Maureen Porter is moving to Folkestone....

17.

Of course, as soon as we left it all started to happen. A final forum for complaints led to great bayings and ululations from one Alison Macdonald (who she?), complaining that the Brain of Mexicon quiz had been foully rigged and slanted so it could only be won by the sort of low person who had in fact won it. Gregory, speaking for the defence, made uncharacteristic use of tact.

Nor we were there when Abi Frost, star of (*inter alia*) the disco floor and

Cactus Times, became very excitable in the bar and in succession asked approximately 85% of chaps at the convention if they would undress her. D. West obliged, though only to the waist. My informant didn't say from which end.

Nor did I witness the salutary incident, sworn to by Dave Wood, in which D. and Hazel Ashworth lovingly turned Joseph upside down (only for Judith to very properly rescue him and lead him away).

On Tuesday we saw the visiting Seattle contingent, Jerry Kaufman and Suzle, who earlier had looked a bit subdued.

“So what did you like best?”

“Definitely Sunday night! That was when it really started living up to the stories we'd heard about British cons!”

The moment my back is turned....

Strange Vibrations Conspiracy '87 (Worldcon), Brighton, August 1987

This was written for Chris Evans's symposium Conspiracy Theories (1987; ebook 2015), collecting various viewpoints on a 1987 British Worldcon troubled by Hubbardian promotion, Scientological minions and enturbulated thetans. See Conspiracy Theories for further context.

The most controversial item on the Conspiracy '87 fan programme was a tendentiously titled panel: "Why Have The Americans Hijacked The Worldcon?" Several spoof versions of the panel name were soon going the rounds, the most durable and most productive of glum nods being, "Why Has L. RON HUBBARD Hijacked The Worldcon?"

How was it that a World SF Convention held in Britain, where Hubbard has never been taken seriously, became so saturated with hype for this essentially minor author? And how, conversely, did the biggest publicity operation ever seen in British SF fall so flat on its face?

Let's go back a few years. I have a rather peculiar relationship with Hubbard's later works: reporting on or reviewing them is somehow never simple. *Battlefield Earth* has a tortuous publishing history, with St Martin's Press (USA) dropping it despite alleged huge sales, and New English Library (UK) taking the very unusual step of cancelling publication after they'd circulated proofs to reviewers. Mildly interesting items for an SF newsletter? When I reported NEL's change of mind in *Ansible*, there were surprisingly strong reactions from people who went on about evil, prejudiced Langford running down a fine book just because he hated Scientology. [\[1\]](#)

"But," I protested, "I carefully didn't say anything about the book's content, because I haven't yet read it..."

"Aha! He admits it!" was the approximate response from one source. "He doesn't even read books before attacking them!"

In due course *Battlefield Earth* crashed through the letter box, and I made a point of reading every word – expecting a fast-moving piece of trashy fun, along the lines of Hubbard’s early stuff. I was deeply disappointed by the glacial pace, the windy vacuity, the bone-rattling clichés, the scientific codswallop, the self-congratulatory “this is *real* SF” introduction, etc. I said as much in a partly humorous, knockabout review: and again there were complaints that this was all a display of wicked anti-Scientological prejudice.

Other negative reviews I’ve written have provoked people to tell me that I’m too “mainstream” to enjoy escapism, too fond of fun to appreciate total humourlessness, or too lowbrow to swing with post-structuralism. Only with Hubbard was my critical integrity at once challenged. (It could be cattily suggested that to some at least of his supporters, Hubbard’s wonderfulness is such an article of faith that no other reaction is possible. [2]) I developed what you might call a mild, informed prejudice: that Hubbard meant trouble.

This was slightly reinforced at the 1984 British Easter SF Convention, when Fred Harris of Author Services Inc (an organization with seemingly limitless funds for the promotion of L. RON HUBBARD) took me very seriously aside and asked searching questions about the depth of my supposed Scientology prejudice ... a strangely off-key thing for a publicist to do. Later, having presumably discovered that that unfavourable Hubbard review was one of the several from which I’d cobbled together my talk for that very convention [3], he actually rang from Los Angeles and insisted on knowing why I hadn’t liked the book. Again, off-key. Trouble?

I didn’t feel worried. *Battlefield Earth* had been such a let-down that (as with a few other authors) I’d already decided I wouldn’t bother reading any future works by Hubbard. No reviews; no trouble.

Until Conspiracy ’87, the 45th World SF Convention....

“Oh God!” I kept hearing fans say as they discovered the pocket programme book – L. RON HUBBARD’s Pocket Programme of the Future, as many insisted on calling it. The sponsored cover picture came from *The Invaders Plan*, first of a posthumous, ten-book Hubbard series. “Image of fascism,” was frequently muttered (a big green fist with a spiked bracelet, clenched around the Earth); but what irritated was that it looked so cheap, so unstylish, a symbol of all that’s old and hackneyed and bad about SF – as opposed to Jim Burns’s lovely and very 1980s Souvenir Book cover. And one couldn’t

get away from this naff thing for the five days of the Worldcon.

A minor irritation, perhaps, but a constant one.

Then there was *L. RON HUBBARD'S* (in very big letters) *Writers of the Future Contest*: a flyer riding with Conspiracy Progress Report 4, five full pages in the infamous pocket programme, an enclosure full of “name” authors poised to dispense wisdom from the best spot in the Dealers’ Room (next to the bar entrance), and posters without number.

Here one’s reactions are more confused, since at first glance it surely must be a good idea to encourage new authors. Yet the young authors were such a tiny part of the scene. We had the omni-dominant banners of HUBBARD and HUBBARD and HUBBARD again, and beneath this holy name the archangels and angels, the thrones and dominations and powers – established living authors who for one reason or another had lent their names and images, and who were endlessly touted as endorsing it all, and somehow through a shimmer of publicity the chief though never stated message seemed to be that they’re endorsing L. RON HUBBARD, good old L. RON HUBBARD himself, grand master of everything, rehabilitated at last! While as for the aspiring writers of the future, the ostensible *raison d’etre* of the whole circus ... amidst all the self-congratulatory glitter and hype they faded to invisibility.

Ah, Langford, you’re just prejudiced. But it’s an ambiguous business. Will the patronage and the established luminaries add lustre to the name of Hubbard; or will that name (hardly in the past an entrée to the topmost ranks of SF, or anywhere else) ultimately diminish those who march under it as well-meaning mercenaries?

Meanwhile, the constant repetition of L. RON HUBBARD all over the convention did somehow chafe. It was a question of taste. Wall-to-wall publicity on this scale (especially for someone we cannot take seriously as a writer) is alien to the frugal British. Perhaps one should grit one’s teeth. It is just the American Way.

After what the fans called L. RON HUBBARD’S Masquerade (at which, I was told by anguished watchers, endless costumes were announced as competing in the category sponsored by New Era and Bridge [\[4\]](#), thanks to L. RON HUBBARD), I met Ross Pavlac. He had chaired the 1982 Chicago Worldcon and had felt pretty bad about the Hubbard crew’s attempts to buy

the whole event for *Battlefield Earth* publicity. He also passed disparaging remarks about similar mega-publicity efforts by Lucasfilms. He had, he said, never seen anything like the Author Services/New Era/L. RON HUBBARD “takeover” (his word) of a convention’s image. He was surprised and dismayed that the British had accepted an operation so much more blatant than the equivalent Author Services performances in America.

Many of the British had also been surprised and dismayed. The irritation level went up another degree or so, but by and large I stayed out of the way: in the fan suite, doing my bonhomous duty as a fan guest. This included listening to an awful lot of rude jokes and bitchy remarks about Writers of the Future and L. RON HUBBARD. The relentless over-publicization had so far succeeded in converting Hubbard from a minor curiosity into a fair-sized annoyance. Great work, Author Services Inc.

Came the Hugo ceremony ... and here my viewpoint is very much more personal. I was nominated for a couple of Hugos, and sat in the front row telling myself I was going to be very cool and calm about it. One shouldn’t take awards *that* seriously. So there I was coated in clammy sweat, twitching a little as spurts of adrenalin hit the bloodstream, forcing myself to breathe from time to time: and suddenly everything halted.

Why was famous SF person Algis Budrys standing up there, droning on about how wonderful it was that that fine fellow Ramsey Campbell had signed up for the next wave of expansion of L. RON HUBBARD’S bloody Writers of the Future? Was he never going to *stop*? Why had the committee let him up there at all?

(A good question; clearly the convention committee had to some extent lost control. [5] It was later asserted that Mr Budrys did promise beforehand *not* to drag in the name of L. RON HUBBARD, nor that of New Era, nor to go on for more than a few sentences. But I believe he has a different version of events.)

It having thus been established that this was L. RON HUBBARD’S Hugo Ceremony, the presentations went on much as usual: except that Algis Budrys’s words of hype had been the last straw for many fans who already felt – with what justice I do not know, since I have no intention of reading it [6] – that the Hugos’ credibility had been damaged by the debated presence of Hubbard’s *Black Genesis* on the novel shortlist. When Gene Wolfe read

out the name of that nominee, large sections of the audience booed. (“Shame on you,” said Wolfe; with, some observers insisted, a twinkle in his eye.)

From a name that fans merely made bitchy jokes about, Author Services Inc had now promoted L. RON HUBBARD to the point where he was openly booed at the Worldcon’s major event. There’s publicity for you.

I suppose I should have smelt a rat when after posing with the other Hugo winners for innumerable photographs right there in the main hall, the word went round about an “official” photo call. Up, up, up; and it was the Skyline Restaurant, with a beaming Fred Harris welcoming us to the New Era party and saying – to me, personally – something about how glad he was that I’d “come in out of the fog at last”. This nearly drove me straight back out again, but I am a fairly polite little fan and tagged along after Brian Aldiss....

Looking round at the saturation level of L. RON HUBBARD publicity in this inner sanctum, Brian said something like, “My God, we’ve just won the L. RON HUBBARD Awards, formerly the Hugos!”

Possibly as an after-effect of the recent adrenalin rush, I thought this excruciatingly funny. So, later, when I’d had a camera pointed at me by some extremely clean-cut young men, I plagiarized the line as a wry parting joke which (I dimly thought) couldn’t possibly give offence, even here. The effect was curiously disturbing. The former smiles became fixed and glassy, the local temperature seemed to drop several degrees, and I was told in very level tones to “Take it easy ... take it easy ... have a nice party.”

After I’d left, it occurred to me that I couldn’t imagine getting anything like that reaction by making a joke (even a much ruder one) about any other author at a party run by any other publisher I know. Again: there *is* something different about the L. RON HUBBARD crowd. The tiniest snigger at any of their doings merely indicates that the person responsible is suspect – a troublemaker.

Of course I may be exaggerating minutiae observed in the feverish aftermath of the Hugo presentations. But the little ratchet of tension and irritation had clicked up another notch ... especially when the world came back into clear focus and I started to feel I’d been manipulated. The “official photo call” ruse had sucked up my own small moment of glory into that omnipresent publicity machine.

By the final day, Monday, it seemed that a large number of fans had become similarly, cumulatively bothered by the grotesque scale of the L. RON HUBBARD promotions. They were still joking, but with much nastier overtones. Algis Budrys had helped tip the balance, with his tedious remarks usurping prime time at the Convention's "central event". Yes, I actually heard the phrases "central event" and "major event" in this context, from fans whose normal reaction to the Hugos is a giggle. Annoyance has reached a remarkable level when it overcomes the British pose of Total Cool about such things. American fans and professionals were likewise muttering in corners. Appalling anecdotes were swapped ("Did you know that when X was President of SFWA he got a call from Author Services Inc asking how much it would cost to buy L. RON HUBBARD a SFWA Grand Master award?"): however exaggerated or fictitious, they revealed the temper of the convention by the readiness with which they were believed.

I don't think Author Services ever quite comprehended the Brits' snobbish preference for understatement, subtlety and humour in advertising. Certainly their Conspiracy '87 splurge was utterly devoid of all three. Perhaps, in the end, Fred Harris did begin to see what went wrong.

This brings us to the infamous SFWA party on Monday night – with apologies again to mine host, Ian Watson. I have nothing to be proud of. My only excuses for becoming extremely off-sober were release of tension (I'd finally got through my last and most worrying programme item) and trying to keep up with Bob Shaw. It is not my normal practice, however provoked by people droning on about him, to pronounce distinctly and publicly the words "Oh, fuck L. RON HUBBARD!"

This led to a brief and mutually rewarding exchange of hurled drinks with Fred Harris (he had first go, but my glass was *much* fuller), and rather embarrassingly to fulsome congratulations from innumerable fans, authors, editors and agents throughout the rest of the week. Their response might indicate Author Services' popularity, but I think they all missed the point.

That night, smiling Fred Harris finally lost his own cool. (Interested bystanders tell me that amongst the phrases he gabbled and I didn't quite catch were, "You're all washed up, Langford!" and "You'll never work in this field again!") At the risk of repeating myself, I note that it's an unexpected reaction from a professional publicist who must once or twice

before have heard some unflattering words about his late client. Again, things are *different* in Hubbard country. But consider ...

For five days his organization, fuelled by the limitless coffers of wherever, had hurled vast gobs of money at British fandom to glorify L. RON HUBBARD; and by the end of it all, Hubbard's name was just a bad joke.

Even the vaguely charitable, "public service" flavour of the basic Writers of the Future idea seemed at the time to go sour – thrown into a new light, by relentless over-exposure of THAT NAME, as another though subtler aspect of this attempt to buy posthumous SF acceptance at any price.

I think that at the close of Conspiracy, picking up the vibrations from all around him, Fred Harris realized this ... and almost, one can sympathize.

Meanwhile, I rather suspect that I've blown my last chance to become a Writer of the Future. To be honest, each contact with Author Services and its doings has left me feeling increasingly negative about them and the things they promote: without being a particularly sensitive person, I kept running into these alien reactions, the false notes mentioned above. [7]

Why? Fandom, ever ready to leap to conclusions, offers an easy answer: "Ah, they're all Scientologists, so any criticism of Hubbard sets them off because it's blasphemy." I wouldn't know. (Though paranoid defensiveness does certainly seem characteristic of the Scientology organization.) There are other possibilities. The Author Services Inc people might have a huge chip on their collective shoulder because they know their efforts are liable to attract just this dismissal – or because they chafe at the repressed knowledge that their promotion of L. RON HUBBARD as a great writer is in the last analysis absurd.

Without needing to pick and choose between these or other causes for the organization's ways, I know I want nothing to do with Writers of the Future. As an author and critic, I value my independent judgement: with my sincerely held opinion of *Battlefield Earth* and my general inability to keep my big mouth shut, I cannot get involved with people who go icy-cold at the merest hint that this trash is not an SF masterpiece. Meanwhile, as a science fiction fan, I value my independent sense of humour. I refuse to accept that (as implied in certain Author Services reactions noted above) there are secrets of the universe, such as L. RON HUBBARD, about which one may not make

jokes.

Prejudice? Yes indeed. In all these little ways, Author Services Inc has resolutely managed to prejudice me. Further misgivings arise from my quite honest efforts to research L. RON HUBBARD himself and find whether he's as black as he's painted. These researches consistently imply that the final line of Hubbard's *Times* obituary was a delicate understatement: "He was not a nice man."

If I were a beginning writer, I'd think more than twice before associating myself with that name.

The Footnotes

1. Concerning prejudice ... There's plenty of weird and worrying reportage of Scientology to be had, the bitterest diatribes usually coming from ex-Scientologists. It's hard for laymen to decide how much has changed since the bad old days. Is Hubbard's dismayingly paranoid and misogynistic *Dianetics* (1950) still a central text, or have things – as one hopes – moved on a bit? This isn't relevant to a critique of *Battlefield Earth*, but assumes some importance if you take the not uncommon view that Hubbard's name smells and the sole purpose of Author Services Inc is to sanitize it.
2. "It is in the uncompromisingness with which dogma is held and not in the dogma or want of dogma that the danger lies." – Samuel Butler, 1902.
3. "The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two", published in Dave Wood's fanzine *Xyster* (1984) and most recently reprinted in the Langford booklet *Platen Stories*, a collection of articles published by Conspiracy '87. [1997: also *Let's Hear It For The Deaf Man* (NESFA Press, 1992) and its expansion *The Silence of the Langford* (NESFA Press, 1996).]
4. New Era Publications UK Ltd is the publishing house responsible for the Hubbard "dekalogy" (the term "vanity press" is being strenuously resisted in this article) and the Writers of the Future anthologies. The Bridge imprint is the American equivalent. • By a funny coincidence, New Era also publishes such works as Hubbard's *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, for which I have just received a new

stack of sales literature. The historically-minded may remember that Dianetics was the early name for what become Scientology. • By another funny coincidence, many fans reported being approached on the Brighton seafront by people with clipboards, who asked questions about whether one was satisfied with one's present self, and whether one had heard of Dianetics.... • A note on scale: it is not unknown for Masquerade categories to be sponsored, or for flyers to go out with progress reports, or for multi-page ads to appear in convention publications, or for shiny four-colour pocket programme covers to be paid for, or for Dealers' Room stands to be hired, or for SF events to be papered with glossy promotional literature, or for lavish parties to be thrown. But doing all these things and more does smack of excess.

5. Thanks to the combination of a lack of sponsorship co-ordination, the usual deadly fear of making a loss, and at least one disaster late in the day (previous arrangements for the Pocket Programme cover had fallen through), even the Conspiracy '87 committee found itself dismayed by the huge preponderance of L. RON HUBBARD advertising. Presumably it's difficult to say No when the representative of an outfit which has pumped large sums of money into the Worldcon asks for permission to make a "harmless" announcement. • The convention, I gather, just about broke even. • The committee did manage to resist a pre-convention attempt to arrange for the paid circularization of all members with flyers urging them to vote *Black Genesis* a Hugo ... but obviously it's possible to point the finger of censure at them for accepting (by some accounts, canvassing for) the overpublicization. Since everyone seems to agree that the publicity splurge went beyond excess into counterproductive overkill, one wonders how and why Author Services professionals allowed themselves to be lured on to their doom.
6. What I've been reading is Russell Miller's *Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* – a fascinating book which incidentally reveals that I'm not the only one to find Hubbard's latest works uninviting. "A.E. van Vogt, whose endorsement of [*Battlefield Earth*] appeared prominently on the cover, later confessed that he had been daunted by its size and had not actually bothered to read it."
7. I have omitted a minor encounter or two, in which politesse prevailed and that odd, characteristic sense of strain was (though present) less tersely describable.

Addenda, Years Later

- In note 5 above, I said parenthetically that “previous arrangements for the Pocket Programme cover had fallen through”. The committee turned to Author Services Inc because Forbidden Planet bookshop (I think it was) cancelled their own sponsorship of the Pocket Programme. But, with some irony, even Author Services did not choose to flaunt the bloody awful *Battlefield Earth* cover in this position. Initially they sent Frank Frazetta’s cover for an early *Writers of the Future* anthology, an innocuous and very mildly erotic painting of a woman with bare breasts or some such atrocity. The feminist element on the Conspiracy committee (Chris Atkinson) refused to print this – and so, at the last minute, the infinitely worse alternative was used. Oh dearie me.
- A friendly fan sends this corrective comment on the “clipboards” aside in note 4 above: “*Brighton and Hove was a major centre for Dianetics/Scientology at the time (and apparently still is), so it would not have been at all surprising to see people on the seafront with clipboards – they had been in evidence there, to the best of my recollection, from the early 80s [...] and they had/have a well established office and call-in centre there.*”
- I confess to being disingenuous at one point, for the sake of narrative flow: “Why was famous SF person Algis Budrys standing up there, droning on about [...] L. RON HUBBARD’S bloody *Writers of the Future*?” He most definitely did, as later confirmed by many witnesses, but owing to long-standing hearing trouble I wasn’t certain – not until after the Hugo ceremony – that this gaffe had really happened. Some later gossip about Conspiracy apparently compresses the timescale to have me cursing Hubbard right there on the Hugo stage. This is untrue, though I later wished that I’d felt sure enough of my ground to say something like: “Since such announcements are now part of the Hugo ceremony tradition, I’m very pleased to mention that I am *not* signing up with *Writers of the Future*.”

Microcon: “The Absolute Con”

Microcon, Exeter, February 1988

Conventions don't come much smaller than university-run affairs in Exeter. Microcon happened in late February and may have set same kind of record by attracting, when you leave out students, locals and the plethora of guests, exactly one fan: Dave Wood.

Nevertheless, the student populace was heavily outnumbered. Iain Banks turned up all despicably hungover from a 2am session with the Edinburgh SF Group. Paul “John Grant” Barnett read out the parodic “Sex in Space” tale which Alex Stewart’s *Arrows of Eros* anthology (originally thought up by Paul) didn’t for legal reasons dare publish, even though the only people who were particularly libelled were Bruce Sterling (not present) and Alex himself. John Brunner flitted urbanely through. Neil Gaiman explained all the excellent reasons why he’s going to be a comix megastar whose towering reputation will leave Alan Moore shadowed and obscure. Colin Greenland left before the concluding Hogo [*sic*] Awards ceremony, meaning that the “Colin Greenland Serious and Literary Hogo Award”, consisting of a milk bottle and some Letraset, was presented to me instead. Diana Wynne Jones gave an extremely energetic speech with simultaneous sign-language translation and subtitles. Ian Pemble of *Knave* fame, together with the numerous ex-*Knave* authors present, agreed that *Knave* had gone downhill something rotten since the jokes were thrown out and the more traditional “men’s” prose style restored (“Gosh,” she whispered in husky awe, “I’ve never seen one as big as *that!*”). And I’m sure the various other professionals did some pretty memorable things too.

Only Terry Pratchett, still struggling to establish a new record for the most Guest of Honour appearances in a single year (and taking his life in his hands by giving the same speech every time), had anticipated the difficulties of the university venue: his briefcase was crammed with the raw materials for endless gins-and- tonic, including lemons and a kitchen knife. Unwilling ever actually to open the bar, the college’s supposed bar staff devoted their time to seeking out and confiscating the booze which every guest except Alex “Isn’t

there any *orange* juice?” Stewart eventually contrived to smuggle in. Our heroic student committee established a beer pipeline of their own, the letter of the law being complied with by sipping drinks on draughty lawns and trying to follow the programme through the double-glazing.

I realized I must be getting old and tired when the need for solid food kept taking precedence. On the first night, the committee wafted us off to a far pub where the most amazingly strong beers like the dreaded Owd Roger flowed freely, but where there was no actual food. On Sunday we listened in fascination as organizers rushed around saying panicky things like “All the pizzas are locked up in the bar!” and “The baked potatoes have all vanished!” before organizing a lunchtime trek to yet another pub which had decided it was a nice day not to serve food.

Yes, there’s a sense of cosy beleaguerment and camaraderie which you don’t get at those posh conventions in hotels. The feeling wore a bit thin on the way home when on our second train (the first having broken down) I ravenously decided to stoop to a British Rail sandwich, only for the four people ahead of me in the queue to very nearly start a fight over the last one.

Alex must be persuaded to edit a collection of *Great SF Stories About Food*. Printed on flavoursome rice-paper, it could become a staple item at conventions like Microcon....

Follies of '88

Various, 1988

As Robert Holdstock liked to claim after recounting some particularly awful incident of youth, I was not as sensible then as I am now.

The Conventional Wisdom

Very early in their productive lives, fans learn that convention reports can be infused with remarkable cool and street credibility by avoiding such mundane topics as the convention. Staying in the bar and overhearing gossip is merely the first twist of the focusing wheel which will eventually provide that totally original and unpredictable view of the proceedings. To dwell at length on Petri-dish breakfast food and Krakatoa bowel movements is always innovative and worthwhile; but true masters of the form will be careful to fill most of their report with minute descriptions of How I Got There and, if appropriate, How I Got Back Home. This is the approved formula for witty and individual reportage, as used by all the best practitioners. Six million fanwriters can't be wrong.

It's thus embarrassing to realize that virtually the only memories I brought back from Follycon last Easter involved the journey home. (Pause for standard excuse about total euphoria during the con itself, meant not so much to be believed as to avert destroying lightning bolts from Follycon committee folk too numerous to mention but largely called Alison.)

Ah, it all comes back, that endless Monday-afternoon rail journey. Geoff Ryman had a reserved seat but was too nice to kick out the dear little white-haired lady pretending with great thespian ineptitude to be asleep therein.

"No," Mr Ryman said nobly, "I'll slum with you lot in steerage."

We found seats, and Geoff leaned back in languorous anticipation of a long snooze after staying up all Sunday night, and the padded back of the seat fell irrevocably off. Behind was a lethal-looking cluster of edged metal brackets

and mediaeval pointy bits. It was a bad train for tall fans, Geoff sitting sternly bolt-upright for the whole trip while Dermot Dobson, unable to do likewise because of injuries on the spinal frontier, groaningly paced the aisle and at set intervals rolled up his shirt to show off the surgical corset. This was on the whole less revolting than Martin Hoare's very similar gesture, repeated through the weekend, which allowed you to relish the interesting stigmata of his chicken-pox. A sickly lot, fandom.

Much later in 1988 I laid the groundwork for a heavily travel-oriented con report by attending the World Fantasy Convention in short bursts via commuter train – a grave mistake, not least because it reminded me of the Follycon incident so embarrassing and repercussive that I didn't want to sign my name to any account of it....

The Bottom Line

It was a convention, Jim, but not as we know it. I was braced for the fact that World Fantasy Convention really means World Horror Convention, but not wholly for the further translation to World Horror Professionals' Trade Fair For People With Expense Accounts.

Penetrating this event was an act more frustrating than it might sound, since the West London Ramada Hotel's front wall had this long row of glass doors, all offering delusive glimpses of Ian Watson drinking beer and all, as it eventually turned out, locked.... In the bar I found Bob Shaw, who piteously cried "A fan!" and babbled awhile of eldritch hotel prices beyond the grasp of sanity. In the book room, Greg Pickersgill was brewing blasphemous, unspeakable theories, which he then spoke, of convention profitability at fifty quid a head and whose pockets he thought were being lined. (I cannot believe his horrid insinuation that this high-turnover professional event doesn't publish accounts.) Terry Pratchett related with glee how he, Bob and Harry Harrison had requested beer to fuel them for a panel, only for the Gopher In Charge to explain it was soft drinks only because, "We're trying to make a profit, you know." It must have been the huge influx of famous American authors and publishers which made everyone go on, and on, about money.

Soon I saw the bright side of this, when famous American publisher Dave Hartwell lured me off for lunch. At last the gravy train had stopped at my station. Yes, he and Kathryn Cramer wanted to commission a major piece for

... *The New York Review of SF*? Sure enough, Mr Hartwell was exercising his vestigial fan credentials, and even permitted me to pay for my own food.

Returning from this spree, I was nobbled by evil Harry Harrison, who lured me with beer from the straight and narrow path, sat me with spurious friendliness at his side, and conveyed via his usual genial mix of spittle and animal impressions the words, “I’ve always wanted to make this introduction, Dave!” From across the table came a slow voice saying, “I’ve read your reviews of me,” and I gazed into the argute visage of Stephen R. Donaldson. It is merely to be recorded that my heart did before too long resume its beating.

Free wine kept appearing in an endless succession of sponsored parties, clearly a good thing were it not that I missed all the later and more debauched ones through having to run for my train exactly as London SF fandom moved in for large-scale gatecrashing. The first time I looked into the main programme, it was full of a mass autograph session hampered just slightly by the shortage of mere credulous fans to beg the autographs. (A scheduled reading by six *Interzone* stalwarts was later dropped at the discovery that the audience was outnumbered by, well, six to one.)

Next time I noticed the programme, an extraordinary mid-afternoon banquet plus awards ceremony was in progress – allegedly the highlight of the convention. Its actual £20-a-head food was reputedly invested with all the bowel-churning terrors perfected by the Union of Hotel Caterers; the cruellest rumour concerned a table mix-up which led to three mere fans, possibly the only persons present who’d actually paid for the meal themselves, being bumped from their places in mid-hors d’oeuvres. I believe the committee gave them some alcoholic compensation, but Charlie Brown and Andy Porter were later beset with suggestions for striking headlines based on the fact that one of these unfortunates was called Stephen King. Lots of people won awards; the Ramsey Campbell Award (as the British Fantasy trophy is affectionately known) went to Ramsey Campbell, and Karl Edward Wagner walked out in strong hysterics because – if I interpreted him correctly – David Hartwell had given too many awards to David Hartwell.

In some ways it was probably a good trade fair, replete with luxury, freebies, influential business contacts and smoke-filled rooms. A mere change of name might eliminate the bewilderment and recriminations arising from the fact

that many fans understand something slightly different by the word “convention”. On my final, empty-pocketed journey home (note the traditional demands of this classic literary form) I was saved from rail-borne dehydration only by the solicitude of Diana Wynne Jones, who will be getting another rave review shortly.

The Plain People of Fandom: Is that all? What about the ever so embarrassing bit you mentioned?

Myself: Rats. I was hoping you’d forgotten that.

The State of the Art

Despite my age and dignity I’m still not immune from totally cretinous actions, and Follycon saw one of my regular lapses. Given three tons of grubby papers to sign for contributors’ and editors’ copies of the Steve Jones/Kim Newman *100 Best Horror Novels* anthology of fave raves from the grave, I drunkenly allowed myself to be led astray by the wiles of Ramsey Campbell’s daughter. The woman tempted me and I did sign, adding an extra L. Ron Hubbard on this sheet, a spurious H. P. Lovecraft on that.... Reader, be warned that such momentary follies can make life bad for a long, long time.

After a terrific wiggling from S. Jones, I managed to blot my crime from memory. (OK, I’m not wholly bad, I did offer to locate sufficient contributors to the book who had sufficient compassion and/or sense of humour to accept copies with signed endpapers “defaced” by the abominable Langford.) Guilt surged up all over again at the rumour – gleefully passed on via the Malcolm Edwards transatlantic gossip line – that Harlan Ellison himself was going to kill me for this. Guilt geysered from my ears at the news that the surplus multi-signed copies were to be sold to idiot collectors at one hundred bloody pounds. “Suddenly,” as Steve wrote to me in an otherwise almost forgiving letter, “it doesn’t seem so funny any more, does it?” Er, no, squire.

The book was much in evidence at the Fantasycon, though with Grafton-like acumen the publishers had made actual copies hard to find – limited to specimens of the amazing super special expensive edition which turned up at a late-night launch party while I was on a train, and faded again at the light of day. This party saw the great alleged Pickersgill/Pringle Purloining Project,

eagerly related by Steve and Kim to everyone who would listen: “They tried to nick books costing £100 each” is one story, and “You expect the books lying round at a launch party to be freebies” is the other.

Next day I had a glimpse of Neil Gaiman’s copy, and was furtively relieved to find that late authors like M. R. James and Robert E. Howard had also signed – officially – via astral rubber stamp; while my own acts of folly were as nothing to the inadvertence of those who’d signed too near the edge and run into trimming trouble (half a Brian Aldiss here, two outlying loops of an otherwise missing signature there, like dismembered relics of who knows what foul crime). And what was this rumour that Ramsey Campbell Himself had succumbed once or twice to the same loathsome temptation as me? Or that ... but let’s not be contentious, since the recriminations are now past.

Thus my embarrassing confession for this issue. I still cringe a little at the memory of those fraught months between Easter and Hallowe’en. Reader, know that promiscuous forgery leads to no good, and desist!

(Signed)
Claude Degler.

Contrivance Memories

Contrivance (Eastercon), Jersey, Easter 1989

Ah, Contrivance, I well remember that fun-drenched time in Jersey. Everyone who was anyone was there. The things H.G. Wells got up to amongst costumed female fans cannot be repeated for fear of libel suits, but how we all laughed when good old H.P. Lovecraft ate the Hotel de France out of ice-cream. As Jules Verne quipped to me while furtively spiking Cliff Simak's mint julep with absinthe, "*Merde!*"

What else? Cyrano de Bergerac didn't appear much on the programme, having spent his time sightseeing around the locations of the TV series they'd named after him. James Blish held everyone fascinated for an hour with his plan to adapt *Finnegans Wake* into a *Star Trek* movie. "It must have been brilliant," Doc Smith said afterwards, "I couldn't understand a word." Then the whole Fan Room party went roaring upstairs: Bob Heinlein had gone to bed early and we chorused "Spung! Spung! Spung!" outside his room until in his crusty but lovable way he started blowing holes through the door with a Lee Enfield rifle – how we all laughed.

It was Phil Dick who late one night passed me a very strange cigarette and said, "But you're not here."

"Neither are you," was my shrewd repartee.

Borrowing John W. Campbell's future-scanner apparatus, we checked on the forthcoming issue of the fanzine *Conrunner* and found a letter bemoaning the absence of many other named authors.

"It hasn't occurred to some of these fans," said John Wyndham, "that most full-time British SF authors except me and Pratchett are pretty bloody broke and rarely travel far to cons, while the only snag about this totally wonderful and deservedly praised Jersey venue is that it discourages the cheapskates who usually share a car or pop in for just one night."

"It'll all be the same in a million years," slurred Olaf Stapledon, who was

pissed.

We went on and had a great if low-budget time, and hope you did too; but if any more crummy little fan politicians mention the word “boycott” we are going to scream, do you hear me, *scream*.

Meanwhile, I wish I had space to tell you the one about how Mary Shelley tried connecting a nine-volt battery to this very tall and very drunk member of the Technical Ops crew, who lurched appallingly erect and gazed at her with watery, speculative eyes. Or how George Orwell booked into Room 101 and found it did indeed contain the worst thing in the world, being the manager of the Brighton Metropole Hotel....

Next time I hope to arrange matters so that my anecdotes will be more reliable (though not much). See you there.

Several Days in May Including Mexican 3, Nottingham, May 1989

20 May 1989: Hazel and I are brooding on Mexican. Nottingham is terra incognita (“I bet,” I said, “there’ll be a Maid Marian Industrial Estate.”). Shall we madly hire a car which will lie around being expensively unused for the actual con, or try the rail route already deplored to me by impartial committee man Greg Pickersgill? At once the phone rings and Hazel’s father asks if we would care to accept a scrofulous, cast-off family vehicle to save the “waste” of having it scrapped. Plot turns like this would cause complaints in fiction.

With the remorselessness of Greek tragedy, Hazel’s brother delivers the car and plunges us straight into horror with the information that someone has nicked the tax disc. Vast penalties loom. Spurred by fear, I suggest a ludicrous implausibility: could it have fallen off the windscreen and into the air vent? To universal scoffing we do things with probes and forceps. The magic piece of paper is in the air vent ... but if this happens within seconds of acquiring the thing, what ghastly sequence of Langford Vehicular Horror Stories is to follow? I may have to do a fanzine.

Meanwhile, why does everyone fall around laughing when told about this car?

21 May: Tell Chris Priest about car. He falls around laughing. Tell Martin Hoare. He cheerily predicts that “my style of driving” will turn it over the moment I venture beyond 40mph. Tell my father, who asks, “The usual rusting death-trap, I suppose?” No, I say proudly, I am told it has a rustproof fibreglass body. He falls around laughing and asks if I’ve counted the wheels. Apparently there is a widespread theory that all 1976 Reliant Kittens have only three. I admit it’s a naff name, but after double-checking I definitely make the wheel count four.

22 May: Paul “John Grant” Barnett is visiting for varied reasons, and after Sunday night is luckily too hungover to fall around laughing. The car lies idle

while we revise our *Guts!* for its lucky new publisher (straws will be drawn at Mexican). This is tricky work, since all Paul's chapters are on *this* sort of disk and all mine are on *that* sort. Luckily I've written this wonderful transfer program which very nearly works, apart from throwing in an extra space at every pagebreak. This is easily solved by converting all pairs of spaces in the text. I fail to notice that thanks to a peculiarity of the WordPerfect word processor, the process also converts all dashes to single spaces. After a long day's revisionism the MS is left printing out: of course the ribbon fades to pale grey before we reach the pub, the paper jams at about our third round, and we reel home to find the last 60 pages mockingly printed on a single line. And, oops, I've run out of ribbons....

23 May: "The bearer of this scroll, namely, David Langford, is summoned to attend the quest of a lifetime. Your adventure begins at 11am prompt, outside Chislehurst (Kent) Railway Station!" Oh dear. Today is Paul's launch party for his other co-written efforts, **Joe Dever's Legends of Lone Wolf**, being spinoffs from nothing less than Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks. The promoters wish to celebrate this in cavernous gloom, amid the savage clash and parry of rubber swords ... and I, yes, unimportant Langford, have been chosen to accompany Paul on his quest for publicity.

Our adventure begins much earlier than 11am. All the best epics involve gruelling journeys through pitiless conditions; the London Transport strike forces us into major street credibility via a long stagger from Paddington to Charing Cross during the heatwave. "They wouldn't believe it, us two crossing London on soft drinks," I muse. Paul waves a bottle and cries, "Perrier louts." Shrivelled and sweat-drenched, we finally attain the Chislehurst Caves, and it all goes ape.

"You," I am told, "are Sir Conrad, a knight who prefers the banqueting hall to the battlefield." This sounds like journalistic typecasting. I beg to be something more suited to my critical image, like Langford Hackrender, barbarian scourge of the pulpsmiths, but this is not permitted. Shepherded by persons in arcane robes or knitted chainmail, a band of literati and media hacks bears hurricane lamps nervously into the tunnels.

The subterranean journey is of course punctuated by loud encounters which are doubtless thrillingly choreographed were it possible to see anything. Magical types fire off mystic cap-pistols, and there is a disquieting move

towards audience participation. I enjoy the sadistic spectacle of a Radio Midlands chap being stripped of his symbiotic tape recorder and thrust whimpering into the darkness to hit things with a padded stick.

Our quest's goal is a dank, lamplit cavern where the party is plied with such delights as "swamp viper" (which I discover too late is cold smoked eel ... backbone, skin and all). More welcome but no less dangerous is the "Laumspur cocktail" promised in the invitation: after finding this to consist of legendary tequila and alchemic vodka with just a smidgeon of herbal cranberry juice, I nervously switch to plonk. As the booze flows copiously, several guests grow very thoughtful about warnings that (a) no one should stray out of sight for fear of being lost in 22 chilly miles of caves, while (b) there are no toilets down here. Let us cast a diplomatic veil over the ensuing scenes.

"God, this is so naff," says a Real Journalist who does not appear to be taking any notes.

More role-playing fun lies in store! The now sodden visitors are invited to win a grand prize by solving riddles which costumed characters will pose on request. ("Who is the General with a fondness for crushed velvet?" Er, Haig?) Though boozily acquiescent, I fail to get the hang of this: approaching a hideously made-up dwarf wielding an inflatable axe, I try a tentative "Excuse me, good sir," and at once she takes huge offence.

Egged on by evil Paul, I have another go, this time selecting a fellow in a plethora of straps and studs capped by a nova-burst of bleached hair. "Hello, costumed person, tell me your riddle."

"I'm not in costume, you bastard," says Wayne, famous editor of *GM* magazine.

Paul and Joe Dever are dragged piteously off to sign 1,000 copies of these Beaver-published "Lone Wolf" novels ("Look," says the inevitable someone, "an open Beaver." Kindly hands prevent his escalation to a split Beaver). I locate a native guide and head back towards the sun, falling over from time to time....

Pick up printer ribbons in Tottenham Court Road, as I discover to my surprise next morning.

24 May: What? Who? How? Where? When? After a groan-laden day of the

software business (“I’ve just seen your car,” says Chris Priest, and falls around laughing) I reprint *Guts!*, all of it, and subsequently notice those missing dashes. Far overhead, Concorde passengers nervously complain about the screams.

25 May: Re-edit and re-reprint *Guts!* Rebellious thought that all this toil and pain wouldn’t be so bad if it were actually a good novel.

26 May: Pleasant drive to Mexicon; that is, until the tyre explodes. With herculean efforts we bang and ricochet into a lay-by. “Fear not,” I tell Hazel, “there is a spare, we are well provided, your father left the car all stocked with jacks and things.” Having jacked up the Kitten with strange ease (aren’t estate cars supposed to *weigh* more than this?), I find Hazel’s father sets great store by his spanner, and has kept it. A trek to a nearby tea-van and the purchase of many cups results in the grudging loan of a genuine wheel-nut spanner. It is the wrong size. Keith and Wendy Freeman sail past and, seeing the sybaritic mugs of tea, do not rush to our aid. At risk of tannin poisoning, I set about further ingratiating with a view to the tea-man’s adjustable wrench....

This sort of thing never happens with hired cars. I wonder why.

Mexicon: As Jorge Luis Borges inexplicably failed to write: “One of the churches of Tlön maintains Platonically that such and such a fizzy beer, such and such a greenish-yellow colour at breakfast time, such and such a programme stream, make up the only reality there is. All men, in the climactic instant of the real beer running out, are the same man. All conventions are the same convention.” Mexicon is, as expected, fun, and as expected it soon blurs ... aided by the surreal directions for reaching the main hall from the bar (which is on the same floor) by going up these stairs and through this labyrinth and along echoing corridors and round a bit and down another staircase *except* when the restaurant is closed in which case it’s open as a short cut *but* wrong use of this route will incur instant terminal reprimand....

Bits I remember: Greg Pickersgill telling the opening-ceremony audience why I’m not on any panels. (“Because you’re a deaf cretin, Langford.”) Avedon Carol shouting for 48 minutes at a weeping Harry Bond just now convicted of Wrong Thoughts. (“This is a learning experience for him,” mumbles D. West. “It would be wrong to intervene.”) Algis Budrys writhing

under the lash of Judith Hanna's opinions on Scientology (all her facts carefully credited to me). Three superlatively enlightened editors expressing cautious interest in *Guts!* before even being bought many drinks. Sneaking away for a quiet tandoori with Terry & Lyn Pratchett only to find three-quarters of Mexicon derisively crammed into our chosen restaurant. Alex Stewart showing off the cover of his fabled "sex in space" anthology, something other than the car at which fans can fall around laughing. And the discovery, almost exactly as predicted, of roads repellently named for Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, etc.

Bits I missed: Greg Pickersgill telling Rob Hansen the alleged error of his ways. ("I don't want to see you at any more conventions!") Katie McAulay – no more Hoare, please – scorning Paul McAuley as one of those pathetic Irish persons who can't even spell their own names. (Paul is considered by Chris Atkinson and Abi Frost as a potential toy-boy, but on closer examination gets rejected.) Hazel's explorations of Nottingham and forming of the conclusion that this is the best ever convention city for people who don't like conventions. ("But you haven't been to New Orleans," interposes T. Pratchett.)

Bad moments: Harry Bond saying, "I've just been looking on the fanzine pile and found a copy of your *Cloud Chamber* 1 dated 1976!" (Avedon's point of view instantly seems more reasonable.) Total inability to wedge answers to the Sunday-paper detective quiz into the femtosecond between Roz Kaveney reading out and answering each question. Virtuous attempt to survive Monday morning on foul low-alcohol drinks. Under the withering gaze of the rudest car park attendant known to exobiology, the Kitten loudly refuses to start.

Much later: "This is the smallest car I've ever been in!" says effusive Moshe Feder, but there is no room in the back seat for him to fall around laughing.

The Charity Con

Compute for Charity, Hull, July 1990

On Sunday 1 July 1990, I committed a shameful act. Though I was encouraged and abetted by Brian Stableford, the guilt lies heavy on me still ... well, no, it doesn't really.

Did you hear of what was to be the most gigantic computer show/charity event/SF convention ever held in Europe? "Compute for Charity" was the name. I learned about this blockbuster from a very tatty sheet of paper explaining that all manner of international SF megastars were attending: that is, Terry Pratchett. Unconfirmed wonders too stupefying for the human mind to comprehend were offered in smaller print, among them – as I was interested to discover – Dave Langford.

One thing led to another. Lured by promises of free train tickets, luxury accommodation, unlimited booze and egoboo, etc, I presently found myself sitting with Brian Stableford, en route to the fun city of Hull. "The only bright side *I* can see," he said after a few hours, "is quite a good bookshop I haven't visited for years." This, for Brian, was unusually cheerful and merry.

Thirty thousand people were to attend over the awesome weekend. Thirty thousand a *day*. No, forty thousand, said the final flyers. Huge media coverage was anticipated. The SF convention alone would dwarf all those puny British Worldcons. I managed somehow not to dwell on the echoes of publicity for other gigantic SF jamborees which never actually happened, like Space-Ex 84 and Project Starcast. The only thing we learn from history ...

Hull looked OK, as I noticed while the crammed car sped out of it. One of the little things the grandiloquent literature had managed not to mention was just how far out of town Humberside College actually is. The guest accommodation had dwindled somehow to austere student bedrooms (no bath or shower but lots of friendly notices saying things like DO NOT REARRANGE THE FURNITURE AS THIS MAY CONSTITUTE A FIRE HAZARD). I will not mention the communal toilet, except that its enthusiastic flush left a *wholly misleading*

pool of water to be negotiated by seekers after relief.

We found Terry already wearing the broad, evil grin of one who rather likes watching unsinkable vessels go down at the touch of a passing ice-cube. When we'd all walked quite a long way to a pub with a much-praised restaurant and the committee had started buying drinks, Brian perked up no end at the opportunity to convey to them that the large sign RESTAURANT CLOSED FOR REDECORATION very possibly meant what it said. Unbelievable complications ensued.

Saturday: Day One! The luxury breakfast was somewhat delayed, there being about an hour's difference between the committee's and the canteen's understanding of things, but it was certainly memorable. Not so much for the strange steamed-looking institutional bacon and other familiar convention joys, as for the subsequent queueing at a cash register where this aged and misanthropic canteen lady very slowly added up the prices of everything – “slice of bread, ur, that's, ur, 5p”. We expostulated mildly at this waste of time, pointing out that we famous writers had freebie tickets. It was pityingly explained that a freebie ticket was worth only £1.85 of rigorously checked breakfast credit. A hiss of indrawn breath could be heard from stray students when the big spenders failed to go back and use up surplus pence on half a sausage or a fractional slice of bread.

Now, the convention. Suspicions that the record-beating SF convention idea was a last-minute extra, advertised exclusively through tatty flyers in the Wellington, were subtly confirmed. What had been laid on for us was a bare dingy room containing a bare dingy table behind which Terry, Brian and I sat glumly while a very small trickle of people looked in and went away again on ascertaining that we were not all-action computer games. (Bob Shaw was supposed to be coming too, but wisely didn't. I spotted one actual visiting fan.) This was the entirety of the SF bit, so besides the lack of any programme there was nowhere to give the advertised readings ... which discovery was the high spot of the day.

In a corner of the house of exile, the chap with the portable Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy computer was dispensing merriment. I can never remember his name: the first line of his address is, hilariously, “Hurling Reliant Robins III”, and his on-screen Hitcher database is full of jokes as good as that. Relentless unfunniness is what we are talking about here. Or to

be charitable, a failure to recognize that even Douglas Adams does not do Douglas Adams one-liners well every time, and does recognize the need to separate them with a bit of narrative. But “Hurling” means well, he flogs print-outs of the stuff for charity (that word again), and I do try not to cringe when, each time I see him, he looms up and demands an amusing inscription for the latest such wad of paper ... which inscription is not allowed to be any of the ones I’ve done before and forgotten, as those have been entered into the main hypertext. Embarrassments preserved forever.

In another corner, the “Octarine” SF/fantasy humour mob were struggling to create an instant fanzine. This proved a lifeline. We all wrote stuff for it because there was nothing else to do.

Let me make it clear that no actual cruelty was involved. Every hour or so, we were issued beer and sandwiches. Toilet access was allowed. Visiting privileges could probably have been negotiated. All the same ...

I sneaked out for an inspection of the rival delights and found that our minute ration of visitors was a fair sample. Dozens if not scores of people must have been flowing through the event every few hours. Out on the campus boy scouts were much in evidence, giving displays of Basic Tent Lurking and touting noxious-looking hot dogs.

After some research I found the book room hidden in a tangle of buildings. This contained copies of our stuff, but was deserted. I bought a paperback I didn’t want, out of sheer pity for the despairing chap behind the trestle tables who had believed the publicity and ordered things in fifties. Local Book Dealer Slays Charity Committee And Self.

The main hall had a dozen tatty stands of computer stuff for sale (not state of the art, not cheap). The stands were tatty because they’d been hastily cobbled together by the organizers when the city council failed to lend some as promised. The council’s failure was ascribed to the fact that Hull’s own municipal festival began on that same day, and miraculously coincided with the students’ rag week.

One began to suspect that the 40,000 visitors who daily pass through Hull in hope of a computer/SF event were being ensnared by desperate fun in the city centre.

Brian cracked first. “A bookshop, I need a bookshop....” Dramatic montage

of bus stops, the Stableford nose for books twitching through central Hull, the sudden triumphant dive into an arcade, the discovery that the place now sold only remainders. It had begun to rain heavily and didn't slacken until we returned. The event's signs were hand-crafted in felt pen on sheets of corrugated cardboard (including the main one at the main gate), and all now lay soggy and detumescent. A body of water had appeared between the main area and our room, helping to curb that excessive flow of visitors.

Very late on Saturday the media took an interest when, as reported by my sources, someone from the local paper popped in and said, "What's all this then?" Useful publicity in the following Wednesday's edition was practically guaranteed. Meanwhile, our massed skiffy guests became homicidal when the promised Saturday night party proved to consist of a loud empty disco and a louder TV set on which all the surviving organizers were watching the World Cup. Terry preached open sedition to the Escape Committee. We stole out to a takeaway and made our own entertainment: that is, I tried to eat Chinese gloop without a knife or fork, and the other two fell around so painfully they nearly dropped their chips.

When Terry didn't appear at Sunday's grim breakfast, Brian and I suspected the worst. He'd made his break. (It later turned out that he'd decided that sleeping in was more soothing than a breakfast like that.) We looked in on the SF ghetto, and the last straw for Brian came when he was asked to pay for the instant fanzine with his piece in. For charity. Explosion of noted author. (This might conceivably have been a joke. I wheedled one by post later on.)

The Reading contingent grabbed its luggage and slunk off. Actually, lingering traces of conscience made me suggest that we first visit the book room to sign anything required, but the afflicted dealer hadn't felt up to opening that day. Boy scouts watched and reported our every move as we headed to the station: "You were *seen*," said Terry in a gleeful phone call. After a few days the whole ghastly mess almost began to seem funny.

One of the mighty organizers wrote to me later. "We hope you enjoyed the weekend, even though it was shorter than you intended! The show was a success..." What? The ingredients of success appeared to be mounds of left-over (that is, unsold) games software for future sale, plus other donated goodies and in particular "the face of severely handicapped (and very intelligent) boy Carl when ICI presented him with a complete Amiga

system”. Only a rotten curmudgeon would sneer at that. But is it barely possible that the donations could have been raked in and the success notched up without actually needing to stage such a shambolic weekend in Hull?

Conquassation Various, 1991

To tamp 1991 securely into its grave I planned a stupendous summing-up of the British convention scene for my very occasional fanzine *Sglodion* ... but ran into two snags. The first was that I'd insanely committed myself to reviving, for at least a year, the unreliable newsletter *Ansible*; and so *Sglodion*'s time and money went gurgling into this (to quote my all-time favourite [*sic*] explanation of the crop circle phenomenon) stationery vortex. Piled on that was the deeply philosophical problem of distinguishing between the 1991 cons I hadn't attended and the ones I'd completely forgotten. Apathy would have raged unopposed if not for the devious wiles of our editor Arnie Katz, who *has no shame* (even when as a last resort you lose all his "Send Me An Article" letters, he smilingly recreates them from backup disks). What seems to remain of 1991 – emotion recollected in sobriety – is ...

Mexicon IV, Harrogate, May 1991

As D. West was to remark with appreciation, the fourth Mexicon took place in a cheery atmosphere of sleaze and grime. On first climbing the hill to the decaying Cairn Hotel (In Liquidation), I overtook GoH Howard Waldrop sneaking along with a large brown bag that trailed suspicious wisps of steam. "A Chinese takeaway seemed sort of safer," he enigmatically remarked. I had yet to meet the Cairn's determined simulation of authentic Mexican snacks, Yorkshire style.

There'd been a sparsely-attended Meet Waldrop party in London two days before, which gave me a pang of alarm. For years I'd been hearing about this Mexicon guest's weird dress sense, with fearful words like "polyester" being bandied freely: in the event Howard looked reasonably normal to me, and about two minutes after the introductions said, "I like your jacket." On my next visit to the Gents I stared very nervously into the mirror, wondering. The evening ended with several tons of spare buffet food being loaded into ecologically sound paper bags for recycling at Mexicon: I made a rough

drawing of one Scotch egg I secretly hoped not to encounter again.

Langford policy after booking into a con hotel room is to seek short cuts involving fire stairs. This doesn't always work ... sometimes you emerge into clouds of evil-smelling steam populated by Orwellian skivvies who make coarse remarks, and once in the Birmingham Grand the hidden corridors led me to a vertiginous little balcony high over the main hall, littered with dusty stage lights and second-hand condoms. The Cairn's backstairs route to the bar was effective enough (especially as the hotel lift was not only the traditional quarter-mile away but ran on a roughly hourly schedule): I got quite used to the steep, greasy stone steps, vomit-splashed paintwork last cleaned in 1936, and the place where someone had apparently hurled an entire chili con carne at the wall.* By their fire stairs ye shall know them.

* 1993 footnote: the hotel Duty Manager at Mexicon 5 in Scarborough this year reminisced of having visited the Cairn a few weeks previously. "The chili stain was still there."

Downstairs it was OK. The Mexicon atmosphere is always loaded with pleasing intangibles, like the second-hand satisfaction felt when there's a *damn fine programme* for me not to attend. (Mea culpa. Either I'm growing deafer or my attention span is dwindling with age, but sitting there listening seems harder each year. I used to go to Stentorian Tom Shippey's SF talks as the one thing I could be sure of following, and never really figured out why people were laughing at Bob Shaw being serious and scientific until I was able to swot it up in fanzines.) This infectious good cheer could lead one into deeply unnatural acts: the bar did a steady trade in real imported Mexican beer, Sol and Corona, to be authentically drunk from the bottle with a truly stupefyingly authentic segment of fresh lime shoved into the neck ... and suddenly perceptions would tilt to reveal that one was drinking a very expensive lager and lime. "An exit application from the human race if ever there was one," as bonhomous Sir Kingsley Amis wrote of this beverage.

The usual suspects were up to the usual things. Paul Williams twitched nervously through panel after panel, little knowing that with hysterical wit young Michael Ashley would soon be describing him as a Dickhead (how we all roared). D. West said perfectly friendly things in that sidelong Yorkshire mutter which transforms everything into the semblance of hideous sarcasm (Brian Stableford can do it too). Greg Pickersgill carried on being Greg Pickersgill and Avedon Carol deplored this noxious habit of his. Roz

Kaveney and Chris Bell spent long hours in diplomatic negotiation over the great Midnight Rose Shared World Anthology Dispute (too complex and tedious to detail here or anywhere else, this involves a scrapped anthology, partially famous artist Fox, bitter lifetime feuds about whose fault it all was, and arcane legalistic documents bearing such dates as the Feast of St Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins).

Meanwhile, I discovered the one absolutely fatal remark to make at a Mexican. This goes: “What a coincidence, you’re producing the convention newsletter with the identical software I use for my fanzines.” Everything went black and I woke up chained to this keyboard.

Let us not dwell on the hardware Mike Ford had borrowed to create the awesome *Cactus Times*. Eager volunteers discovered that breathing, allowing your heart to beat or mentioning the BSFA were all sufficient to send it down in flames. This did not help the tranquillity of chief editor Abigail Frost, who at fifteen-second intervals would light another ciggy from the last one and issue great ululating cries of, “Will you please fucking *go away*, I need *absolute quiet* to compose my hard-hitting apology about the real beer running out again....” Newsletter highlights included a complete short story by really famous author Neil Gaiman (*Pitman’s Model*, after H.P. Lovecraft: **“Bt b Gd, Elliott, t ws a phtgraph from lfe!”**), a Eurovision Song Contest scoop and a great number of lies.

But Brian Stableford truly did improvise a talk on homoeopathy, extending the principle of vast dilutions which are supposed to increase drugs’ potency to amazing levels. This was largely pinched from a breakfast conversation in which I’d reasoned that it was entirely logical for there to be (as just featured in the *Observer* colour supplement) a homoeopathic cure for claustrophobia: merely dilute the small room which causes the symptoms, until it becomes a *much larger* one. Brian gave us homoeopathic morality, about which the less said the better, and likewise homoeopathic education: “It’s well known that the people with the loudest and most potent opinions in pubs are the ones with the most infinitesimal, diluted traces of actual information or education.” We all rushed to do field research in the bar and found famous sot Gamma apparently trying to snort the imported beer. (Next lesson: Homoeopathic Fansmanship, or how to retain vast fame and influence by doing absolutely bugger all.)

It is also true that I made an attempt on the Smallest Programme Item record upon finding the BSFA discussion panel entirely empty, even of panelists. Inspired by memories of a US fanzine piece on “microprogramming”, I delivered a stirring address to vacant seats for almost thirty seconds. “As I gaze on the rows and rows of shiny, earnest little faces in the audience, my faith is restored and I know that the BSFA will endure for a thousand years...” Leaving in abrupt haste, I looked long and suspiciously at my bottle of that Mexican beer.

Memo: produce an Abigail Frost Phrasebook to assist future newsletter teams. Mild-mannered Vincent Clarke needn't have looked so shaken if he'd known in advance that “*Fuck off and DIE!!!*” means only, “Excuse me, I am trying to concentrate on typing this.”

Twentycon, Birmingham, July 1991

This is the Birmingham SF Group's twentieth anniversary party, ingeniously held in competition with the BSFG's own Novacon later in the year and thus (owing to the fabled proverb “One trip to Birmingham is as much as anyone in the world can stand in any twelve months”) hugely unattended by fandom at large; also, for some reason, by the Birmingham SF Group. I remember asking Storm Constantine about the slight double-entendre in a book of hers set in a world of radical cosmetic surgery: as a quick health check someone prods this skinny kid, whereupon “*He could feel the bones through her spare buttocks.*” I remember Storm's hearty laughter as a few seconds later I picked myself from the bottom of some stairs while her enormous Gothic minders dusted their hands. I remember Martin Tudor contemplating with anguish the gigantic mounds of cheap snacks and barrels of real beer laid in by the hotel in anticipation of the promised hundreds, and insufficiently depleted by the actual dozens. Finally I remember saying merrily to the haggard committee, “Planning to do the coming-of-age Twentyonecon next year?” Their red, feral eyes are the last thing I can recall before losing consciousness again. *Memo:* must practise tact.

Mabinogicon, Bangor, July 1991

This, held on the remote north coast of Wales, had traditional guest of honour

problems. Anne McCaffrey had let down the committee, or the idle committee had failed to send her the necessary weekly reminders that she was GoH ... something of the sort. In the manner of Greek tragedy, messenger after messenger scurried into the bar with the latest from the battle: “We phoned Anne and got someone who wouldn’t let us talk to her!” “We phoned again. Her secretary says she gave up on Mabinogicon when we sent her a progress report in Welsh!” (All the more baffling since they’d never in fact done a progress report in Welsh.) “We’ve spoken to Anne! She says she’d love to come but some *incredibly important proofs* have *just arrived* and she *absolutely has to correct them by Monday!*” A passing semiologist translated this as: “Fuck off and die.”

The show went on. In place of a GoH speech there was a guest interview, fortuitously found printed in an old issue of *Vector*. The original interviewer David V. Barrett repeated his savagely probing questions, and the answers were delivered by a cunning simulation of Anne McCaffrey, being con chairman Ivan Towlson in a rather fetching borrowed dress. He had neglected to shave off his beard. I noted a few slight deviations from the script.

Barrett: “Anne, do you ever think –”

False Anne McCaffrey: “Good heavens, *no!*”

Wincon (Unicon), Winchester, August 1991

The Winchester venue was extremely hot and tilted at an angle of 45°, which made getting to and fro a bit difficult. One tended to sprawl on grassy banks with rapidly warming beer, and watch the dragonflies. Occasionally the bar opened, but (this being a campus) soon thought better of it.

Here my famed ability to attend and appreciate the programme at second hand was assisted by an entire Midnight Rosary of shared-world editors (motto: “Not At All An Imitation Of *Wild Cards*, Honest”) who came stumbling out of the climactic Author Panel with symptoms of advanced brain death. As Roz Kaveney partially expressed herself, “Oh God, John Brunner and Bruce Sterling are contending hotly for the title of World’s Greatest Jerk ... with, I regret to say, some competition from Gwyneth Jones.”

Warming to her theme, she went on: “They were *supposedly* talking about

plot, and first Gwyneth would go all fey and say something like, ‘I don’t plot, I just steal old fairy stories and put in some gravitrons.’ And then Bruce would come back *very, very slowly*, with: ‘The .. concept .. of .. plot .. is .. no .. longer .. tenable .. since .. reality .. is .. in .. fact .. a .. series .. of .. unrelated .. intersections....’ And then John Brunner would cap them both with some massively cosmopolitan anecdote like, ‘Personally I was very proud to meet this fan in Prague who said to me, “Others, Mr Brunner, have Told us about the art of Plot, but you ... you have **Shown** us!”’ And so we all walked out and headed for the bar.”

The bar was shut.

A Wellington Pub Meeting, London: September 1991

“I want to *berate* you,” said famous actor Mike Cule, heedless that I might mock his latest major TV project (an ad for Nuclear Electric). “I wish to taunt you with your failed futurology.”

“If it’s *The Third Millennium*,” I explained with practised haste, “Stableford wrote that bit.”

“In your convention talk about that very book,” sneered Mike, “you accused General Sir John Hackett of wishful thinking for suggesting the entire Soviet Union would fall apart in internal rebellion after the first nuclear strike. Didn’t even need that, did it? I taunt you, Langford. I berate you.”

Bloody hell, that was five years ago. I offered the suggestion that a nuclear attack in recent, crucial times would have been about the one thing that could have reunified the USSR, but Mike was too busy taunting and berating me to take this in ... and on my other side awesomely famous fan John Richards had embarked on a harangue of his own. This went something like:

“I’ve had enough of fanzines. All fanzines are self-indulgent rubbish. They don’t contain enough about SF and they have far too many first-person pronouns. They give masturbation a bad name. I’m going to publish a serious diatribe about all this, as a fanzine.”

Although he later mumbled something shifty about er taking an extreme position to er you know provoke discussion, I was enchanted and began to

imagine a fanzine that would conform to the new ideology. Luckily, scientific training provided an obvious model:

A specimen of “science fiction” was procured for examination from the *Analog* laboratories. The selected sample proved on preliminary examination to weigh 0.22 kg plus or minus 1g and to contain 192pp plus or minus 0.5 page. A molecular spectrographic analysis was conducted and the chemical constituents determined to be 67.5% inert padding, 32.2% faecal matter associated with domesticated ruminants (male) and 0.43% experimental error. See Table I.i.a. The repeatability of the procedure was checked using 49 additional specimens of this product, and ...

Harlech, North Wales: September 1991

This is where we truly Get Away From It All; Harlech beach, out of season, is reliably lonely. If so much as one tiny figure is visible in the five miles or so of wind-blasted sand, Hazel will hiss: “It’s a *crowd*.” This time it wasn’t just a crowd, and I cringed in alarm. After the stormy night it looked like an alien invasion. My sense of wonder glowed fitfully and then blew a fuse.

Mere reason might instruct us that this sinister, gelatinous dome, with whirly things like brain lobes visible through purplish flesh, had to be a mere jellyfish. But it was two feet across and bulged six inches high. Long-established SF instincts made it clear that the thing was just waiting to dissolve my flesh (Damon Knight), soak symbiotically into my pores (Hal Clement) or swarm up my back, override my nervous system and turn me into a shambling libertarian neo-conservative (Robert Heinlein). Paranoia grew as we covered three miles of foreshore and passed a further 63 of these monsters, many even bigger. Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence....

“They were merely *Rhizostoma pulmo*, the largest British jellyfish, which can officially be 60cm or more in diameter,” said Hazel, looking up from a reference work some time later. “It was perfectly natural.”

The *Observer’s Book of Pulsating Blobs* may never lie, but it doesn’t feel natural when after lifelong ignorance of this sodding great creature you meet 64 in one afternoon, hundreds of kilograms of wobbly biomass. Plus a number of patches higher in the sand where the sun had shrivelled further

specimens (which out of purism I didn't count). And a dogfish. I could have coped with just the dogfish.

After a while I thought of the moral: could this be how some ordinary sane visitor from the outside world feels on discovering a seemingly normal British hotel to contain not one hideous and unlikely sight, not two, but an entire pullulating SF convention?

Irresistible editor Arnie Katz, after badgering me relentlessly for this piece as noted in the introduction, never actually published it. It eventually appeared in The Fanzine Sampler published by Eve Harvey for Mexicon 5, May 1993.

Boskone Postcards

Boskone 29, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1992

As one of the guests of honour I should have written much more about this convention, but got stampeded into trying to cover the whole experience in part of one issue of my single-sheet SF newsletter Ansible. This was not sensible.

JFK Airport. I seem to have arrived early. My official mentor and transport boss Ben Yalow is delayed by traffic. An increasingly persistent cabbie works on my fears: "You're all alone here now. Soon you'll be getting hungry.... Believe me, this is a *bad place* to spend the night.... I want to *help* you...." Ben rescues me before I actually break down and cry.

Flushing, NY. Chinese nosh with Moshe Feder (now editor of the Military Book Club) and Lise Eisenberg is overshadowed by grim news of why I'm not meeting fannish legend Gary Farber. He has a kidney stone the size of a walnut, with operation after operation being postponed because his health isn't up to it.... At the fabulous Feder family home I gaze on bits of the Coke Collection. Is that a Coke bottle? No, it is a loving facsimile carved from solid rock crystal. A Coke neon-sign dominates the living room, a Coke clock broods over the kitchen, and I fall asleep surrounded by smaller Coke memorabilia of all shapes and sizes. Blimey.

New York City. Totally unimaginative touristy doings, plus a skiffy exhibit at the IBM Gallery (early editions of space operas by Kepler, de Bergerac, etc). Tor Books in the Flatiron Building is equally full of sights to boggle at: Anna Magee's desk with its litter of plastic rats and rubber brains ("I want to pick your brains." "Here, catch."), Senior Editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden, an inflatable Edvard Munch "Scream" figure diffusing Angst out over Broadway, and (most eldritch of all) David Hartwell's tie. Teresa Nielsen Hayden is also an editor these days, at Masquerade: her lurid book samples do, er um, worry me a bit when coming back through Customs. Having recently edited one porn epic whose hero was called Langford and the villain

Hartwell, she says wistfully: “No one would believe I hadn’t put the names in myself, so I had to change them.” Returning bloated from a swish publishing dinner with Patrick and Teresa, I wonder dimly what I’ve promised to write. Words?

Next day it’s so cold that I have to pause sightseeing to buy gloves. Lunch with Messrs Hartwell and van Gelder of *The New York Review of SF*, for which I doubtless promise to write things. Wonder about souvenirs for Hazel: a clockwork toy from “The Last Wound Up”, a two-foot statuette of a chap advertising interesting elastic bandages, a set of Museum of Modern Art cookie cutters in the shapes of famous buildings (including Sydney Opera House – the World Trade Center, which I have just been up, is conspicuously not represented)? What she’d really like is that skeletal 1890s electric toaster in the ConEd museum of energy. Not, alas, for sale.

Most of the evening passes fannishly in a microbrewery said to be the only one left in New York City. Hic.

I-91 northbound. Ben Yalow reveals many titbits about cons and the New England SF Association clubhouse (“Originally built on the other side of the road from where it is now.”). I glean that Worldcon ’95 bidding is neck-and-neck. Atlanta’s facilities are thought superior but large US fan blocs distrust the committee for Historical Reasons ... while Glasgow has the virtue of not being chaired by Malcolm Edwards.

Springfield, MA: Boskone. This is avowedly out in the sticks, a reaction from when Boskone ’87 grew far too big. Next year it moves back to civilization since NESFA think it’s now too small, a mere 800-odd people, most of them on the crowded programme (“A lot of people want to appear”) – so that GoH Jane Yolen has 9 items involving 26 speakers or panelists scheduled against her main speech (my figures as a mere subsidiary guest are 5 and 19). Nevertheless, great stuff.

I remember: A long walk on the first morning through new and photogenic snow • Jane Yolen disrupting “Meet the VIPs” with an ad-hoc conga line, notables like Joe and Gay Haldeman dancing over the tables (in a spontaneous uprush of emotion, I hide behind Hal Clement) • Mike Glicksohn and Teresa debating True Fanpublishing: “Twiltone!” he cries, and “The GENie network!” she ripostes. Tempted by technophilia, I promise to try the latter. “But,” she sobs, “there’s no GENie node in England.” Exit

Langford, with mutters of “Bah, ‘generally available’, humbug...” • Charles Ryan of *Aboriginal SF* explaining to me what he thinks of Chris Priest • A Glasgow ’95 bid party with Tim Illingworth serving single-malt from minute and clinical-looking containers (seemingly for eye lotion or tiny urine specimens), accompanied by other UK phenomena like KIM Campbell, Chris Cooper, Martin Hoare, haggis ... the nearby Atlanta ’95 party is soon emptied by this attraction • Gene and Rosemary Wolfe inviting me to dinner: I think my jaw hangs slackly open throughout • Social awareness – free condoms in the con suite and “British-style fan lounge” bar (“Beer, please.” “Not until 2pm.”) • Priscilla (Chair) Olson’s attempts to control “whimsey” outbreaks at the banquet: jet-assisted, whistling and helicopter balloons, chattering clockwork teeth, fetishistic headgear and worse, courtesy of Roger MacBride Allen, Lord of Misrule (resembling a smaller, more evil Dermot Dobson). This being Boskone, the anarchy is carefully delimited. “Please keep it to tables marked with the Whimsey logo,” Priscilla announces: “*Practise safe whimsey!*” • Being interviewed by Teresa about embarrassing subjects like exploding Oxford colleges and Fred Harris • Champagne and 90° heat at the Tor party • Missing the “Dead Doe Party” at a wild-game restaurant where Chris Cooper’s new lobster glove-puppet (coming soon to a million SF events near you) makes its entry on a platter • Filling the con newsletter *Helmuth* with Langfordiana, this hubris followed by Nemesis as, aghast, I hear myself volunteer for Helicon’s newsletter • Gene Wolfe sneaking in halfway through my “Insult Famous Authors” talk and asking later why I haven’t slagged *his* books. “You’re such a flagrant case,” I lie, “that I covered you on page one.” • Lurking enjoyably in hotel bars with [*fearfully long list omitted*] • Trying to eat something bigger than my head.

I-91 south. Highway culture shock at noticing that the American for “flattened hedgehog” is “inert raccoon”. Ben spills further dread con secrets. He it was who once mollified an irascible GoH with an unpopular presentation, by conscripting 20 gophers to remove their badges and sit doggedly through it ... I giggle a lot. At JFK, Ben even finds and switches me to an earlier flight. Truly a god amongst men.

The Illuminoids Illumination (Eastercon), Blackpool, Easter 1992

The Norbreck Castle Hotel in Blackpool promoted fannish health with facilities spread over miles of bracing corridors, and a rigorous breakfast curfew to discourage cholesterol intake. (“The breakfasts are actually very good,” said one wide-eyed committee member, “especially the mushrooms.” Those not at the secret upstairs committee breakfasts got no mushrooms, and riot was narrowly averted.) So-so hotel food apart, it seemed a pretty good venue, as vast sprawling castellated places three miles from city centres go.

“I was booked into the same room as Geoff Ryman,” said ashen-faced GoH Paul McAuley. “I had to explain the guest relationship isn’t *quite* that close.” PM also reeled in horror at being tagged as a reincarnation of [*ideologically suspect author omitted*] in the deeply naff opening-ceremony script, and hastily substituted Philip K. Dick. • Each registration pack came with a free fortune cookie containing a plug for *Chung Kuo – the epic*. A large box of spares was later hurled into a party, and vicious cookie-fights ensued: I looked in vain for certain reviewers muttering, “As I thought, this sick and obscene work inevitably engenders violence.” • Who could possibly speak authoritatively for an hour-long Isaac Asimov retrospective, organized at the last possible minute? The usual suspects made themselves scarce and three pundits who shall be nameless [*including Richard Evans and myself*] were forcibly conscripted. Con chair Rhodri James remarked, with measured care, “It was *interesting* ... people thought you must have been retrospecting in the bar for a long while beforehand.” • Chris “Someone bit me last night but I don’t know who” Bell deplored the folding of the **Contact** Eastercon bid: “We were planning to stand up at the bidding session and say, ‘Actually, Sou’Wester is a spoof bid,’ and watch Nic Farey’s face.” • Dave Ellis could not be stopped from describing his hotel room, whose fitted carpet gave way to an expanse of concrete adorned by a bin to catch drips from the ceiling leak.... • Roz Kaveney: “What about the *Villains* signing?” Dick Jude, Forbidden Planetoid: “Oh, Penguin didn’t send the books.” Roz: “*WHAT?*”

I've been here two days and you didn't tell me?" Dick: "Oh, I didn't think to." Roz, later in bar: "*How much* does that man get *paid* to run a bookshop and sell books? So I went to ask if the package had arrived early and been put in a hotel storeroom, and came back with the books, *fully determined* to deliver them to Dick Jude *rectally* –"

"Everything is wonderful," said Kev McVeigh to the massed ranks of the BSFA. "Er, our only qualified accountant has resigned, and so have numerous editors, and we'll probably have to merge some of the magazines, and put the subscription up, but *overall...*" I had to be elsewhere and missed the rest of this Panglossian enthusiasm. • Steve Lawson said of his wife, "Will you do it to Alice?" – sadly just a *Villains* autograph request. More awkward was Jim Burns's demand that, besides an inscription, authors add some "personal stain". • Publishing parties involved secretive cash floats at the Dealers' Room bar; by the time of Gollancz's, fans had caught on and the queue was parsecs long when, quite soon, the money ran out. • "Programme streams named Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail are bad enough," I puked gently, "but do I really have to talk in a room called Peter Fan?" "Shut up," explained Anne Page. • David Bell reeled back from a bar trivia game, quavering: "This machine has just asked me which religion L. Ron Hubbard founded." • Ever-political Abigail Frost did the con newsletter a story on the Revolutionary Communist Party's weird mystery-tour convention that same weekend: editor Chris O'Shea altered the name ("Revolving Communal Party") as he "thought there was a *real* organization called that." Abigail: "THAT'S THE FUCKING POINT!" Chris: "Well, I had to make it funny or it wouldn't mean anything to fandom." • David Pringle presided over an *Interzone* ten-year retrospective, surrounded by less successful small-press publishers. "Now I'll ask Chris Reed of *Back Brain Recluse* to tell us how he tried for national distribution like mine but failed miserably," he said, or words to that effect, and presently expounded on his new flyer campaign: "We've printed 120,000 of these and they'll be going out with *Granta*, *Literary Review*, *London Review of Books*, *New Scientist*, *New Statesman*, the *TLS* ... The *LRB* editor says to expect 0.4% response, that's 480 subscriptions, taking us up to around 2,500 ... and it's all jam because the Arts Council incentive grant is paying for the flyers!" Gnashing teeth resounded on every side. • Chris Evans kept wincing as penniless friends and Rog Peyton queued to say, "Your new book *Chimeras* is no doubt triff but Grafton must be insane – *I'm* not paying £5.99 for a slim 173pp paperback." •

Late at night Gamma confided loudly, “I’m going to sit at that table with the woman with the breasts, and give her my Aleister Crowley look.”

Fireworks: huge concussions setting off car-alarms all over the hotel car park, terrified policemen dodging showers of hot embers, fire engines hurtling coincidentally past, general oohs and ahhs, and behind me the small, sad voice of James White saying (after one particularly fearful detonation), “They’re trying to make me feel at home.” • A 5" piece of ordnance was found left over and MUFF, the Mortar Under a Fan Fund, was instantly mooted. • “Why,” asked Abigail in habitual alarm, “did Dermot Dobson just put his arm around me and say ‘Hello, my little nest of vipers?’” • Gazing from the safe side of the hotel’s glass-walled “Health & Fitness Club” at the quivering forms within, fans clutching pints of beer were reminded of the bit in St. Augustine or somewhere about heaven’s joys being enhanced by looking over the edge at the torments of the damned. • Paul Barnett confided: “Favourite overheard line: *Anxious fan* – ‘I told Ramsey Campbell I had this great story idea for him, and he *did* say he’d be in this bar around now....’” • One nearby Italian restaurant offered *Pate Tricolore alla “Don Antonio”* – *A fan of three patés*. Who was this fan? Did we know him? • After cracking some mild jokes about Storm Constantine in my own talk I was accosted by her supporters’ club, Vikki Lee France, who said rather sharply: “You obviously know nothing about sex and have never experienced an orgasm.” Oh. • At the end-of-con grump session Mike Molloy started to explain how no one needed these uppity “tech” people, at which point his mike mysteriously went dead. (“We took him at his word” – Pat Silver.) • Mild-mannered Andrew Stephenson was overheard saying, “Whitley Strieber is completely batty. He writes crap. He’s always written crap. All his books are crap. He’s never *going* to write anything but crap....” • At Geoff Ryman’s party, aspiring capitalist Rog Peyton did a triumphalist rant about the Tory election victory: “And when they finally destroy the National Health Service forever, I’ll be *really happy!*” “I can’t listen to this,” gasped Mike Ford, backing away as though from Chernobyl. “It’s too awful....” • Erstwhile spaceman Gerry Webb waxed maudlin about recessions, debts and his toddler son’s appalling prospects in a country dominated by, well, Rog Peyton. • Joseph Nicholas’s strangely clinging leggings attracted comment; tight-lipped Judith Hanna said, “I don’t censor Joseph’s *clothes*.” • Luring its audience with free T-shirts, David Wingrove’s *Chung Kuo* revivalist meeting won the respect of *Chung Kuo*-hating David V. Barrett but not of John Richards: “We

writers are the heirs of Ariadne, he said, following the thread through the labyrinth with our torches held high and the wide-eyed readers following behind.... It was the most pretentious gibberish I've ever heard." One has heard worse, mate.

Of course there were awards. For my sins I had to present the BSFA's, with the added fun of trying to reconstruct their mislaid nominations list *even as* Ramsey Campbell was introducing me. NOVEL: *The Fall of Hyperion* by Dan Simmons. SHORT: "Bad Timing" by Molly Brown. ART: *Interzone 48* cover by Mark Harrison. DRAMATIC *Terminator 2*. Eastercon "fun" awards followed. LONG TEXT: *Take Back Plenty* by Colin Greenland. SHORT "Quantum Choco-Dynamics" by Sean Ellis *et al.* GRAPHIC "Milton Keynes" T-shirt by Smitty. DRAMATIC *Red Dwarf V*. Colin Greenland writes thanking "the dozens and dozens of people who sent that beautiful Get Well card ... also for voting me an Eastercon Award. Nevertheless, I do feel I ought to point out that *Take Back Plenty* now has three awards (the worthy one, the official one, and now one just for fun) ... there are plenty of other books out there, some of which haven't got *any awards at all* – so I think you ought to start voting for some of them now. In case you're wondering, I've got M.E. (or post-viral fatigue syndrome, for short), which is absolutely bloody exhausting – I am getting better slowly...." Avowedly silly awards were also presented, to much acclaim: *Most promising newcomer* D. West, *Most active fan* Bernie Evans, *Most inactive* Brian Davis, *Most fanciable* Teddy, *Most talented* Dave Mooring, *Most untalented* Steve Green ("Wait for the *Critical Wave* headline," said Abigail Frost: "Wave Editor Wins Major Award."), *Most boring* Nigel E. Richardson, *Most exciting* David Lally, *Most excitable* Pam Wells, *Most likely to succeed* Bernie Evans, *Most likely to fail* Tony Berry, *Most chauvinistic* Nic Farey (invariably seen introducing himself to some lady so, er, thrustingly that within 30 seconds she would be pointedly mentioning a large husband or boyfriend), *Best bum in fandom* Dave Mooring. Let us not discuss all the obvious fixes.... Oh, and Roger Robinson got the Doc Weir "unsung good guy" award.

The 1994 Eastercon bidding session, rumour forewarned us, was to be an ordeal by fire for the "unopposed" Sou'Wester committee. After an invisible slide-show in the not very darkened hall, they did indeed cringe a bit at savage questions like "Have you got a hotel contract?" (no, just a letter of agreement) and "Is it true that what you're paying for function space is such

as to stupefy the imagination?” (yes, apparently). MC John Richards had half-expected a “Hold Over Decision” vote, later observing that “Ian Sorensen woffled interminably from the floor and lost ‘Hold Over’ an awful lot of votes by arguing for it.” A first show of hands was decisive: Bristol it is. In theory.... Terry Pratchett was on the far side of the world for Easter, but has since remarked: “I know something about Bristol’s hotels and for the life of me I can’t imagine a con in any of them.”

By Monday I felt old and tired and pathetically grateful for a lift home. Not as old and tired as senescent Martin “Oh God I’m 40 this weekend” Hoare ... but my turn comes *next* Easter.

The oracular prophecy of Terry Pratchett was fulfilled when Sou’Wester, the 1994 Eastercon, switched venues in midstream from Bristol to the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool.

Di Ex Machinis

Mexicon 5, Scarborough, May 1993

It's all Mexicon 5's fault. Weirdness happened again: the *Cactus Times* convention newsletter grew increasingly bizarre and incomprehensible as the event wore on. Placid, tolerant Abigail Frost was the official editor, meaning that ill-treated slaves Barnett and Langford got to do only 90% of the work (rising to 110% on the issue "guest edited" by non-computerate Paul "Gosh, this editing is easy!" Kincaid). Recovering in the following week, I nervously hoped that copies of *Cactus Times* wouldn't reach a certain sensitive pro editor in Australia ... owing to one of the many running jokes that Got Out Of Hand that weekend. Is it possible to explain? No, but I'll have a go anyway.

It was all Linda Krawecke's fault. She is a patron of the dread mail-order pop-culture suppliers Archie McPhee in Seattle. (After our visit to that area, Eileen Gunn provided Hazel and me with a matched pair of McPhee's huge loathsome floppy plastic slugs. "The white one," she pointed out helpfully, "glows in the dark.") Mexicon's committee was largely furnished from the McPhee catalogue. Hence the Frost "Fuck off and DIE!" editorial handgun, frequently employed on would-be *Cactus Times* contributors, which took the shape of a one-legged transparent blue plastic dinosaur with a huge and penis-like trigger (its symbolism, the newsletter concluded, was best not explored). Hence the time-wasting game of "Pinball Philosophers" in which you scored 20 for the Descartes slot, 5 for Aristotle and 50 for Marx (Groucho, actually). Hence the revoltingly lifelike and tactile rubber "Brain of Mexicon" provided as quiz mascot, with the addendum of a large Mexican moustache. Hence the little plastic genie-lamp in the committee room, which when you rubbed it first laughed tinnily and then broke out into electronic cries of "Free! Free! FREE!", just like chairman Mike Ford when Mexicon was over. Finally there was a half-gallon jar containing upwards of 800 tiny, kitschy things (including, I heard later, 49 lifelike black plastic ants), leading to a convention-long competition to guess how many things and win an *Encyclopedia of SF*. Proceeds went to Books for the Blind.

It was all Abigail's fault. The collecting box for How Many Things guesses had come free with Mexican's giant order from Archie McPhee: an almost tasteful little Chinese mandarin with a slot in his back. ("We should have charged 50p a guess," she grumped, "but you couldn't get anything bigger than a 20p in the slot." Not even, apparently, two 20p coins....) Abigail decided he must have a name and, staring at a copy of the *Encyclopedia*, realized that he actually *looked like* a certain editor thereof. He could only be that majestic Chinese-Australian sage Ni Kol-Tse. As she explained in *Cactus Times*: "He knows EVERYTHING – except how many things there are in the jar...."

It was all my fault. I had brought along a buckshee copy of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia* corrections and updates I'd been typesetting for John Clute, and divulged with great glee how I'd managed to contest Peter Nicholls's "correction" (made over the heads of the other editors – he faxed it directly to New York where the list was first drafted) of the correct plural *di ex machina* to *dei ex machina*. Evil cackles of mirth were heard from *Encyclopedia* technical editor John Grant, who moved among us that weekend in his mundane "Barnett" guise....

Yes, it was all Paul Barnett's fault. In the very next issue of *Cactus Times* he gleefully inserted a correction about Ni Kol-Tse. "He knows EVERYTHING – except how many things there are in the jar and the plural of *deus ex machina*."

It was all practically everyone's fault from that point onward, as imaginative plurals ran riot up and down the columns of the newsletter. There were addendas and corrigendas and *Cactes Times*, and any inadvertent use of correct Latin plurals was apt to be followed by an interjection from Ni Kol-Tse himself: "I have two proof corrigendae to make there, you drongos!" ("Oh *shit*," we said later with much smiting of brows. "It should have been *drongoi*.")

Most of all it is Abigail's fault: she has subsequently been drafting a Mexican report by Ni Kol-Tse himself for a post-convention *Cactus Times*. This goes on a lot about gorgeous sheilae and "ignorant pommy bastards coming the raw crustaceum about one or two minute lacunes in my omniscience." Never let it be said that Mexican lets a joke stop running until it's actually coughing up blood in exhaustion. "And," explained Abigail sweetly, "to indicate the

dual Chinese-Australian nature of this ancient sage I want the *Ni Kol-Tse* at the end to be in that oriental typeface but *upside down*.” I fled screaming. (Actually she didn’t say “that oriental typeface” but “Firm’n’Fruity”, the name by which the font in question is known for reasons lost in the impenetrable mists of Mexicon 4. But I digress.)

If it takes that long to explain one small point of mystification, what hope is there of translating the entire run of *Cactus Times*? On the whole I think it’s all Pat Cadigan’s fault. You had to be there, and she was.

The Scottish Convention Intersection (Worldcon), Glasgow, August 1995

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times: it was a Worldcon in the hangar-like halls of the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow. Total attendance: 4,800. All the usual desperate fun was had, punctuated by endless shuttle-bus and taxi rides between city-centre hotels and the SECC in its distant post-industrial wasteland amid car parks approximately the size of Kansas. Few coherent memories remain – just a handful of snapshots.

First and saddest: **John Brunner** bustling suavely through the fan area. A hurried exchange of Hellos and then he's gone forever: a stroke, death within hours, a flood of memorials and regrets. Numbness spreads. John would have been hugely tickled by the idea of making his exit at a major convention ... but not just yet. *Lisanne Norman* writes: "At 9 minutes past 5pm on Friday 25 August, while his wife LiYi, my friend Judith and myself held his hand, John Brunner slipped peacefully away from us. The end for him was gentle, and he went with what love all three of us could surround him with. I will never forget him." • **Drummers and Pipers** ... marching through the SECC concourse and into the gigantic Hall 4 with its weirdly assorted fannish litter (bouncy castles, play areas, fast-food stalls, con bidding desks, fanzine tables, Ukrainians selling trade goods at unbelievable prices, etc, etc) to launch a lavish opening wine-party financed by Glasgow's grateful ratepayers.... A partly convincing Nessie features in the parade and nearly eats Peter Morwood. • **Samuel R. Delany** (Guest of Honour) with a beard more genially patriarchal than ever, encountered at a HarperCollins celebration mysteriously sited on a moored Clyde ferry miles from anywhere. He has read my fanzine writings! I swoon. • **Ian and Judy Watson** telling of a fire evacuation from the Moat House Hotel (where showers trigger alarms if you leave the bathroom door open). "We thought you had to run to the car park in your *pyjamas!*" gesticulates Ian, "We were the only ones! Everyone else had anoraks and camo gear!" To make it more interesting, Judy adds: "And of course Ian had this enormous erection." • **Terry Pratchett** magically

converting the same fire alert into a 4am signing session when he encountered a fan carrying (all together now) a Rare Unsigned Copy. Terry's antics with a pop-up dildo during a panel with Tom Holt remain veiled in diplomacy. • **John Clute** on the *Fantasy Encyclopedia* panel, miraculously conveying his theory of true fantasy's pattern of Wrongness, Thinning and Healing against near-impossible odds. Problem: the SECC acoustics. "Rooms" are flimsy, non-soundproofed, roofless enclosures; voices float upward into murmurous echoing vastness. To use the sound system is to compete with adjacent rooms: since the entrances face one another, John finds himself staring down the aisle at his hated sonic rival across the way, who is Gardner Dozois. Each manically succeeds in drowning out the other. (To do it properly, the committee explains firmly, would have cost money.) • **Vince Clarke** (Fan Guest of Honour) tucking into frogs' legs under the watchfully sozzled eye of his self-appointed minder Chuch Harris: "I am here to make sure he has fun *whether he likes it or not.*" • **Michael Swanwick** musing, "I like gratuitous sex and think it has a place in fiction as well...." • **Greg Pickersgill** (fan area Grubby Eminence) blinking when a mild "Hello" to Teresa Nielsen Hayden elicits the response "FUCK YOU, PICKERSGILL!" – little does he know that seconds earlier, Teresa placed a bet with me that he would ignore her all weekend.... • **Evening Fan Programme** offering Moose TV, Ian Sorensen's play *Dune or The Sand of Music*, and The Lovely Jackie McRobert (so described on her visiting cards). • **Fanfundery** ... TAFF's Dan (and Lynn) Steffan, and GUFF's Ian Gunn and Karen Pender-Gunn, all being jolly good guests. • **Peter Weston** fulfilling a ritual Worldcon need by hurling beer over the most Scientologist-like figure to hand – in this case, Ted White....

Hugo Ceremony

Vast crowds filling the Extravanzas hall amid the usual atmosphere of sweaty paranoia exuding from nominees whose pose of Total Cool is fast eroded by delays and minor presentations: BIG HEART award to Ken Slater, FIRST FANDOM to Jack Speer and Harry Warner Jr; Cordwainer Smith gets a "Japanese Hugo" (SEIUN AWARD) for the 1961 "A Planet Named Shayol" and Dan Simmons another for *Hyperion*. Robert Silverberg's spoken memorial for John Brunner is simple, word-perfect, and causes a four-minute standing ovation for the late great man. This feels right – as does the JOHN

W. CAMPBELL award for best new writer, presented to our very own Jeff Noon. • Then the Hugos proper. FANZINE: shock horror victory of *Ansible*. FAN ARTIST: Teddy Harvia. (Meanwhile your editor is detained in a Kafkaesque maze backstage, until –) FAN WRITER, me: I can only say, “Unfortunately, Martin Hoare can’t be with us tonight....” SEMIPROZINE: *Interzone* – and suddenly this award’s impartial presenter Kim Newman is leaping gleefully around “like a demented Muppet” as David Pringle marches to the stage. ARTWORK: *Lady Cottington’s Pressed Fairy Book* by Brian Froud and Terry Jones. DRAMATIC: *All Good Things (ST:TNG)*. PRO ARTIST: Jim Burns. PRO EDITOR: Gardner Dozois, whose shadow never grows less. NONFICTION: *I. Asimov: a Memoir* by the late Himself. SHORT STORY: “None So Blind” by ever-popular Joe Haldeman. NOVELETTE: “The Martian Child” by David Gerrold, who with memorable tackiness hauls his young son on-stage to eulogize him as the Real Martian Child. (A voice says, “He was worse at the Nebulas.”) NOVELLA: “Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge” by Mike Resnick – nominated in four categories and thus, in inscrutable US phrasing, the first person to bat .250 in the Hugos. NOVEL: *Mirror Dance* by Lois McMaster Bujold. • And so to wild parties, fireworks, tears, sighs of relief and, all night, a background throb of gloating from a select few. “I’m still making the Hugos,” confides artificer Peter Weston, “but basically it’s a sideline.” He adds in doomy tones, “This empowers me to say: *Remember, Langford, you are but mortal.*” H’mmm. Is 11 too many?

Last Snapshots

Chris Priest, bemusedly discovering that his squib *The Book on the Edge of Forever* ended up a mere 4 votes behind the nonfiction Hugo winner, Isaac Asimov’s autobiography; also that mild-mannered Norman Spinrad carried a commission from Harlan Ellison to “punch Priest out if he wins”. (“I keep wondering why I would become *more* punchable for winning an award I did not canvass, when the presumed offence remains, irrespective of winning or not winning? In other words, why didn’t Norman belt me one while he had the chance?” Apparently because, while muttering something non-committal to placate the great Ellison, Spinrad has no intention of being silly enough to obey instructions.) • **Baltimore**, winners of the 1998 Worldcon site selection vote, mercilessly pursuing their “pirates” bidding theme by naming the

convention “BucConeer”. Oh dearie me. • **Balanced Reporting:** the *Sunday Mail* attacking nasty anorak-wearing sci-fi fans in a story headed *Weirdos’ Show Is Branded A Rip-Off*. This is justified by (a) locating a woman who owing to media misrepresentation has expected a free *Star Trek* exhibition and doesn’t like what she finds after paying £90; (b) moving on to lengthy descriptions of oddball fans “looking as though they were on drugs” without finding space to report that the complainer got a rapid refund. • **Science Programme** organizers groaning that their early and frequent requests for equipment went astray in the committee’s management labyrinth: nevertheless, despite the maddening proximity of a Live Aliens promotion playing awful music and sound effects at top volume all too near the science and fan areas, it is agreed (and endorsed by Mighty Jon Cowie, Before Whom Mere Fans Tremble) that they do a splendid job. • **Bob Guccione** of *Omni* infamy being revealed, on p79 of Dorling Kindersley’s spiffily produced *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, to look uncannily like me. Separated at birth? “Not my fault,” ringingly declares compiler John Clute. “This should be worth lots of publicity in *Ansible*....” • **Voice of the Mysterons**, the con newsletter, producing an impressive 15 issues plus many extras (can you spot the unsigned Langford contributions?). In unwise homage to the Mexican headline that plunged hotel relations into war, a squib about booze running out at a publishers’ party is titled SCUM! SCUM! SCUM! Repeated apologies (“That wasn’t *grovelling* enough!”) are demanded by massed publishers who threaten the Ultimate Sanction of not paying the bar bill.... • **Typo of the Convention:** Wizards of the Coast, purveyors of expensively addictive card games, billing themselves in one of their own ads as “Wizards of the Cost”. • **Strange Fruit:** Chuch Harris exploring a fruit-bowl in the suite where I’m holding a post-Hugo sprawl, and finding weird objects covered in thick blue fur. Fascinated, he pops one between finger and thumb in a gooey red splatter. A special effect from *Alien*, or a symbol of Intersection’s good things (acoustics excepted) bursting through layers of foreboding? No, it is an elderly Glasgow strawberry. • **The End.** Sore-throated and euphoric, I am toying with a final drink in the Central Hotel and telling hungover Tony Berry all about last night’s spiffy Indian restaurant meal. Slowly he speaks: “I was there. At the same table. You twit.” It seems time to leave.... Martin Hoare briefs me extensively on the horrors of getting massive, rocket-shaped chunks of metal through airport security: in fact the Glasgow x-ray operator merely falls around laughing and beckons colleagues

with noises of “We’ve Got A Right One Here!” The rest is history.

September Afterthoughts

Somehow, until this month, the possibility of continued life after (one last time) **The Scottish Convention** seemed curiously remote. Well, it had its moments, and most of those I remember are in *Ansible 98 [as above]*. Was there more? Going up by air was great fun (no, I couldn’t really afford it but was determined to pamper myself), with little treats like watching the plane’s rainbow-edged shadow hop and skip science-fictionally between the ground and cloud layers, showing that I don’t fly often enough to get blasé about it. In Glasgow, I resolved that *just once* I would walk from the city centre to the distant SECC, and within minutes was spotted and given a lift by kindly Pat McMurray (thanks again): other resolutions, mostly concerning alcohol intake, were likewise broken in the following days. Chatting in bars and restaurants with various of You Lot was good fun, very much more so than trying to follow programme items through the venue’s awful background rumble, drone and echo effects. After pious pre-convention noises about concern for disabled access, “Intersection’s message to anyone with a hearing loss was, in effect, ‘fuck you, go home’.” – thus Patrick Nielsen Hayden, who is less tactful than I would be, but that’s pretty much how it felt. The Hugo ceremony made up for much, of course, especially seeing mighty David Pringle collect a rocket at last: would he contrive, almost, to smile? (Microscopic examination of the photographs is still awaited.) And afterwards: house guests, more house guests, a mass of column and review deadlines, our party (glad to see some of You Lot again), John Brunner’s funeral, the rush to do *Ansible*, and other complications best not written down. Sanity is expected to return, oh, some time in November.

House Guest Footnote: did anyone else have GUFF winners Ian Gunn and Karen Pender-Gunn to stay? Nice people, but after they left we were bemused to find a slip of paper on the hall notice-board, warning of the “Plastic Spaceman Conspiracy” and claiming that at least ten small plastic figures had been concealed in this dwelling. Seven have indeed come to light (one plastic spaceman, the rest model German soldiers; Hazel was slightly upset to find one in her Very Private Room Which Others May Enter By Invitation Only). Yvonne Rousseau will perhaps be able to confirm whether this is standard antipodean etiquette when staying with fannish

acquaintances....

Swan Song

UK Year of Literature and Writing, Swansea, December 1995

In December a small horde of writers converged on Swansea for the tail end of the city's "UK Year of Literature and Writing" celebration: this was the SF bit, organized by that mighty maestro of multiplicitous metaphor, Lionel Fanthorpe. Whether this segment of the festivities counted as Literature or just Writing was never made clear. A bit of both, perhaps: Brian Aldiss is definitely Literature and I, er, I know my place.

It was a convention, Jim, but not as we know it. The various UKYoL events mostly took place in Ty Llên, a rather jolly old municipal building only recently restored from being a dilapidated abode of dossers and alcoholics (we'll leave that straight line right where it is, thanks) ... although certain items happened in other scattered venues, including an alley inappropriately named Salubrious Passage and a bleak university arts centre several miles around the bay. Meanwhile the honoured guests were (in Steve Sneyd's phrase) "exiled to an Industrial Estate Motel" far, far away in another direction altogether – this being the sort of luxury accommodation where, having undressed and begun to shiver violently, you find a small sign reading: THIS HEATER IS CONTROLLED FROM THE RECEPTION DESK. PLEASE ASK AT RECEPTION IF YOU WISH IT TURNED ON.

To add a keen spirit of competitiveness, all UKYoL events were separately priced, enabling the organizers to charge extra for the mighty Aldiss/Pratchett double bill while accepting mere coppers for access to the small, hard-to-find room containing Langford and Brian Stableford. Our advertised topic was "The Decay of Science Fiction", illustrated by me talking about padding and Brian reading several of his own stories. Fun was nevertheless had, encouraged by that man Fanthorpe as a manically bouncing MC who, naturally shaven-headed and clad in sinister evening dress, did indeed closely resemble a bouncer. Having him on hand as presenter while giving a talk is

rather like being allotted a high-volume laugh track. Lionel jollied the whole thing along somehow and cowed the restive audiences with his improvised songs. Other familiar weirdnesses of organization soon emerged: what do you do when a million thirsty Terry Pratchett fans crowd into the festival building for a signing session? Close the adjacent bar, of course.

Indeed Lionel's bubbly enthusiasm kept the whole slightly shambolic Swansea organization fizzing along in some style. Perhaps his finest hour came when a large hole appeared in the programme as a result of Bob Shaw eloping to get married in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Dauntless Lionel replaced the advertised Shaw "Serious Scientific Talk" with a medley of his own songs, including a heart-rendingly lyrical summary of the entire occasion which wrenches the words from my mouth: "Brian Aldiss, Terry Pratchett, / Colin Wilson and the rest, / All our Science Fiction writers / Rank among the very best. (*Chorus: Every kind of Science Fiction / Or an Unsolved Mystery, / Supernatural, Horror Stories / And Heroic Fantasy!*) Guy N. Smith and Andy Sawyer; / Ian McDonald – pleased to tell – / Freddie Clarke and David Langford / And Paul Brazier's here as well. (*Chorus.*)" Later verses dropped the names of Pringle, Sneyd and Stableford; I won't say in what.

Brian Aldiss's striped jacket and straw hat aroused general awe, but he was all of a tizzy: "You're lucky. You only have Stableford. I have to follow Pratchett. I can see the rush for the exits already..." Colin Wilson, who revealed his new serious scientific theory that Atlantis lies beneath the Antarctic ice, was billed as "a real life *X-Files* Agent Mulder" – but soon demonstrated by comparison that Mulder is absurdly closed-minded and sceptical. Alas, I missed most of the excitement by leaving early, since I was coming down with a foul cold that turned off my brain. Please ask at Reception if you wish it turned on.

Six Day Warp Intervention (Eastercon), Liverpool, Easter 1997

It is probably a very, very silly idea to ask an Eastercon guest of honour to write a con report. After all, if I actually recall anything significant from Intervention, this could be interpreted as a hideous slur on a committee that showed itself determined not to let me spend more than nanoseconds burdened with an empty glass.

Thursday

The classical unities of convention reports require extended and tedious discussion of travel, as I embarrassedly remember while sprawling in the only first-class railway carriage I've ever legitimately occupied. (Seems very like other carriages except for the little antimacassars; also an absence of people and a plethora of dust, as though the sun has come up on an all-night party of vampires.) Even more embarrassingly, there are a few cracks about the inherent tedium of "How I Got There" reports in the draft of the speech I'm giving tomorrow. Slipping into *Encyclopedia* mode, I mumble "See RECURSIVE FANTASY."

Railtrack decides to provide some interesting copy by halting to allow a lingering 40-minute meditation on the majestic beauties of Birmingham International station, while up the line at New Street the Liverpool connection sneaks off without me. Bugger. In due course there follows a great deal of racing up and down those echoing New Street stairs in the wake of that terrible loneliness I always feel when an incomprehensible tannoy announcement blares forth, and *exactly half* the people on my platform leave at a panic-stricken run.... There is a sense of enormous relief on finally reaching Liverpool station, especially since my new train carries stickers assuring the world that it goes no farther than Runcorn.

Ah, the Adelphi Hotel. The traditional attempt to claim my badge, only to be informed that because I'm a guest it has been specially put aside in order to

speed me through Registration, and now no one can find it. The traditional collapse in an unpalatial hotel room, and phone-call to assure Hazel that I'm safely here ... only to be informed by Reception that because I'm a guest and they haven't grabbed a credit card imprint, they're bloody well not letting me make outside calls. Reluctantly I go downstairs and retaliate with extreme prejudice by telling that mistress of tactful hotel liaison, Chris Bell. (Hazel: "She has a *terrifying hat!*") There follows a blur of action as Chris leaps over the reception desk with a single bound: stunned receptionists arc in slow motion across the lobby, crash through windows, wedge themselves gorily into the revolving door, etc. Yes, this is an Adelphi convention all right.

The hotel's strong point, the vast central lounge which serves as focal point and general sprawling place, is a bit of a handicap to those wanting to chivvy fans into actual programme items. It's so much easier to sprawl and let the Eastercon slip dreamily by. With the resistless, driving will-power for which I'm so notorious, I do precisely this. Vignette: graphic artist Ron Tiner deciding that the Isabella-coloured surgical collar which prevents Diana Wynne Jones's neck from imploding looks a bit ... dull. In no time at all he has livened it up with a frieze of naked dancing nymphs.

Friday

Big paranoia day: my talk is at 6pm this evening, the latest I could negotiate. A later hour, when more people will have arrived, is ruled out by intricately complex reasons of con organization; the weekend, when everyone will have arrived, is ruled out since Intervention has four guests and has decided that attendees' minds may be blown only once a day by the wondrousness of a GoH performance.

At breakfast, Alison Scott looks balefully at her silently sleeping offspring. "This is Not Representative. She's quiet *only at conventions*. Knows when she's on to a good thing." Conversely, I explain, I am ever so quiet when at home.

A walk around the town discloses that on the streets of early-morning Liverpool, *Big Issue* sellers somewhat outnumber mere civilians. On return I find a grim checkpoint at the Adelphi lounge entrance: "Can I see your badge?" asks a very small fan, and without breaking step I frankly confess "Haven't got one!" rather than pause to argue. At Registration – cunningly

located beyond the badge checkpoint – they explain that my badge is in a very safe place indeed, and that scores of people are diligently seeking it. This seems a good time to cower and whimper in the Fan Lounge (“BoSh’s”), where chairbeing John Richards greets me with fresh reassurances: “I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY! I KNOW ALL ABOUT YOUR BLOODY BADGE! I CAN’T DO *ANYTHING* ABOUT IT! IT’S ALL FALLING APART!” Obviously he is putting a brave face on things.

But wait! In a corner of BoSh’s I discover and proceed to rummage through a temptingly abandoned cache of staff badges. Am still wondering whether I can get away with being Tourist Information, Hotel Staff, Green Room Catamite or other interesting possibilities, when the hand of Anne-Marie Wright thrusts a new badge pin deep into my chest. God bless Intervention. A mere sixteen and a half hours after being alerted to the problem, they have resourcefully dubbed me Temporary Dave Langford. It is a common feeling.

John Jarrold has also become temporary, or at any rate part-time, and gloats at length about how he’ll be editing 24 SF/fantasy books a year for Simon & Schuster UK, while working in London only two days a week, and another day for S&S at home, leaving him able to spend the rest of his time at profitable freelance editing or heroic pub sessions, he’s not quite sure which.

This leads inexorably to discussion of Intervention’s specially imported real beer (“Oh God, the hotel didn’t get anything like enough,” wails the committee). The three flavours are Theakston’s Old Peculier, a bit heavy for merry quaffing sessions; Somebody’s Mild, which I don’t like; and a surreal cider of that curious cloudy yellow known to connoisseurs as “Mrs Blenkinsop’s Specimen”. (Simo has an alarming related thought while drinking this and noticing the brand name is Bulmer’s – just as word goes round about Ken Bulmer’s stroke and hospitalization.) This last isn’t too bad if you shut your eyes, but gets steadily lumpier towards the bottom of each cask....

It may be taken as read – and indeed as an essential aspect of Eastercon heritage – that the real beer runs out, to be replaced by hastily negotiated and progressively less real substitutes. England, my England.

Onward, to the Opening Ceremony. GoH Brian Aldiss may still be on a train and GoH Jon Bing in Norway, but John Richards (wearing a three-piece suit which he overtly hopes will irritate people) knows that the show must go on.

“We Are Grey!” he bellows to a suddenly baffled audience. It is his catchphrase of the hour, conceivably borrowed from John Major. The general effect is something like this:

“We are grey! We stand between science fiction and fantasy, between the mundane and the imaginative, between the light and the dark! We are grey! We lie between drunkenness and sobriety, between multiplication and division, between coherence and incoherence! We are grey! We occupy that elusive middle ground between going on far too long and going on even longer than that.... Because we are grey!”

And Octavia Butler and I are duly introduced, and I fail in my attempt to pick John’s pocket as a live demonstration of the thievery he’s currently warning people about (“We are grey! We position ourselves steadfastly between those who leave their room doors open, and those who fail to close them!” ... well, perhaps not in those exact words), and Intervention is well and truly opened. This leaves no further safety-barrier between me and my own talk. I begin to gibber, while Paul Barnett says helpful things like “But you’ve done this lots of times before – you can’t possibly be nervous.” I favour him with a Look.

The actual talk is a resolute attempt to do something different. I sense – perhaps wrongly – that after past outbreaks of Langford, con audiences wearily expect me to conduct a brisk tour of recent and not-so-recent SF, wielding a merciless bladder on clichés and plot devices, and never ever omitting to have a go at L. Ron Hubbard. This time, therefore, it’s fanzines, and specifically the 1970s fanzines (plus a few early-80s ones) that made me think it was worth hanging around in the fannish microcosm. Subject matter dictates form: you can’t assume an audience has read all or any of this sometimes esoteric stuff. So between the linking material, my text is a mini-fanthology of brief extracts that I still think are funny, clever or memorable ... like the escalating “Peter Nicholls definition of SF” devised by Leroy Kettle:

“Sci-fi can be succinctly defined as speculation, whether based on established scientific facts or on logical pseudo-facts consistent with the framework of the fiction in question, involving smelly green pimply aliens furiously raping or eating, or both, beautiful naked bare-breasted chicks, covering them in slime, red, oozing, living slime, dribbling from every horrific orifice, squeezing out

between bulbous pulpy lips onto the sensuous velvety skin of the writhing sweating slave-girls, their bodies cut and bruised by knotted whips brandished by giant blond vast-biceped androids called Simon, and written in the Gothic mode.” (*True Rat* 7, 1976)

The great relief is that the audience laughs – sometimes with disconcerting uproar at minor throwaways, sometimes rather more mutedly than hoped, but it all averages out and I end up finding myself not actually dead on stage. General collapse beckons, but the bar beckons harder. How I envy all those gifted sods who can wander blithely on-stage and improvise.

Meanwhile Paul Barnett, chronically overworked in past weeks, is secretly far more stressed than I by what he perceives as utterly shambolic preparations for the imminent *Fantasy Encyclopedia* launch party ... and keels over. He is already protesting volubly while being loaded on to a stretcher and removed to hospital, but I am unaware of this when a helpful messenger locates me in the pizza cellar and cries: “You know Paul’s had a stroke?” We have all just heard that Ken Bulmer has had a stroke; we remember John Brunner at Intersection. The world goes a bit funny.

This is why, to my shame – with “John Grant” busy talking his way out of hospital and John Clute far away in America – my own backup role in providing some editorial presence at the *FE* launch is confined to sitting clammily in a dim cellar, staring at slowly congealing pizza while being soothed by Alice and Steve Lawson. Gulp.

The happy anticlimax involves a late drink with the returned Paul (still plaintively protesting about officious medics) and others of the usual suspects. Diana has furtively visited Boots and acquired a bandage or something to cover up her erotic Classical Frieze. We scoff at her.

Saturday

A good day on which to recover from Friday. I soon stop logging occurrences of Saturday’s most popular query, which rings a variety of scatological changes on the theme “Why the hell was your talk scheduled before I even arrived?” Martin Hoare passes on the latest Chinese whispers – “So Paul’s had a heart attack then?” – but I feel a bit stronger now.

My notebook records some favourite Evolution party slogans in the food

area: “Do not take glasses into the gene pool!” and “Enjoy yourselves – or we’ll clone Simo!” The next note is an overheard from Brian Aldiss Himself at a nearby table: “I was reading *The Sun*, my favourite newspaper ...” Unfortunately, this is where my written record appears to stop. I envisage Langford’s Unfinished Con Report, which like *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* will achieve a lasting reputation fuelled by critical controversy about what happened in the end ... but see a mysterious Dickensian vision of three spectral *Attitude* editors shaking their heads firmly.

The *Fantasy Encyclopedia* panel starts soberly enough with Paul’s serious overview of how the mighty project took shape, but inevitably silliness creeps in. Abetted by Chris Bell, Diana graphically re-enacts her horror at reading some early drafts and making countless marginal notes like “BOLLOCKS!” and “Oh God, Clute, you can’t say *that*,” and “What does MENIPPEAN *mean* anyway?” Picture the hurt face of J. Clute peeping into these pages, expecting structuralist critical comments and many a grave consideration of JUNGIAN PSYCHOLOGY, only to find all these learned cross-references to BOLLOCKS!

I am well armed with droll anecdotes about hideous lapses in erudition and cross-referencing, having researched all this for the special Eastercon *Ansible 116½*. Soon we are plumbing such depths as my traditional spoof Clute entry (“We are complicit, all of us, in the haecceity engendered by Pratchett’s chiaroscuro of disjected topoi ...” [\[1\]](#)), and also belatedly trying to indicate through the general aura of fun and farce that this is a Damn Good Serious Book which everyone ought to buy. A deplorable anecdote about our publishers Little, Brown begins to well up within me, but is lost since it’s time to close the panel down. Which is jolly good luck, as Tim Holman of L,B proves to be in the audience and listening attentively. (*Chorus*: “Ha ha ha, Hee hee hee, Little Brown book, don’t I love thee!”)

Subsequently I begin to wish that I’d told the wicked story after all, owing to the discovery that mighty LB/Orbit publicist Michelle Hodgson has now sneaked away for Easter holiday fun, leaving her authors (Mike Rohan and the “Jonathan Wylie” duo, as well as our *Encyclopedia* crowd) to organize their own signing session.

Saturday, I’m fairly certain, is also the day of my solitary attempt to charge a modest meal to my room as sternly instructed by Chairman Richards, only to

be pityingly informed by the waiter that because I am an unsecured guest of honour I have been given a special key-card which doesn't allow anything to be charged. Time for another word with Chris Bell, leading to terrible screams from Reception, severed limbs littering the lobby floor, and other traditional evidences of diplomacy. [2]

Psychic examination of my notebook's blank pages suggests a further lapse into the continuum of just lounging around and having gossipy fun. Dollops of this may be assumed between practically any two paragraphs of the present report. One such long natter is with Elizabeth Kerner, a newish Tor author who proves to be an incipient Ernest Bramah fan and patiently endures my entire repertoire of misremembered Kai Lung quotations. Such random encounters are fraught with peril, as shown when Martin Hoare (Man of Tact) later goes into a long routine of "Cor, that Elizabeth Whatsit, you're well in there, chatting her up like anything, nudge nudge, I saw you ... Did you get any?" and similar gentlemanly badinage. Oh dear.

Exploring the Adelphi's surprisingly cheap cellar bar exposes one to local entrepreneurs flogging things like battered soap and cosmetics which have inexplicably fallen off the back of a shelf at Boots. A recurring phenomenon is the dingy fellow who sells a soiled copy of *The Big Issue* and then snatches it back again: "it's my last one, see?"

The evening outing involves tastefully crutched Jo Fletcher leading a vast party of Gollancz hangers-on and camp followers to Zorba the Greek's, for a confrontation with nameless meze that is possibly inimical to human digestion as we know it. This party's merry excess looks likely to go down in Gollancz legend as *The Last Big Thrash On Expenses Before Pratchett Moved To Corgi, Bugger Him*.

Sunday

As so often, I fall back on spies for reports of alleged events. The feared BBC camera crew – infesting the Adelphi for a tasteful documentary on how harassed hotel staff cope with vast influxes of costumed geeks who believe in UFOs, etc – proves surprisingly inoffensive, and even receives some co-operation. At the site selection ballot, the vote is taken twice "because the camera crew missed it first time round...." As Bob Day later reports, fannish hands shoot up in reasonable imitation of mass spontaneity at a Chinese

Communist Party congress, and certain souls not entirely in tune with New Labour thinking shout: “Card Vote!”

The lack of a newsletter to record the victory of Reconvene at the 1999 Eastercon goads certain superfluously technological *Plokta* editors into generating *Ceci N'est Pas Un Newsletter*, which also reveals Monday's copious programme changes. It's too late to promote the autograph sessions, not listed in the official *ReadMe* programme schedule. The sole authorized news outlet is the “Chinese Wall” noticeboard, secreted in an obscure corner and (as the Ploktoids cruelly put it) promoted only via the Chinese Wall. Intense embarrassment shrouds the knowledge that our hero committee have decided to have no newsletter since they feel – or claim they feel – unable to equal the pinnacles of the Langford/Barnett *The Adelphi Coracle* three years previously. Oh, come on, chaps: ambition should be made of sterner stuff.

Another thing I've missed is the alleged sight of those few receptionists who have survived Chris Bell being inveigled into a filking session near the lobby lifts. With enthusiastic Schadenfreude, my informant insists that the receptionists sing a whole lot better than filkdom's finest...

One fleeting Sunday-afternoon memory: a signing session at which Octavia Butler has an eager and constantly replenished queue stretching the full length of the Adelphi lounge, while Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison – whose queues intermittently stretch for the full length of this page – are consoled by passing fans pointing out their relative lack of scarcity value.

Sunday evening, for me and Paul and regular guest star Mike Cule, is Thog Night: a **Live Thog's Masterclass** in the BoSh's lounge. This time I've thrown myself madly into the spirit of the thing, with elaborate rituals of preparation. All Thog's extant specimens of SF and fantasy at its worst are classified under convenient headings like “The Purple Prose of Cairo” or “See Nipples and Die”, with day-glo posters for each. Each category's quote slips are carefully printed out on different-coloured paper, almost as though there is an actual good reason for this. There are paper plates, lovingly purchased by me, to hold each pile of slips. (These plates replace the original, too-complex props I had envisaged. Steve Green, Overlord of BoSh's: “Er, I don't know that I could find you any *cardboard boxes*...”) There is Thog's Rigged Deck of Cards, and the Dice of Thog, and heaps of little chocolate Easter eggs to reward victims who manage to read out one of these

“differently good” paragraphs without actual disgrace.

One thing we know about Live Thog is that it’s difficult to keep within the confines of a puny 50-minute or one-hour programme segment. The Intervention choice is a strictly curtailed slot in the main hall, or all the time we like in BoSh’s. Part of the reason for the cramped schedule is that several potential hours of programming are sacrificed to the “courtesy” of closing down alternative streams during all four GoH talks. They order these things differently in America: at Boskone 29 no one seemed perturbed that GoH Jane Yolen had nine items involving 26 speakers running against her main talk (while as a lesser GoH at the same event, I scored only five and 19).

Less theorizing and more Thog! BoSh’s would be roomy enough but for all these huge round tables devouring the floor space. Will this be a disaster? Dutch courage is evidently needed first, and I demand great carafes of red wine to accompany my tandoori trout in the restaurant down the road. Here it is gently broken to me that this is a Muslim enterprise....

“It must be hell at the back,” I find myself thinking as Live Thog begins to gain momentum. As planned, the heavily scripted opening (with Paul being unsubtly landed with his own unfortunate line, “Then she would feel her breasts and discover that she lacked a penis ...”) gives way to a measure of anarchy. Mike and Paul and I and various audience volunteers relentlessly break down sanity with our barrage of awful, awful quotations. The rear of BoSh’s is a standing-room-only crush. To speed the pace we eventually dismiss the last audience participants in a shower of mini Easter eggs, and the Three Thoggeers set out to exhaust every single pile of quotation slips.

An hour. Sweat flows freely in all directions. An hour and a half. Grown men pull their own heads off rather than contemplate our treasured passages from John Norman. Can it *really* have gone on for two hours? Every plate of quote-slips is empty, and Mike swings into my scripted finale with selected passages of True Romance and Feminine Hygiene which require all his thespian abilities. Boy, can he thesp. We score 102% on the audience Lasciviometer with his impassioned rendition of a Lionel Fanthorpe heroine who spends nearly 400 words cleaning her teeth. One by one. The incisors, the canines, the bicuspidis.... Just when you think it’s all over and not even Fanthorpe can further delay the return to the plot:

“She had taken barely a dozen paces when she was assailed by a

horrible thought that she had not cleaned the top left inside molars. She stood in an agony of uncertainty for five minutes, then went back to the bathroom area of her living quarters, recharged the brush, and carefully cleaned again the top left molars on their inside surfaces. She looked at her reflection in the mirror; it foamed back at her like a rabid dog.” (“John E. Muller”, *Dark Continuum*, 1964)

Afterwards, limp and hoarse and surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of slips of paper as though in the wake of a small ticker-tape parade, we feel remarkably pleased.

Getting to bed, however late, is complicated by the Norwegian party which seems to have been raging all weekend, so close to my own room that overspill and detritus are heaped up against the door. Tonight’s deposit consists of a collapsed, vaguely bellicose Graham Joyce – the *Fantasy Encyclopedist* within me makes automatic cross-references to LIMINAL BEING and GUARDIAN OF THE THRESHOLD – who, Sphinx-like, repeatedly confutes me with his RIDDLE: “How the fuck can you go to bed now, Langford?” After fortifying myself a few times with Norwegian rotgut, I finally climb over Graham and escape from fun. That he continues to slump against my door is indicated by random banging, varied with muffled oaths. It would be childish to fill a toothglass with water and pour it under the door, I reprove myself. Well, it would be childish to do it more than three times. Outside, damp silence eventually falls.

Monday

Owing to a points failure at Memory Junction, Monday seems to have been diverted to entirely the wrong destination. The subsequent pathologist’s report implies a fair amount of Langfordian fun.

What can I reconstruct? At the closing ceremony, John “We Are Even Greyer Than We Were” Richards gracefully acknowledges a shortage of guests to put on display, since – in eerie echo of Friday – Brian Aldiss is on a train and Jon Bing is back in Norway. An unexpected surprise for me is Paul Kincaid’s fiendish presentation of the 1986 BSFA Short Story Award, the absence of whose physical trophy has been a regular target of Langford mockery ever since. Now I can no longer mock and must console myself with an exquisite

art-form constructed from yellow plastic. Sic transit.

Other memories are elusive. Most especially, I have no memory whatever of Chris Bell asking me for the 5,271,009th wheedling time if I'd do the 1999 Eastercon newsletter, and my crazed lips (momentarily possessed by the mind control of Alien Greys) saying something not a million miles from "Oh, all right." This alleged conversation is now officially expunged from the histories. Believe me.

All the usual Adelphi stories emerge from the woodwork. Fire extinguishers have crashed excitingly through doors, burglars of the dealers' room prove utterly undeterred by gophers sleeping therein, and Gary Stratmann is in maximal gibber mode. Most hideous and appalling of all – on the Mel Brooks principle that "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." – the text of my GoH speech has vanished and all its last-minute scribbles are lost to posterity. Should I be flattered by the notion of larcenous yet literate chambermaids ... felonious but fannish Liverpudlians? Or, of course, I may simply have lost the bloody thing.

Tuesday

In strict accordance with tradition, the long train journey home passes in a sense of bleary remoteness, as though seen through thick and grimy glass. This post-conventionness is an eerie mental state in which small things become obsessive. I remember coming back from a Glasgow Eastercon on one of those dreadful Nightrider tickets, rumbling through the small hours in a peculiar electric half-light and failing to read an SF anthology containing that man Aldiss's "Where The Lines Converge" ... which at that disoriented time seemed the most hauntingly resonant title ever.

Something similar happens on the way back from Intervention, as I study *Banana Wings* and Mark Plummer's article titled (irrelevantly, and for no reason except Noel Collyer's expressed desire that the tightness of his socks should not be bandied in the fanzine) "Tool Man and the Socks of Constriction". For an hour or two this seems the funniest title there has ever been or will ever be. What do conventions *do* to the brain?

Obviously Intervention must have been pretty good....

Footnotes

[1] John Clute remarked, critically, that he would have preferred “chiaroscuro”.

[2] Chris Bell wrote to *Attitude* as follows: “That’s the one with the terrifying hat. I intend to *get* Dave Langford later. None of the Adelphi staff were mangled, spindled, mutilated or even befurtled much. It was my child who got caught in the revolving door, not the manager, who was trying to rescue the brat at the time. It wasn’t me who demolished the manager’s desk using one of our powered wheelchairs to do it. I deny everything. You rat Langford. (‘Langford you dog!’ being already taken.) I don’t know why I love you like I do... And I shall set my hat on you. (‘Fang – *gum* him!’)”

Things To Do in Docklands When You're Dead

World Fantasy Convention: London, October-November 1997

Another lost weekend: I'm recovering from the vampire fangs of the World Fantasy Convention, held in a London Docklands hotel whose architect was badly frightened when young by an Escher print. We're talking eldritch, inhuman geometries here, with uncanny corridor angles and fire exits impossible for sane minds to comprehend. The World Fantasy Awards – spectacularly hideous caricatures of H.P. Lovecraft's head – seemed quite at home.

My convention diary is unusually disjointed, since I was mingily commuting from Berkshire rather than pay £65 per night for a single room. Obviously it was this endless rail travel and not the booze that left me shattered. Doing an Internet on-line chat for *Wired* magazine didn't help ... this was scheduled for a sensible hour in Pacific Time, and so started at 2 a.m. Bleary-Eyed Langford Time.

The World Fantasy Convention, legendarily kept expensive to discourage riff-raff like me, is a place to rub shoulders with celebrities and even M.J. Simpson. Seconds after arrival I was quizzed by Muriel Gray (there to plug her novel *Furnace*) about a story “by Ray Bradbury or Arthur C. Clarke” which she thought would make a super film, and with a certain smugness I identified it as “The Ruum” by Arthur Porges. You read it here first.

A massed wave of thirsty humanity swept me on to a Thames boat headed for Greenwich, where HarperCollins had hired a whole pub for their lavish thrash. Here Robert Silverberg was ironic at me and I finally managed to bury the hatchet with Stephen R. Donaldson – who had some irrational objection to my 1984 review awarding him “a Collins Pocket Gem Dictionary, on the strict understanding that he gets rid of the one he's using now.”

The boat journey back to Docklands ended in drama as a horde of fantasy and horror celebs with bursting bladders swarmed up a caged-in ramp leading to shore, and found the exit locked. There was a great and piteous whimpering, like some scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Eventually the boat captain did a death-defying climb from the cage and went to hunt for a key, and in a moment of madness I followed. It seemed my finest hour as I waved goodnight and wandered off towards Canary Wharf, leaving the hordes of the damned clutching futilely at the bars ... (Later, HarperCollins party supremo Malcolm Edwards loftily said: "Oh, I came back by car.")

Next day Christopher Lee flitted awesomely about, signing his autobiography. Pat Cadigan, as always, denounced me as "You Dog, Langford!" – some day I'll find out why. Jane Yolen danced around me satanically. Jonathan Lethem showed how to deal with autograph hunters who criticize your book, by inscribing his *Amnesia Moon* in large block letters: WRITE YOUR OWN ENDING YOU BASTARD. Diana Wynne Jones fulminated at having to leave the bar and drive off to sign copies of *Deep Secret* at Forbidden Planet, only to be told: "Sorry! We sold all your books on Wednesday."

One small surprise was that Naomi Mitchison, not present but much loved in SF for *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, reached the age of 100 during WFC. As smartarses pointed out, that made her just as old as the 1897 first edition of *Dracula* which Fantasy Centre were wittily selling for £1,897.00 in the dealers' room – but the book, alas, was in better condition. A tribute to our genre's new centenarian was suggested for the WFC banquet; a convention organizer who shall be nameless said: "Who's Naomi Mitchison?"

More snapshots. A lady helping with WFC "Vampire Liaison" trying hard to contain her generous frontage in a low-cut dress seemingly designed for a vampire anorexic ... admiring male crowds kept forming around her. Sudden panic, and Ian Watson going completely spare, at announcements that Docklands police were removing vehicles from the roadside: "Oh dear," said a small voice near me, "it's probably my fault. I have Irish number-plates." US editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden turning handsprings and cartwheels in the bar after winning the World Fantasy Award (Best Anthology) for *Starlight 1* – jolly good timing, since just a few days earlier I'd sold him a story for *Starlight 2* ...

The vicious circle of WFC was that the hotel was far too hot, while there was a ceaseless round of very, very boozy promotional parties. Think about it. I don't know why I can't remember any more.

And that, children, is what a World Fantasy Convention is like.

A Footnote Elsewhere

This reminds me that it's time to clear up the Dried Fish Rumour. At regular intervals through the World Fantasy Convention, I was accosted by Leonid Kourits from Ukraine, who seemed increasingly panicky about the fact that Martin Hoare wasn't present. "This is world convention! All fans must come to world convention!" Eventually, on Sunday afternoon, Leonid decided that I was worthy to convey gifts to Martin ... including a bag of convention or con-bid stuff, a small bottle of sinister spirits labelled only in Cyrillic, and – dramatic pause for the unwrapping of layer on layer of smelly Ukrainian newspaper – four quite large dried fish. Detailed instructions were given. "You and Martin must share. With beer, right? You sip beer, you eat of the fish. Open the fish so, and not eat the skin or bones, the meat only. No refrigerator: is dried, see?" A demonstration of driedness followed. It was at this point that Mark Plummer and Claire Brialey, standing some way away and wondering what this mysterious transaction could be, were rewarded by the sight of me cowering while Leonid earnestly pounded his dealers'-room table with a dried fish. Clearly some terrible initiation must be in progress....

Minicon Diary

Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998

So there I was booked to be Fan Guest of Honour at Minicon 33 in Minneapolis over Easter weekend, 1998. The trouble is that despite the pose of spurious cool, I'm not exactly a seasoned international traveller. Previous US trips (Noreascon II, Boston, 1980; Orycon 11, Portland, 1989; Boskone 29, Springfield MA, 1992) have failed to leave me sufficiently blasé. At the slightest contact with trouble, the veil of unconvincing suavity is ripped away to reveal the all too convincing gibbering wreck beneath....

Monday 6 April 1998

Phase one seemed straightforward. Catch train from Reading station, disembogue at Gatwick, check in with plenty of time to spare for TWA Flight 721 flying to St Louis at 11:55. (St Louis? Mine not to reason why. The connection was apparently cheaper that way.) As it turned out, Dorking Deepdene station will be infesting my nightmares for years to come ... since just beyond, with three stations still to go, the mighty Thames Trains express stopped and made vigorous idling noises, continuing in this exciting course of inaction for the next forty minutes. Then it reversed into Dorking again, while the conductor fended off lynch mobs with the practised diplomatic claim that he knew nothing about anything and neither did anyone else. Subjective aeons passed. We draw a veil over the eventual resumption of movement at 11:30, nicely calculated to raise my hopes ... the very, very slow subsequent progress, as though the batteries had run down and this train could no longer do hills ... Langfordian efforts to preserve tranquil calm through an unscheduled bloody halt at bloody Betchworth, may plagues of locusts and boils afflict the bloody awful place ... and of our eventual stately progression into Gatwick, merry as a funeral bell and ten minutes after flight time.

TWA were quite nice and invited me to try again on Tuesday, when there

were no free seats on Flight 721 but someone or other was rather more than likely to cancel. So it came about, boys and girls, that six hours after leaving Reading I was home again.

Tuesday 7 April 1998

Not being one to keep my woes to myself, I had duly whinged at full throttle in the general direction of Minicon liaison Geri Sullivan and travel agent Rick Foss. Various strings attached to TWA had been pulled, with what effect no one was sure. Tuesday's train – an earlier one, just in case – went smoothly; my suitcase was sucked into the Gatwick system with huge luminous STANDBY labels all over it; and the real suspense began in the boarding lounge as what seemed like several dozen similarly placed passengers all got the nod before me. One gloated at the top of his voice about being allotted a cancelled first-class seat. I started feeling very lonely in the almost empty lounge – but, not to prolong the suspense, a boarding pass was thrust into my profusely sweating hands some seconds before take-off.

There isn't much that's new to say about transatlantic flights. Notable differences from past experience:

(a) My choice of Very Fat Book this time was *The Count of Monte Cristo* ... which may have something to do with years of hearing about its influence on Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination / Tiger! Tiger!*, and even shiftily mentioning the fact myself in print, without ever having read the book – the Dumas, I mean; I forget how many times I've reread the Bester. The approved John Clute phrase is "use of secondary sources", meaning "Of course I haven't read the bloody thing." Anyway, *Monte Cristo* is now recommended as a rattling good yarn. It even has a scientific bit: thanks to long training in the utter darkness of the Chateau d'If, the Count (just like Gully Foyle after his rewiring) can see in the dark.

(b) This was the first time I'd carried along a midget word processor, in the form of a Psion Series 5 – whose bijou keyboardette would probably be a disaster for a ten-fingered touch typist but works fine for me. It also offers opportunities for exciting international diplomacy when the all too detachable pointing-pen

thingy falls out and vanishes under the large lady wedged in the seat next to you.... (“Excuse me, Ma’am, may I feel under your bottom?”)

(c) It is, I assure you, a novel experience to fly in company with thirty or maybe forty members of the Selby Rugby Union club’s goodwill mission to St Louis – all boasting this fact in proud t-shirt slogans and demonstrating the traditional rugboid qualities of loudly consuming more than fannish amounts of beer, laughing or applauding loudly and derisively at the in-flight movie, singing loud rugby songs, and being loudly impervious to plaintive TWA suggestions about sitting down, fastening seat belts, etc. Old Langford’s Travelling Tips: wear a hearing aid, and turn it off.

Touchdown. Good things about St Louis airport included getting this far and managing to find a pint of reasonable beer first try – Samuel Adams, chosen for the name’s beery resonances (Samuel Smith and Adnams are words of power in Britain), costing bloody hell \$5.05, and later identified to me as “America’s best-known overrated beer.” Not-so-good things: a Gulp moment when the woman in the Immigration booth cancelled my US visa on the ground that its “Indefinite” status had somehow expired since 1980 (but she let me in anyway); the realization that all Minicon’s string-pulling and karmic boosts had been directed at TWA Gatwick, leaving me with the last-ditch stratagem of clinging to the TWA St Louis desk and looking deadily pathetic until they found me a seat; and inability to find, anywhere in this vast modern airport, a telephone that would accept a credit card or the puny amount of loose change to hand.

But wait. As I collapsed gratefully into the last seat on TWA 124 (St Louis to Minneapolis), I noticed a handset right in front of me. Seconds later this had sucked money from my Visa card and connected me to legendary Toad Hall – and so I was met by Fabulous Geri Sullivan and the Amazing Nielsen Haydens, all waving early copies of Minicon’s Langfordzine *Wrath of the Fanglord*. We collected my suitcase, whose little wheels had gone all peculiar in transit and emitted persistent squeaky noises; when Geri and Teresa complained that it was alive, I painted a touching word-picture of small furry animals inside that were expiring in their final agonies after being jumped upon by burly TWA baggage handlers, and – with a certain quiet majesty – Teresa fell over. Yes, I was definitely in the Fannish States of

America again.

Wednesday 8 April 1998

Come, Muse, let's sing of toads ... but actually Toad Hall, the ultra-fannish abode of Geri, Jeff Schalles, a thousand toads and ten thousand Pez dispensers, does rather outstrip the feeble descriptive power of mere words. Every surface is littered with enough toys and silliness to keep the most jaded fan (me) happy for hours. Living-room highlights visible from where I most often sat slumped included much antique wooden furniture (most spectacularly, an ancient music-box that plays 18" perforated metal discs, the one in situ being *Der Hugentotten* [1898], which I painstakingly translated as *The Huge Otter*), stained-glass windows, a realistic wall-hung punk unicorn head conceived by Terry Garey and arted by Giovanna Fregni, sundry arcane optical devices, a monstrous deep-sea fish model suspended from the ceiling, a Fabergé-style egg containing a china frog reading *The Wall Street Journal*, a USS *Enterprise* telephone, a chair that delivers alarmingly intimate electrical massage, racks on racks of Pez memorabilia, and innumerable further frogs, toads, books, knick-knacks and playthings.

But, contrary to popular report and the insidious distortions of urban myth, there are only ten mimeographs in the Toad Hall basement. The other two are out in the garage.

Info-dump digression for those rare fans as ignorant about Pez as I was: the things are unremarkable little lozenge-shaped sweets, generally citrus- or peppermint-flavoured, whose makers have cunningly injected interest into the packaging by (a) the concept of spring-loaded Pez dispensers which spit the things into waiting hands; (b) adding droll plastic heads to these dispensers, so that your Pez is now realistically regurgitated into the world by Mickey Mouse, Batman, a variety of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, etc – Toad Hall's favourite is of course Kermit the Frog; (c) introducing variants and rarities into the mix – “This Wonder Woman has the *raised star* on her forehead,” said Geri breathlessly, “and is worth *ten or fifteen dollars!*”; (d) adding the further joy of Pez Body Parts, whereby your Darth Vader dispenser can be realistically sheathed in the awesome garb of Miss Piggy; (e) making some specialist varieties available only overseas – Geri was gloating unrestrainedly over a set of imported Asterix dispensers bought for her by Karen Cooper at

the recent PezCon, and I narrowly avoided too intimate an acquaintance with her copies of the all-important handbooks *Collecting PEZ*, *PEZ Collectibles* and *More PEZ for Collectors*. Then there was the electric revolving Pez-o-Matic, the high-velocity Pez pistol, the home-made Minneapolis in '73 zeppelin-headed dispensers, the even more fannish set of Pez cartoons by Bill Rotsler ... and I have barely scratched the surface.

Me: "Gosh, what a collection. The work of a lifetime." Geri: "No, I've only been collecting them two years. Well, *maybe* three."

Upstairs, with characteristic attention to detail, Toad Hall's spare room offered a jolt from my childhood with a bottle of "Wakey Uppy Medicine" ("To be administered to Minicon 33 Fan GoH Dave Langford as his behaviour warrants"). This supposedly foul and paralysing potion had been the ultimate deterrent for naughty children at Mrs Saunders's day school in old South Wales where Martin Hoare and I had first learnt to read in the 1950s. Minicon is not afraid to confront guests with the horrors of their past, aided by bean-spillers like Martin – or like Chris Priest, who revealed a few Langford embarrassments from the 70s in his programme book piece. You can flee as far as Minneapolis, but there is no escape. As they said to Attila the fortieth time he fell off his horse, "You can Hun but you can't ride."

Onward.

After an intense business lunch with Patrick and Teresa ("Are you still thinking of writing a book for Tor some day?" "Yes." "Good. this is now an official Tor lunch."), it was time for total immersion in US culture at the Mall of America, allegedly the world's second largest shopping mall. Teresa helpfully footnoted its vastness with a commentary on mall design psychology and its aim of achieving a light trance state in which shoppers become decoupled from the outside world and the realities of money. Meanwhile, a built-in amusement park decouples the kids from their stomachs: one ride, perhaps based on garbled memories of "The Pit and the Pendulum", used a massive simulated axe-blade as counterweight to a midget auditorium that was swung upside-down into the air and put through a whole aviatational lexicon of pitch, roll, yaw and puke.

The scale of the place emerged not so much through immense set-pieces – "Golf Mountain", far from inducing vertigo at the awesome north face of the sixth hole, proved to be a rather small and ordinary miniature golf course – as

in relentless specialization. The shop devoted entirely to chili, for example, whose impact was only reinforced by the *other* shop devoted entirely to chili. (Here I learned more than I wished to know about the dreaded habaño pepper that scores 300,000 “scovilles” on an “objective” scale of hotness which rates the formerly dreaded but now merely wimpy jalapeño at only 5,000 or so.) Other emporia stocked only fridge magnets ... Minnesota theme goodies ... expensive and entirely useless yuppie toys ... anatomical parts (including rubber brains and simulated organs in jars that slowly *grow* as they absorb vile fluids) ... antique fishing lures ... Lego on a gigantic scale (Legoland was currently displaying detailed Lego globes of the entire Earth and Moon, slightly less than full size) ... things that you can have your name put on ... and green slime.

Actually, out of justice to the magnificently tacky Nickelodeon toy shop – which I was told has its own TV channel – green slime is not the whole story. There are rival amorphous products like Smud in a variety of vaguely food-like colourings, designer chewing-gum kits, and Gak, a paramagnetic gunge which when attracted by a magnet does repulsive things. Teresa gave Nickelodeon high marks for style and regretted that the shop didn’t stock their very special (presumably Slime-encrusted and Gak-compatible) computer keyboard. Their baroque boomboxes alone will haunt my dreams.

Incidentally, throughout our long mall walk I managed not to buy anything – thus demonstrating myself to be made of sterner stuff than P&T, who came away with a bottle of chili sauce whose label showed a twisted, agonized face to go with the brand name **PAIN IS GOOD**. This may tell you something about editors.

Wednesday evening offered a first chance to justify my existence as a Minicon GoH by joining in the pre-con “registration party” at a local fannish household (Don Bailey and Margo Bratton). A startlingly huge number of badges awaited, made to seem huger by the Clarke publicity tie-in of beginning the sequence at 3001. (“But I *always* have 1973!” wailed Geri later. My snappy guest number was 4691.) Thanks to the joys of commercial lamination, these thousands of badges came in random order. Therefore a solemn knot of fans in a hot room first performed a rough sort by chucking badges into paper bags bearing legends like 4201-4500, while I marvelled that so very many people at Minicon had names like “Deathmaster 5”. Next came the intense joy of crouching on the floor getting agonizing pains in the

joints while shuffling these batches into order. PAIN IS GOOD. I like to think the 4201-4500 sequence was *particularly well sorted*, and apologize to fandom for the great blobs of Langfordian sweat that came free with each of these badges.

Doug Wickstrom put on his badge and I immediately claimed to have recognized him all along. Joyce Scrivner, enveloping me in a vast hug, left off her badge but I detected her identity anyway.

Things got complicated again as Teresa drove off through the Minneapolis street grid to Steve Brust's celebrated Brokedown Palace, where communication was impaired not so much by the thick haze of smoke as by the fact that the clutter in the great man's workroom – including a vast frame on which his two parrots disported themselves – made it a bit difficult to get within earshot.

Recollected fragments: that according to Steve this was a *bad neighbourhood* and Teresa should on no account park where, in fact, she had parked; that Teresa then found she'd left her bag and all-important electronic organizer at the badge orgy; that somehow the least competent person (me) ended up navigating her back there, armed only with stark ignorance and a half-sheet of scribbled directions; and the discovery that, Teresa's short-term memory having let her down again, we had to trace our way back by interpreting the directions in reverse, a ploy which got us most of the way and then mysteriously stopped working in about the region of the *bad neighbourhood*. Teresa's search-spiral steadily expanded and threatened to pass the city limits; everything went black until I came around to find Steve Brust standing next to a large, terrifyingly professional-looking case of gambling chips and asking me: "Do you play poker?" "No," I said with caution. "Good!"

The party adjourned to an uptown restaurant whose cuisine was subtly adumbrated by the name "It's Greek To Me". Here I learned that when they bring the flaming cheese to the table, it is of the essence that everyone should shout "*Opa!*", meaning "The Cheese Is On Fire!" Must submit this important phrase to Hazel's Language Lessons....

Thursday 9 April 1998

It was The Day ... we were off to Minicon itself at last, but by roundabout

routes owing to Geri's schedule of last-minute errands (delivering work; depositing Willow the famous linoleum-eating dog at a boarding kennel for the weekend) and tourist excitements. The latter began with a visit to the utterly historic eatery Mickey's Dining Car, est. 1939, open 24 hours daily, and offering a wondrous pre-war ambience of grease, uncompromisingly fast food – you get 30 minutes to gobble it before they tow your car away – olde-worlde mechanical jukebox selectors at every table, and more grease. With appropriate reverence I consumed their topically named “Mickey's Sputnik” burger with a side order of hash browns whose fragrance of purest grease lingered with me almost as long as a tattoo.

Subsequent excitements included the Geri Tour of superior properties in the posh areas up at the top of St Paul (with pauses to covet all those with wrap-around porches), and the awed discovery that a “Cretin-Vandalia” sign did indeed refer to Cretin Avenue, location of Cretin High school. To laugh at this nomenclature would be a very Offensive British Cretin thing to do. I laughed inordinately. Next, a glimpse of the Mississippi, and of Minnehaha Falls Park with its no doubt historically authentic statue of local hero Hiawatha and his consort. Geri related the colourful legend, probably set to verse by Longfellow, of how the falls run dry in hot weather but were nevertheless reactivated by the hydrant-opening skills of the entire local fire department to provide a brave spectacle when President Johnson visited at the wrong time of year.

And so to Minicon, pausing only to pick up expensive chocolate truffles (Geri's Pavlovian reward to the con's executive committee) and lesser goods suitable for microwaving: Peeps and Ivory soap. Peeps are horrid little marshmallow chicks in a variety of toxic-seeming colours, the bright blue ones being especially alarming. I don't know exactly what Peeps do when microwaved, but Ivory bars apparently grow legs and expand like some spectacularly gruesome special effect from *Alien*, conquering the world in Lovecraftian shoggoth form and at last leaving your microwave smelling indelibly of soap. Let me admit right here that anyone who did in fact bring a microwave oven to Minicon successfully concealed it from Geri for the duration. Curiosity still has me by the short and curlies....

And then it was Minicon and I don't remember any more, except for a moment during dinner when Patrick Nielsen Hayden advanced on our restaurant table to administer committee egoboo: “Geri, I just want you to

know this is THE WORST POCKET PROGRAMME I HAVE EVER SEEN!”

Friday 10 April 1998

I try to be quick at getting the hang of hotel geography. Here was Minicon 33 in its traditional venue the Radisson South, hotel of two towers: the huge great South Tower with 20-odd floors, and the modest North or Plaza Tower whose top (8th) floor housed such fannish oddments as Geri, Martin Hoare, the Minneapolis in '73 suite, and me. Far below, the ground floor offered vital spots like the breakfast and lunch room (“Kaffe Stuge”), the coffee and sandwich bar (“Plaza Java”) and – eerily empty by British standards – the real bar or “Captain’s Quarters”. The second floor contained the main function rooms. What was notably missing from the programme-book maps was the Fontainebleu Room where I happened to be giving my first talk. Closer investigation disclosed that this was in the Sofitel, an overflow hotel not thought worth mapping, whose position relative to the Radisson remained shrouded in mystery.

It seemed a good time to ignore this problem and send some traditional postcards to England (one – “Wish you were here” – carefully addressed to Martin Hoare). A gentle reminder of the scale of Minicon came when I asked about the nearest mailbox and was directed to the con’s official US Post Office substation next to the mighty registration desk complex, which not only accepted my humble cards but franked them with a special Minicon 33 postmark.

Joyce Scrivner, a familiar face since the 1979 Brighton worldcon, decided to take me to lunch and present me with a bottle of single-malt whisky since she knew my dark secret: today was my birthday. With an air of cunning I suggested we eat in the Sofitel, and thus learned how to get there and to puzzle over the authenticity of the restaurant’s doggedly French ambience. If their wall sign ATTENTION – CHIEN BIZARRE wasn’t a warning against surrealist poodles, could it be the speciality of the house? We searched the menu in vain.

After lunch it took only about a quarter of an hour to penetrate the arcana of Sofitel geography – the key insight being that the YOU ARE HERE on the lobby’s helpful function room map refers to a position one floor below HERE. Downstairs, one merely had to wander to the far end of an unsigned

corridor to find the Fontainebleu Room labelled as such on its door, in letters almost an inch high. There was not, as rumour later had it, a notice reading BEWARE OF THE LEOPARD. How many fans would solve this spatial *koan* in time for my scheduled speech at 4pm? Disturbingly, according to the Pocket Programme which showed seven panels conflicting with my little spot, mine was the only item in the Sofitel all day and the only one scheduled for the Fontainebleu through the whole of Minicon. (Actually, several late-breaking readings were subsequently put there.)

Meanwhile, further exploration of the Radisson revealed that the heart of Minicon wasn't the bar (as it would be at a low British event) but the bottom two levels of the big South Tower, with many "cabana" suites – including the con suite itself – surrounding the hotel pool and its adjacent floorspace. I inferred that "cabana" is an ancient Spanish term, probably first coined in *Don Quixote*, meaning "room with balcony/porch fronting on hotel pool area". The cabanas held a wide variety of bizarre and variously private parties. The con suite was strong on food (early one morning there I had my first close encounter with a blueberry bagel) and also provided free utility beer. Here the cultural gap between Minnesota and British fandoms could be measured with some precision, as the time difference between 10:30am, when Britfans first clamour for alcohol at the hotel bar, and Minicon's perception of an appropriate time to unseal the beer keg, at 7pm.

Tiptoeing back to the distant Fontainebleu Room a few minutes before H-Hour, I found that my audience consisted wholly of Bruce Pelz, strategically placed in the back row for easy escape. After whimpering and hiding in the toilet for a bit, I returned to find a throng numbered in the high single figures, and was encouraged to begin the rerun of my 1997 UK Eastercon talk ("Twenty Years of Uproar", as reprinted in *Idea* and *Matrix*), about fond memories of fanzines in the good old days of my own early career. More people arrived at intervals, muttering dark things about signage. Hardly anyone walked out again. Several laughed at my carefully hoarded joke. Bruce Pelz permitted himself a thin smile. Relief, success, joy, and Anchor Steam Beer in the Sofitel bar afterwards with Martin Hoare, Dave Clark and Doug Wickstrom ... I felt I had negotiated the First Hoop and was now a potential Minicon survivor.

Next came the opening ceremony, at which toastmaster John M. Ford successfully concealed the fact that (as he later confessed) the hot lights made

it impossible to see his audience. At his command though invisibly to him, GoH Gardner Dozois and Fan GoH Langford stood up to be admired, after which I was ordered on-stage to announce a few highlights from the just-released Hugo nominations. “Keep it short,” Geri advised, leading to a précis of the fan categories as “Modesty forbids,” of Professional Editor as “Gardner something and a few other chaps,” etc. I managed not to swoon at the absence of *Babylon 5* episodes under Dramatic Presentation, and very nearly controlled my puking at the presence of *Starship Troopers*. The Hugos were overshadowed by the following set-piece item, in which Phil Proctor and David Ossman of Firesign Theatre fame announced the Mark Time award for audio drama and had clearly been told to confine themselves to a tight time-slot lasting approximately forever. Kindly hands eventually led me away for drinks and the Official Langford Birthday Dinner Party, organized by Geri and featuring an appropriate selection of evil cronies whose names I will not drag through the mire here.

10 April was also our toastmaster’s birthday, a fact later acknowledged in the con suite when Mike Ford (the civilian alias of John M.) and I were required to cut an enormous sticky cake while Steve Brust – now armed for battle or for poker in his extraordinary leather hat – led the masses in appropriate song. “*Happy Birth-day – UGH! / Happy Birth-day – UGH! / Doom, destruction and despair, / People dying everywhere, / but Happy Birth-day – UGH!*” Minneapolis, the home of fannish music.... (Later, with the remark “Aren’t you glad we didn’t sing it all?”, Geri sent the entire text of “The Barbarian Birthday Dirge” which has enough dubious references to sheep to make a Welsh fan feel slightly uncomfortable. But there is sound advice in the couplet “This one thing you must learn: / *First you pillage, then you burn ...*”)

I blame the beer for the impulse that caused me to adorn that cake with a fearfully symmetric pattern of electric-blue Peeps. Unfortunately, photographs were taken.

Saturday 11 April 1998

Saturday was my day of heavy programme commitments, beginning with a 9am “Meet the Guests” breakfast party at which Gardner Dozois’s role was to scintillate and set the table in a roar, mine was to look at least vaguely

awake and sentient, and liaison person Geri (“*I don’t do mornings.*”) accepted the burden of staying in bed. Luckily Gardner really is hideously entertaining even at 9am. By introducing stomach-heaving subjects like children’s revolting rhymes and scatological alternative versions of songs and hymns, he not only boosted the circulation between breakfast table and toilets but prodded me into remembering things about Raymond Briggs’s joyously filthy *Fungus the Bogeyman*, W.H. Auden’s favourite rude variants of carols (“*While shepherds watched their flocks by night, / All shitting on the ground, / An angel of the Lord came down / And handed paper round*”) and much other odd stuff I’d forgotten I knew. Clever sods, these *Asimov’s* editors.

It was a busy day for Gardner too, since his “GoH Interview” followed at 11am and was interestingly complicated by the fact that no interviewer turned up. GD, resignedly: “So, Mr Dozois, where do you get your crazy ideas?” By the time I’d screwed my courage to the sticking-place for the Live Thog’s Masterclass in the same room at noon – a presentation based on truly terrible lines from published SF – Gardner had been reduced to reading great wads of stuff from his emergency packet of truly terrible lines from the *Asimov’s* slushpile. This was a frightening act to follow, but I survived the Thog event somehow, and this time caused Bruce Pelz to giggle out loud. For the record, I think the session’s biggest double-take and laugh was provoked by the Linguistics Special from Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle’s *The Incandescent Ones* ...

“*Hello, stranger on the road,*’ a voice said in a language not known to me, Turkish presumably.”

After Thog and a hasty beer of recovery, 2pm was already looming, the time of my – and Gardner’s – scheduled autograph session. I carefully researched this in the *Minicon Pocket Guide*, first failing to find it anywhere in the quick-reference grid, then locating Autographings a little after Science & Technology in the alphabetical subject list (the book had been creatively collated) and Dave Langford in between Dave Bogen and Dave Romm in the alphabetical list of participants ... indexed by first name because, to translate the euphemism actually employed, “our database is crap”. (Just to make it more fun, the miscollation caused this list to begin quite plausibly with Eleanor Arnason; forenames in A to D were transposed to a later page.) After long struggle with the maps, I put the question to a committee person: “Is it in fact possible to deduce the location of the autographing area from

information in this guide?” The frank answer was “No.” For the guidance of future generations, what you do is walk hopefully around the second floor until you spot someone (Gardner) who has been guided by better-informed hands to the tables which are so conspicuously not signed “Autographing Area”.

A digression. Yes, it seemed a bit odd that such a highly organized-seeming convention, of such size and established tradition, should schedule the two main GoH slots for successive hours in the same room, with no one to introduce us; and likewise should provide no directions to mysterious places like the Fontainebleu Room (eventually fingered in the nifty con newsletter, *The Bozo Bus Tribune*, on Saturday afternoon) and autograph zone. But all this, I came to realize, lay at the edge of the Great Minicon Controversy – wherein the convention was seen to have become too vast a party, in which both SF and fandom were swallowed up in dense heaving masses of undifferentiated fun while organizers became too over-extended to cope with all the details and suffered regular burn-out from confronting the intractable immensity of it all. Minicons are bigger (3,350 at Minicon 33) than any but the most recent British worldcons, between which British fandom gets about a decade of recovery time as opposed to Minneapolis’s single year. Hence the hotly debated “High Resolution” scheme for a smaller, tighter-focused Minicon 34 in 1999....

(I worriedly began to toy with a vision of brainstorming at a policy meeting: “Hey, *I* know how to make the fans stay away in droves. There’s this guy we could ask as guest, called Langford...”)

Meanwhile, M33’s variegated generosity to this particular crabby guest also needs to be recorded. An emergency bottle of wine in my room; an enormous stash of bottled beer and a refrigerator to keep it in; a special amplifier fitted to the room phone so the deaf twit GoH could call Hazel in England at Minicon’s expense; wads of bills as “walking around money” for beer and meals, several times replenished by Geri on the basis that “even if you haven’t spent it all, you *should have* by now....” As a bonus treat, Martin Hoare – that man again – had been commissioned to write down his long-researched thoughts on Roundsmanship, the art of not buying drinks when it’s your turn, and Geri had printed this up on dollar-sized cards in an exquisite limited edition of three copies for the author, the publisher, and me. (Martin lives in vain hope that each of the two British fans whose habits are

most closely described in this opuscle will recognize only the other.)

I blame the hotel for the room's presentation bundle of "Minnesota Birch Logs", straight pretzels complete with salt-grains but noxiously coated with white chocolate except for a bit at one end. Cally Soukup insisted that these things were nice, so I was able to cover myself with glory by donating them to the Green Room during her shift there.

We now return you to the scheduled autograph session, which I estimate was not visited by 3,340 fans. I sat between Gardner and the very nice Lois McMaster Bujold, the latter still boggling at her discovery that the Mobile Robotics / Machine Perception Lab had named an experimental robot after her. Shameful egoboo came from the fact that as I'm rarely at US cons to sign books and there was a heap of my stuff on sale just round the corner, I did slightly more business than Lois. Since her autograph is conscientiously large and legible, it was my duty to pass on the wisdom of Greg Bear, who during a signing at Orycon 11 had stood critically behind me for a while and then confided: "I've been timing your signature, young Langford, and it takes you five whole seconds to autograph a book. This shows that you have clearly *never had a bestseller....*" Here, perhaps, is the secret of ever-popular Tanith Lee's autograph, which over the years has contracted to a single inscrutable pothook from some lost shorthand alphabet.

After an hour and a half the signing was brought to a close by the traditional Dozois cry of, "That's enough *humiliation* for one day!"

Meanwhile in the main hall, the Minicon 34 committee were lined up on-stage in a long dogged row, fielding questions about their shrinkage plans which – considering the ease with which "tightening up Minicon" can be interpreted as "elitistly picking on special interest groups X, Y and Z" – were incredibly polite by British standards. A haze of Minnesota Nice filled the air. Whenever confronted with anything unanswerable, ringmaster Teresa Nielsen Hayden would break open and read a Chinese fortune cookie, with eerily appropriate results.

One useful rendezvous spot for pros and others was Minicon's Green Room, boasting endless supplies of coffee and cake plus its very own copy of *Flight* by Vanna Bonta, from which various people – many of them Mike Ford – would give random readings almost as impressive as (if less cogent than) Teresa's fortunes.

“He was having a grand time behind Section A controls of Z Zone when, without warning, his face turned umbrageous and he barked, ‘But there is no chance of error!’ [...] A laugh heaved forward from Juristac’s massive body and broke up the catarrh deposits in his throat. ‘But of course!’ Juristac intermixed in his laugh-cough.”

Never sit in the front row when this guy is speaking. But a sudden chill settled on the Green Room when the whisper went around that fellow-guest Phil Proctor was a bosom friend of Ms Bonta’s, with a dangerous fondness for defending her work against all comers. We found ourselves – to quote the great book – emitting frequent dispersals of fear.

And so it went. Vignette from the lavish Tor party: Gardner Dozois was holding court amid a circle of lesbian and feminist writers. During a brief silence, one Dozois remark rang unforgettably out: “When you’ve had a fat old man, you won’t wanna go back!”

Sunday 12 April 1998

Breakfast routine was disrupted when, owing to some strange pagan festival revolving around ice sculptures of rabbits (known in the trade as “graven images”), the breakfast room opened very late and then refused to serve mere breakfast. Over sandwiches elsewhere with Dermot, he told me how he’d wandered into a hall full of Wiccans or something, all conducting arcane rituals with crystals, and I reminisced about the dealers’ room visit in which I’d just bought a souvenir for Hazel, an octahedral chunk of fluorite in her favourite blue. Being under the impression that that this was a lump of mineral, I was overwhelmed by gush from the lady behind the sales table, who congratulated me on my fine choice of healing stone and gave a short lecture on how to charge it with orgone energy, align it with leys and very probably wield it to conjure Easter Bunnies from the vasty deep. I thought it wise to make my escape before she sold me a set of occult instruction and maintenance manuals.

It is well known that I don’t do music, but I was seduced by glowing newsletter reports of Friday’s performance of the practically legendary 1977 fannish musical *Midwestside Story* – based of course on *West Side Story*, which in turn was based a little bit on *Romeo and Juliet*, so I felt I was in with a chance of understanding the repeat performance on Sunday. Instead of

Montagues and Capulets or rival street gangs, *Midwestside Story* has fanzine and conrunning fans who meet at the Worldcon (Bozocon, Minneapolis in '73), and, from forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life....

Even I must have been bitten by the Spirit of Minnesota Nice, since the energy and enthusiasm of the players made the whole thing seem pretty damn wonderful even to a tone-deaf twit. Picky exception noted: there was a framing device consisting of long, long, taped voice-overs – to me, incomprehensible – which “explained” all this weird fannish stuff, as though slantlike SF readers were incapable of picking it up from context or from the glosses in the programme book. But after much on-stage silliness, including the distribution of Tony (Romeo) the Confan's first awful fanzine *Idea* to the front rows, the charge of enthusiasm built and built until the entire audience was on its feet clapping and demanding impossible numbers of curtain calls. Me included. This is uncharacteristic. There must be something in the air.

CLOSING CEREMONY SPEECH WHICH IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT GOT TRUNCATED TO ABOUT THE FIRST SENTENCE: “Thanks very much, everyone. The best part of Minicon 33 hospitality was the trusting way that they stored the Minneapolis in '73 beer in my room, and encouraged me to sample it freely. I've been asked to announce that Minneapolis in '73 apologizes profusely for the shortage of beer at tonight's party....”

Normal reactions to music had returned by the small hours, when I found myself cringing from the filk circle in the Minneapolis in '73 suite (my musical spy Krissy Benders assured me that people who knew about tunes and keys were quite often cringing too), a circle which had arranged itself with insidious cruelty to block the way to the bathtub of beer. In the next room, various fans were disporting themselves in a jacuzzi but failing to be the centre of interest, this spot being reserved for the spectacular electrical storm that raged over Minnesota and lit up the whole sky in jagged mile-wide lightning bursts. Watching this from a hot tub full of naked fans would doubtless have added to the experience, but, being Britishly uptight, I kept a cautious distance from the party suite's tub of simmering flesh.... Was this decadence as she is practised in Minnesota? Martin Hoare sneered at my naivete. *He'd* been exploring the bondage party. Eventually the pyrotechnics blew away, and I went to bed by moonlight.

Monday 13 April 1998

While Minicon workers took the convention down, it was soothing to sprawl for hours in the bar, all programme responsibilities over. Dermot gloated over his portable technology: a pocket Windows 95 computer which played video clips of recent explosions he'd been implicated in, and a super camera that not only held 90 minutes of digital video or 10,000 stills but also zoomed in to read the small print on bottles behind the bar 40 feet away. All this was eclipsed when a fan came in waving a brochure from DiaboliCo, who make giant Tesla-coil installations that generate 18-foot "lightning bolts", and other fun things which I nervously sensed were being added to Dermot's Xmas list.

Meanwhile, Joyce Scrivner fretted in the bar for approximately eight hours because Martin Hoare (about to become her house guest) was supposed to be meeting her there but, it turned out, had been lured off for a little 12-pint session in a city pub called Sherlock's Home. Various fans, on his return: "But isn't the food there *awful*?" Martin: "Oh, do they do food?"

Minnesota Niceness came into perspective here and at the con suite's final "Dead Donut Party". That great Minicon shrinkage debate had raged very mildly all weekend, with hotheads fomenting reasonableness in all directions; the most visible evidence of strife was a feebly satirical poster suggesting that costume fans were being picked on and "excluded". (Actually the whole masquerade event was being transferred bodily to a new convention, or possibly two new conventions.) M34's savage riposte was a pre-prepared rubber stamp for annotating subversive notices by adding, in red: "... is not a sufficiently healing message." One earnest fan explained at length how she had helped preserve Niceness by dissuading someone from printing up his dreadfully over-hurtful and divisive t-shirt slogan: *Oh my God, they've excluded Kenny!* The M34 controversy reached its peak of violence when a tired and over-emotional con worker was moved to (if you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them now) scrape the frosting off a cake bearing the inflammatory message that Minicon was hosted by Minn-Stf, the Minneapolis SF Society. "They're not hosting it, they're trying to destroy it!" etc. Effusive apologies followed.

Had I been abducted to some paradise planet where 3,350-person cons can happen without serious incident? In a guilty way it was almost a relief to hear that one loon had unfunnily threatened people with a real sword and been

marched off by the police.

Tuesday to Friday: Toad Hall

Tuesday morning, and Minicon really was all over. The next convention was steadily moving in – something to do with the oil business, bringing people in suits, significantly posher vehicles in the hotel car park and a vast model of a gasoline pump in the once fannish Plaza Tower. Would it be wise to move among these newcomers asking, “Say, are you with the global warming convention?” Sitting at a handy table in the deserted bar, I tried to update my Psion notes and found myself falling prey to the *Tristram Shandy* syndrome. Life moves faster than writing; Tristram Shandy, having taken several books of his “autobiography” just to get himself born, despaired of ever recording his adulthood; likewise, my Tuesday-morning trip notes were still stuck in the remote epoch of last Wednesday. It was time for decisive action. I ordered a Bloody Mary. Another item crossed off the roster of great US con experiences that I’d planned to relive.

Some Minicon jigsaw fragments still remain, since with famous Langford efficiency I don’t quite remember where they fit. Fabulous fan artist Ken Fletcher giving me a copy of his *Spontoon* cartoon scenario for islands, seaplanes and funny animals, looking to my untutored eye exactly like every other funny animal fanzine ... much silly and inconsequential party chatter with Ann Layman Chancellor, not knowing that she had only three months to live Dave Romm presenting me with a fridge magnet labelled MINNESOTA DAVE as compensation for missing Minicon’s “Legion of Super-Davids” photo call for a group picture of everyone called Dave or David (“It won’t matter if you’re a minute late,” Geri had mispredicted, “and I need a beer first.”) ... and many kindly fans like Jeanne Mealey and John Stanley cheering me up by permitting me to autograph Langfordiana at unexpected moments. Allowing for the strong likelihood of my being slightly off-sober at “my” party, Jeanne took the precaution of sending photographic evidence of the act.

The next few days involved a certain amount of slumping at Toad Hall, interrupted by occasional hideous screams as Geri struggled with a belated tax return. I improved my cultural self-esteem by reading neglected classics like *Bunnacula* and Dr Seuss (now it can be told: for shameful decades I had

cravenly worn the mask and *pretended* to know what oobleck was); my bemused examination of a Zippy the Pinhead cartoon attached to the mighty fridge caused Jeff to vanish with a knowing smile and return with several no doubt priceless Zippy comics for Langfordian perusal.

There was a soothing dinner outing to Denny Lien's and Terry Garey's, involving super Chinese nosh, lots of red wine, and a lengthy tour of innumerable rooms – from extensive cellars to vertiginous attic – mostly crammed with enough books to boggle me. Denny flatteringly asked that I sign a copy of *Wrath of the Fanglord ...* for Mog Decarnin, not for him, because “librarians don't let people write things in books....”

I came away laden with pots of Terry's home-made preserves – one of which was to prove life-saving in the Great Chicago Breakfast Dearth a few days thence – and, from Denny, a copy of *Thirteen Poems* by “Grace Lord Stoke” (ed. J.C. Rez, Bootless Publications, 1998). This strange chapbook's introduction explained almost convincingly that Stoke was an obscure poet of the Lovecraft era, whose masterwork *The Saga of Red Ethel the Unruly* had been praised by HPL himself as depicting ...

“a viraginous maiden, whose every inch of integument is bedizened with variegated cicatrizations bearing the form of Gorgons and gryphons, and whose Cyclopean thews betoken a strength matched only by the profusion of her ichorous expectorations.”

At some stage Geri took me downtown to marvel at Minneapolis buildings more than three storeys high, futuristically linked by glass-walled “skyways” that let you wander through office buildings and above traffic-laden streets, until – this being the realistic and not the Frank R. Paul future – the skyway mysteriously lapses into a snarl of convoluted dead ends about a block short of where you wanted to go. Somewhere beyond the reach of skyways, unattainable like a mirage, was the attraction which for reasons best known to herself Geri kept dangling temptingly before me, the place with the naked dancing girls. I settled for a glug of beer at the onomatopoeically named Gluek's, a bar whose back-room decor is resplendent with moose and water-buffalo. As Geri pointed out, there was something strange and un-British about the sausages served at this place. They seemed to be made entirely of meat.

That night saw a reception at Dreamhaven bookshop in honour of the

Minnesota Book Awards' fantasy and SF nominees. These included Peg Kerr, Mike Ford – who later won, for his NESFA Press book – and the normally ubiquitous Steve Brust, who for once didn't show up. The audience consisted almost entirely of a party passing through on the way to a drinks outing: Neil Gaiman, Neil's assistant Lorraine Garland, Geri and me. We gathered up Mike Ford and fled in search of beer and snacks at the famously overpriced William's pub nearby. All the ensuing small talk was terrifyingly high-level and off the record, which sounds more interesting than an admission that it was just enjoyably desultory pub chatter. You had to be there.

Further milestones in life.... Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (of which I bought my very own copy at Dreamhaven) mentions Byerly's as "the most lavish supermarket in Minneapolis", a memory which gained the ring of authenticity when Geri took me there and I boggled at exhibits like the big tanks of trout and lobsters, all clearly trying to look small and hoping that passing customers would pick a different one. The attached off-licence – no, Langford, the attached liquor store – supplied a strange and wondrous cranberry-flavoured cider which for a time seemed just the thing to live on for the rest of one's life.

In fact, re-reading Emma's novel on the homeward flight produced a curious effect of double vision. The actuality of Minnehaha Falls, and my failure to find strange glittery remnants from the old glassworks there (Teresa Nielsen Hayden found several; all that falling over puts her closer to the ground) was sort of overlaid by the pitched battle between elven cohorts of the Seelie and Unseelie Courts that takes place there in the book – which had also taught me to recognize Lake Calhoun at the heart of Minneapolis, and the city's strange air-inflated sports dome that glows like a vast phosphorescent mushroom. And Blaisdell Avenue, home of Geri and Jeff, was an oft-used thoroughfare in that very narrative; nearby was fabled Hennepin Avenue, more recently immortalized in Peter Gelman's *Flying Saucers over Hennepin*.... Sense of wonder!

Not mentioned in *War for the Oaks* was the "Ax-Man" surplus shop, full of imaginatively labelled electromechanical junk. "How can you possibly live without a dozen of these obsolete bakelite grommet swivels?" Alas, I couldn't see a way to smuggle a medium-sized missile casing ("Ideal lawn ornament") in the hand baggage, while Geri's solvency was saved in the nick

of time when a lifesize Robbie the Robot candyfloss machine proved to be not for sale. As a tasteful souvenir for Hazel, I laid out several cents on a large plastic INFECTIOUS WASTE sack covered with biohazard symbols, and dutifully put my used socks in it.

A final personal triumph was that I finally managed to open a US bank account to handle those royalty cheques, or checks, for sums like \$3.84 that aren't worth converting to sterling. This nearly foundered on bureaucratic insistence that everyone must have a US social security number, British NI numbers being deemed not good enough ... but under relentless pressure from Geri, her bank came up with a special-case checking account for smelly foreigners like me. Then, serendipity: thanks to a new-customer offer which she spotted and invoked, Geri was rewarded with \$10 in her account for introducing me, and I with \$10 in mine for being introduced. Until further notice, Norwest Bank is declared to be utterly splendid.

All too soon it was airport time again. Looks as though I'll have to come back to Minneapolis....

Friday to Monday: Chicago

Things to remember about short hops on cheapo Vanguard flights: you're charged extra if you ask for a decent drink (\$3 for a gin and tonic wasn't so bad, but it took forever to arrive), the window of opportunity for visiting the toilet is nonexistent since the aisle is choked with stewardesses taking drinks orders in the fleeting period of unfastened seatbelts, and Vanguard do not so much touch down as plummet the last fifty feet to the runway, impacting Chicago with a satisfying bang.

The contrast with the tranquil niceness of Minneapolis was fairly boggling. Brother Jon picked me up at Midway airport with nine-month-old Jimmy in tow, and we inched our way to the Langford apartment through dense clots of rush-hour traffic while being offered unparalleled views of Chicago's grottiest neighbourhoods. "Mayor Daley had this freeway built to cut off the poor districts from the rich white ones," Jon explained. I'd already worried a bit about the presence of that sinister name on the Midway welcome sign, but it was merely the more infamous Daley's son. Being stuck with the Royal Family and all our ghastly peers, we Brits know about hereditary rule but hadn't realized it survived in America.

After greeting my ever so attractive sister-in-law Helen (architect and breadwinner), inspecting their swish top-floor apartment, and consuming a huge slab of barbecued salmon which shamed the expensive little pink tissue-samples in supermarkets back home, it seemed a good time to try an evening out on the town.

Chicago was all neon, glitz, bustle, innumerable signs in Spanish. Jon knowingly led me to a Mexican restaurant where they didn't mind us spurning food in favour of sitting and drinking authentically sour margaritas from goblets bigger than goldfish bowls. This gave way to a succession of low bars where the celebrated artist and Mekon tended not only to be recognized by bar staff but given drinks on the house (and likewise his brother). Special bonus points in this area to the Silver Cloud Bar & Grill, an airy place with the stamped tin ceiling which I'd often read about as indicating some kind of US bar authenticity, either of atmosphere or of sleaze. Also of note: The Boulevard Café quite near Jon's place, whose barman proved to be a drunken ex-Mekons drummer who started but did not finish a number of interesting sentences (Jon: "This is the bar of the short attention span.") and who seemed seriously determined to bolt the doors and keep us swilling freebies all night.

Yes, Chicago was the city where I renewed my acquaintance with an old friend who had deserted me all through the pristine joys of Minneapolis: the hangover.

Another landmark pointed out by Jon demonstrated yet again the ability of rock stars to live on the cheap. For obscure reasons of goodwill he gets free studio space on the upper floor of "Shirts Our Business", a t-shirt sweatshop whose workers – all Mexican women – come to the upstairs lunchroom at noon and are moved to give handfuls of food to this obviously starving artist. The words "Jammy sod!" rose unbidden to my lips.

Besides the music, Jon is selling lots of artwork and has just branched out into small tombstones. It gives him that authentic Damien Hirst glow of thinking up concepts and letting humble artisans do the actual work, as his sketches of doom-laden subjects like the Death of Country Music are drilled into polished granite slabs by other hands. When informed that these priceless artforms weigh 135 pounds apiece, I decided not to take one home for Hazel.

Other joys of multi-ethnic Chicago included a Patel Brothers grocery exactly like countless small Asian shops back home, except that the Reading variety doesn't offer Gandhi Salsa. After one quiet Indian-restaurant lunch with Helen and small Jimmy, Jon and I furtively agreed that our dissolute reputations would suffer if it became known that we had just disported ourselves in a alcohol-free vegetarian eatery that encourages small children....

As Voltaire quipped after reading a certain TAFF report, the secret of being a bore is to tell everything. Let's leave some aspects of this trip shrouded in tantalizing mystery: specifically, the merry Family Visit to Greek-American in-laws, of which I merely record that we survived.

Monday, Tuesday: Chicago – St Louis – Gatwick – Reading

By this period, the Langford notes are getting wavery and sparse. Following detailed consumer testing of Vanguard and TWA domestic flights, I can now report that TWA charge \$4 for a much mingier G&T than Vanguard's \$3 offering, but are able to touch down without simulating a dinosaur-killer meteor impact. You win some, you lose some.

At St Louis, everything worked – apart from a slight misunderstanding when I ordered a margarita and was served with two, the simplest solution being to display proper British sang-froid and drink them both. Could it possibly last, this uncanny experience of being in the hands of an air transport system that was working correctly again? Of course not: instead of a 6:50pm takeoff for Gatwick, I sat in the plane being treated to interminable and incomprehensible cockpit messages from someone who was very, very bad at improvising soothing remarks and appeared to be saying “Uh ...” a great deal as he failed to explain that the plane was being reloaded with all-important ... fuel? gin? wings? small lemon-scented tissues? It remains a garbled mystery. Two hours after takeoff time, when the inordinate number of babies in seats close to mine had more or less cried themselves out, we took off.

After a free G&T which the no doubt guilt-ridden stewardess spontaneously decided should be a double with an extra cup of ice, I forgave TWA everything and settled back to my recently acquired Daniel Pinkwater omnibus. Easy, that's me.

And so home, where Hazel and a longish period of post-travel convalescence were waiting. Thanks again to everyone. Thank you for having me.

Pratchettcon

Discworld Convention 2, Liverpool, September 1998

For this long weekend in September, Terry Pratchett is lord of all he surveys at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool – site of the second Discworld Convention. He’s bemusedly showing off a recent gift: a suavely polished black ash walking-stick whose heavy metal handle is the cowled skull-head of Death. “If I were young, black and poor, this would be an offensive weapon,” he observes. “Good thing I’m old, white and rich.”

Even for Terry it’s still boggling to stand in the convention dealer’s room and see the endless vistas of Discworld merchandise. Maps, companions, artwork, role-playing and computer games, a quizbook (I can’t complain; I wrote it), tapes, CDs, videos, badges, jewellery and t-shirts are only the beginning. You can light your home with Discworld candles (but what fan would ever put a match to one?), play chess with Discworld pieces, cover your mantelpiece with Discworld figurines and the £50 Terry Pratchett Toby Jug, impress the neighbours with academic qualifications from Unseen University (*Doctorum Adamus cum Flabello Dulci*), and replace those flying ducks on your living-room wall with countless ornamental Discworld plaques and plates.

Terry has a certain grim sense of personal responsibility: “The thing is, when the tip drops off your *Star Wars* light-sabre, George Lucas never hears about it. But if a candle’s the wrong colour, it’s me that gets the bloody e-mails.” It’s almost a relief to find limits to Discworld’s relentless commerciality: Clarecraft are pushing the very last chance to buy their Teppic the Assassin figure, which is just about to be “retired”. Teppic hasn’t much following, but Death sells like crazy.... Meanwhile, the biggest model on display is Bernard and Isobel Pearson’s multi-part set of Unseen University buildings, which would look spiffy on the coffee table if you don’t mind having no room for coffee-cups.

Bernard (subtitled “The Cunning Artificer”) and Isobel are here as convention guests. So are other toilers in the mighty edifice of Pratchett PLC:

artists Josh Kirby, Paul Kidby, Stephen Player and Graham Higgins, obscure editorial-feedback person Langford ... and Stephen Briggs, that encyclopedic cartoon-drawing thespian playwright who has an unfair advantage when playing the unscrupulous Patrician of Ankh-Morpork since he actually looks the part. The principal guest is of course Terry. There's a supporting cast of publishers: Jo Fletcher from Gollancz, Patrick Janson-Smith from Transworld, and Colin Smythe – Terry's literary agent – who originally published *The Colour of Magic*. All one big happy family, not entirely unlike the Addams Family.

Among the 800-odd people gathered in the Adelphi are a few who've attended more traditional SF events, and find themselves saying – not in any unfriendly way – “It's a convention, Jim, but not as we know it.” The Discworld community, only two years after the first of these gatherings, still has a kind of innocence which in mainstream SF fandom has dwindled over 61 years of con-going. This weekend the Adelphi is filled with the sparkly sense of wonder exuded by those twenty enthusiasts who in January 1937 converged on the Leeds Theosophical Hall for the world's first-ever SF convention. So in 1998 the Discworld con programme is very heavily attended indeed, to the bemusement of hardened SF fans who cherry-pick interesting items and skip the rest in favour of socializing. For one whole afternoon I shamefully find myself alone in the main bar with Andy Sawyer of the SF Foundation. O brave new world.

Jo Fletcher, Colin Smythe and I are grateful for this enthusiasm when there's a good turnout for our “Meet the Publishers” panel at the ungodly hour of 10am. As usual, the professionals' insights into writing as a business are terminally gloomy and boil down to the message: “If you're not Terry Pratchett, then forget it. Slit your wrists now and save time.” Even Terry, to remind himself of mortality, keeps a photo of the W.H. Smith warehouse's industrial-size book shredder by his computer. I horrify our audience by mentioning that I recently, with slow deliberate malice, put a copy of *The Last Continent* through my own shredder. The explanation that this was an early draft print-out, not for public consumption, only increases the moans of despair.

Terry himself pervades the con, omnipresent and pantheistic: walking the halls, giving a late-night reading, pressing the flesh at “Kaffee Klatches”, being grilled in a showcase interview, and undergoing three gruelling two-

hour signing sessions – one rather cruelly billed as “Terry does what he does best ...” But there is much else. In “Luggage Wars”, robot versions of Discworld’s unstoppable Luggage – that trunk with lots of little legs – contend in an ad-hoc arena. The most sinister entry, which advances implacably while gnashing its lid, is unfortunately the only one not radio-controlled, and the rest literally run rings around it. One notably agile Luggage has a secret weapon: it squirts derisive jets of water at opponents from its keyhole. What would Freud have said?

My own solo programme spot – again gratifyingly crowded – is the **Live Thog’s Masterclass** presentation, drawing on the department of *Ansible* where “differently good” prose gets pilloried. Unfortunately Terry offers few hostages to Thog and the best I can manage is an anatomical slip-up in *Lords and Ladies*: “The bat burped. Granny genteelly covered her hand with her mouth.” But Thog’s “Flowers of Rhetoric” category contains this finely crafted allusion to a famous Discworld librarian, from David Gerrold’s “Chess with a Dragon” – “The argument was a peripatetic orang-utan, bouncing off the walls of their separate frustrations like a ping-pong ball in a wind tunnel.”

(Andy Sawyer, himself a librarian, considers that Terry has greatly served the profession by creating Unseen University’s orangutan Librarian. At last, a tough yet caring role-model who loves books and can effortlessly bounce book-defacers upside down on the floor....)

Big set-piece events include a charity auction where money flows like helium-II, the Maskerade Parade with its vast turn-out of exotic Discworld costumes, and the Patrician’s Maskerade Dinner, where even awkward sods like me must grudgingly wear a mask or face the scorpion pit. With a white-suited Terry at his side, the Patrician – Stephen Briggs in black robes and skullcap – watches critically over the cowering feasters, while strange and only locally audible bits of Discworld street theatre happen around the tables and culminate with a prolonged, ding-dong sword fight between “Captain Carrot” and an Assassin. One lady fan is mightily offended when the actor playing itinerant vendor Cut-My-Own-Throat Dibbler offers her some herbal lotion hastily and obviously relabelled as Viagra. Elaborately designed Ankh-Morpork dollar bills, with Terry’s face and mottoes like *Pecunia Fecit Revolvere Discum*, are provided at each table for buyers. They think of everything.

In charge of all this forethought is organizer Paul Rood, who as the weekend progresses looks increasingly doom-laden ... owing to what's already an immemorial Discworld Con tradition. At the end of the first event, his loyal committee rewarded his years of hard labour by publicly bathing him in custard. This year, it's tapioca. The centrepiece of the main Adelphi lounge is a plastic paddling-pool in which well-wishers deposit scores of ominous cans, growing inexorably into a majestic construction known as Tapioca Henge. To look upon it, at any rate if you're a convention organizer, is to know the meaning of fear.

Terry – we guess it must be Terry – intervenes in this plan. Just as he monitors Discworld merchandise (after all, he's the one who gets the bloody e-mails), so he keeps a careful eye on this event into which he's thrown himself so whole-heartedly. By the finale his wrist must be aching desperately from those long bouts of autographing, whose immense queues wind and coil around the Adelphi even on the last afternoon. During one session, the heat is so oppressive – the hotel's swimming-pool thermostat has gone barmy, making the place a humid hothouse – that our hero is forced to strip to the waist, revealing a hirsuteness that leads to many obvious orangutan gags. Photographs are taken.

"I've got a special treat for you, Terry," I say ingratiatingly when the last autographing is over. "I'm going to ask you *not* to sign a book." His signing arm twitches convulsively: "No, no! I must sign things! I'm suffering from *signatus interruptus* ..." Admiring fans offer their bodies.

As the closing ceremony reaches its ominous end, Terry takes the stage. "It's been such a pleasure to see your little faces ... it makes all the money worth while." Does Paul Rood deserve mercy in the light of his announcement that the event has raised £6,000 for the Macmillan Cancer Relief Appeal and, of course, the Orangutan Foundation? Our author presides over what follows with the high seriousness of a Masonic Wizard, recalling the spoof rituals in *Guards! Guards!* and indeed the frieze of Masonic emblems in the Adelphi's breakfast-room. Paul Rood kneels in the paddling pool, now renamed the Pit, while grinning committee members hover over vast stockpiles of tapioca. Then Terry decrees that the proposed misuse of so much food is ... wasteful. The tapioca mountain shall go to feed the homeless! Paul: "Yeeeessssss!!!!!"

"But there are *limits to our mercy* ..." A sufficiency of white soginess – just

three cans – is hieratically tipped over the hapless Mr Rood and rubbed well in. Terry raises a ritual jar and adds the blob of jam without which no traditional school bowl of tapioca is complete. Mercy is tempered with justice. The crowd goes wild. You had to be there.

And that, gentle readers, was the second Discworld Convention.

Dreamtime Guilt

Aussiecon 3 (Worldcon), Melbourne, September 1999

Originally prepared as a single exquisitely formatted PDF page for a “Mimeo Fanzine Demonstration” at the 2008 Denver Worldcon, the idea being to produce a one-off fanzine to which Hugo-nominated fan writer and fan artists were invited to contribute. As far as I know this fanzine never appeared.

They told me there was absolutely no need for a trip report on Aussiecon 3 in 1999, but I took notes all the same. The words tapped into the little Psion palmtop came safely home with me; the paper notebook, alas, suffered a mysterious Fortean disappearance, just like Ambrose Bierce and *The Last Dangerous Visions*. Hence the guilt, since I’d travelled under the kindly auspices of the “Auld Lang Fund” set up in emulation of the funds that brought the great Bob Tucker and the great Bob Shaw to past Aussiecons. Now, in a rousing anticlimax, the latest beneficiary was not-so-great me. Thanks to everyone who helped! From the jumbled fragments that survive:

Outbound. On row 53 DEFGH with Paul Kincaid, Maureen Speller, Mark Plummer and Claire Brialey – me in the seat across the aisle with a couple who moved to mysteriously superior places (it was quite an uncrowded plane), although the man returned to sleep across “his” two seats ... and repeatedly came and went to lead a complex social life up and down the aisle, helpfully climbing over me each time to save the effort of undoing my seatbelt. The Peripatetic School of airline philosophy. All this was later recorded in immense detail in Mark’s and Claire’s fanzine *Banana Wings*, which I and Paul Kincaid (Famous GUFF Winner) found vaguely inhibiting to our trip reports. My feat of reading the entirety of Peter Hamilton’s *The Naked God* during a mere 12,000-mile flight was widely admired or disbelieved, I forget which. Thog note on page 551: “If eyes had been hands, he would’ve crushed her.” In the event he merely left twin damp patches on her.

Adelaide & Environs. Exemplary hospitality from John Foyster, Yvonne Rousseau and local fandom: parties, restaurants, wineries and wildlife reserves. The Hugo Winery was nervously appreciated by visiting nominees Maureen and myself, while Claire couldn't identify the spindly animals visible in a distant field and (after a sudden happy flashback to Arthur Upfield's *The Lake Frome Monster*) I covered myself with glory by guessing: "Camels?" In one wildlife sanctuary, the done thing was to meet the kangaroos up close, feed them with officially approved kangaroo nodules purchased from the tourist shop, and then retire to the restaurant to become better acquainted by eating them. Dinner was followed by a surprise night walk through the woods, where shivering Brits tried hard to believe that the distant might-be-a-ripple on the far side of the lake was a platypus, while our guide's torch unerringly picked out nocturnal clusters of possums, potoroos, numbats, bandicoots and mediafans.

Port Adelaide. All Adelaide's low hotels (i.e. pubs) were plastered with signboards offering POKIES. I came to think of this as some fast-food delicacy, surely pointy in shape. Hungry travellers would order a plate piled high with steaming pokies, flavoured with piquant outback spices and washed down by cold beer.... Yvonne shattered the illusion by explaining that pokies are slot machines enabling those of little brain to lose money fast at automated poker. With rapid synchronicity, I found a front-page newspaper article bewailing the moral stupor of a land with 27,500 licensed pokies. O Babylon. Meanwhile the Brits were powerless to explain why they found the local crested pigeon so risible. It is a pigeon, an ordinary boring pigeon, the least interesting bird in existence, yet at the same time it has this bloody silly point on the top of its head. Zippy the Pinhead Pigeon.

Melbourne. Gosh: Aussiecon chair Perry Middlemiss drove to the airport just to meet me! In a quick VIP briefing he explained why the pre-Hugo reception had to be alcohol-free: "We don't want people like you getting shitfaced and falling all over the stage." Driving through the city's marvels, Perry promised to boggle me with the anthill swarms of diligent fans even now setting up Aussiecon at the Convention Centre. Alas, no fans at all were in evidence there, and while Perry rushed off to enjoy a top-level executive panic I found myself for the first time all alone in Australia. Naturally I dived into a bar and got shitfaced.

Pre-Aussiecon. Dinner with Irwin and Wendy Hirsh, whose GUFF trip

photos show us all as alarmingly youthful and sylphlike. Wendy to cowering menfolk: “I’ve had babies – what’s *your* excuse?” Thai restaurant outing with Bruce Gillespie, Elaine Cochrane and others: embarrassing incident of satay chicken (the accompanying dish of fluid emanating foot-high flames is not intended for browning the chicken, as Bruce conveyed by whimpering and putting his hands over his eyes) and anticlimactic first encounter with Aussie spiders in the toilet. Pish, tush. The same wispy grey Phalanges variety that infest my house in Reading, UK? Little did I know.

Aussiecon. Here that notebook would have been tremendously useful. It seemed a fine Worldcon. Winning two Hugos with bases shaped like Ayers Rock (Uluru) was splendid. Not so much fun was taking the wrong door out of the party hotel to find myself trapped in a sealed car park resembling one of the less salubrious levels of *Doom* (Uluru): in the end I had to scramble painfully over the raised exit barrier. Another ignominy was that I missed the closing ceremony after being shanghaied for a train journey into the interior to visit the legendary Aussie fan shrine of Uluru (John Bangsund). Good times were had, though: I’m very glad I made that pilgrimage.

Post-Aussiecon. In Melbourne Zoo, in a cunning darkened enclosure, I saw the platypuses swimming. Wow!

Homeward. En route I should have typed more notes but had a tricky magazine column to prepare, about the recent sad death of James White. Also I was flying alone and so of course got shitfaced, which I *hope* is Australian for “pleasantly mellow”. Sorry. It was a wonderful trip.

Langford Meets Swamp Thing Tropicon/Fanhistoricon, Florida, November 2000

I didn't keep a terribly detailed diary of my FanHistoricon Fan Fund trip to tropic climes, but it went something like this....

6 November 2000

With large chunks of Britain flooded and the railways in disarray, it seemed a cunning plan to travel to Gatwick a day early and stay in nearby Horley to make absolutely sure of the flight to Tropicon XIX in Florida. The state of play at Reading station was suitably indicated by destination boards resolutely claiming that each and every train was headed for FIRST GREAT WESTERN CUSTOMER INFORMATION SYSTEM. In due course, as it continued to piss down, I arrived at the porch of a B&B in Horley village so early that I passed an hour there damply doing a crossword while mine hosts were out walking (or more likely immersing) the dog. When told I was off to an SF convention, they wondered if this was why I'd chosen to stay at the Vulcan Lodge Guest House. I crept away for a curry before my ears went all pointy.

7 November 2000

Taxi to Gatwick; high drama at check-in as Continental Airways rep offered me large cash sums to leave my overbooked Miami flight and go *via* New York. I nervously stood firm. Gatwick's visual aids were every bit as good as First Great Western's, with displays escalating through WAIT FOR BOARDING CALL TO BOARDING TO GATE CLOSING, while at the gate massed Virgin staff continued to repel boarders, and the loudspeakers apologized for *unintelligible* which had been caused by *inaudible*, until the official flight time was long past. Business as usual, then. After a brief tussle with the other holder of a boarding pass for seat 37c (mine, cabin crew telepathically divined, was a typo for 39c) and the normal insanely long interval, I was in

Florida and feeling dizzy. Reading *Ulysses* in one continuous session had been a deeply disorienting experience. Well, nearly continuous – people in uniforms kept interrupting to force food and drink into me through a funnel, and I eventually reached the head of the interminable US Immigration queue with ten pages of Molly Bloom still to go, yes I said yes I will Yes.

Good old Joe Siclari was at hand to load my inert form into his borrowed car, and I gaped at the insistent tropicality of this alien region: I'd been braced for the occasional palm tree, for example, but not miles and miles of them along all the freeways and beaches. Having prepared for the coming of Langford by hastily moving from nearby Boca Raton to New York, Joe had installed me and himself in the nearby home of his kindly Aunt Madeline. Out in the garden there was a cactus three times my height; inside, a vast TV screen was going on about some local election which of necessity would be all over before the night was out....

8 November 2000

Time for touristy stuff. Kennedy Space Centre was three hours away and my plane-ravaged bum still ached, so the fallback decision was to take in an Everglade or two. Joe drove for ages alongside an endless drainage canal, passing sparse one-storey buildings and occasional egrets, and regaling me with horror stories about alligators and giant cockroaches, until we attained the low-budget Everglades Holiday Park and its flocks of loud, dark-blue, evil-beaked birds which turned out to be the legendary grackles. The next step was to board an airboat, a mild surprise because Hazel's lack of enthusiasm for all boats has relegated this aspect of holidays to realms of the normally unimaginable. Airboats are broad, flat-bottomed, shallow-draught affairs like aluminium punts on steroids, which (sharply contrasting with my notions of poling idly through misty, miasmal swamp channels) are driven by bloody great fans and even while carrying a load of tourists can happily roar along at 40mph. The show began with the clearly well-rehearsed gesture of driving this craft at speed into an apparently solid bank which proved to be all water-lilies and sawgrass, folding neatly though not silently out of the way. After various showy turns, crosswinds and stomach-challengingly bumpy bits, disembarkation at a floating jetty led to a fake Native American village comprising a handful of stalls that offered alligator heads, cheap jewellery, feathery dream-catchers, fragmentary skins of small furry animals

(faces, I noticed, cost more than tails), and tasty bites of real alligator tail. None of the party fancied the last. Besides the official attractions there were some wondrous op-art butterflies flitting to and fro; peering at them could actually hurt your eyes, tweaking at the retina like an animated Bridget Riley.

Next came “alligator wrestling” by a chap who explained without great conviction that this was no mere entertainment but a scientific demonstration of terrifying educational value. He then waded into a pool full of alligators and hauled out a smallish specimen, holding its jaws carefully shut. Pointing this at the audience without even checking whether it was loaded, our man wrenched its mouth open to display teeth, tongue and (several times) the mighty **snap** of closure. Even more scientifically, “Alligator eyes retract to protect themselves from injury. as you can see when I poke this one repeatedly with my finger.” *Audience*: “Yuck.” And onward by airboat, with the captain bellowing assurances that Everglades alligators really do live out in the wild like *that one there*, which when stimulated with flung pieces of bread put on a fine show of snapping the dread jaws, lashing the side of the boat with its tail, etc. Not believing these creatures are naturally excited by fragments of hot-dog bun, Joe and I speculated whether the performers were once in a while fed a small tourist to maintain their level of interest. Further examples of local wildlife included blue galleons, suspiciously reminiscent of coots in colourful make-up, and a heron that looked quite remarkably like a heron.

The next treat on offer was Joe’s cautious promise of manatees in a secret body of water somewhere in Port Everglades, a low-rise coastal expanse of storage tanks and light industry that all seemed curiously clean and white. This being Florida, even the industrial estates had palm trees. Alas, the manatee pool and its shoals of stripy tigerfish could only just be glimpsed through a huge new eruption of wire fences and signboards carrying dire threats to trespassers. We retreated for authentically American lunch at a rough-hewn eatery called Ernie’s or (Joe’s emendation) Dirty Ernie’s. Despite my seafood prejudice, the little round rissole things called conch fritters seemed OK apart from odd white gristly lumps which I discarded and which – as Joe eventually used all his tact to convey – were the conch. Onward, hastily, to a platter which caused my idle questions “what exactly is barbecue beef?” (copious sliced beef in spicy sauce, garnished with more beef and more sauce and more and more until at last the mighty-thewed

chef's wrist gets tired) and "will I like it?" (oh yes) rapidly gave way to "can I possibly finish this without physically going pop like the man in the Python film?" It was a near thing, but fortunately no one insisted on feeding me one final wafer-thin mint. The menu had rightly advised on etiquette, thus: "*Butch sez, If you're gonna eat BBQ, carry a big handkerchief.*" That's enough about the wonders of US fast food for this particular trip....

Evening came earlier than seemed possible after brilliant sunshine and temperatures peaking at 85° Fahrenheit ("No twilight within the courts of the Sun"), and Joe led me along moonlit beaches chatting alternately about fan history and conservation projects involving artificial coral-attracting reefs. Sudden flash of Greg Pickersgill's Memory Hole fanzine project as equivalent to the loads of old tyres or ship hulls sunk offshore by Floridans in hope that small coral-building creatures will attach themselves.... A sign chalked up on a lifeguard's hut recorded a temperature of 79°, which failed to make my jaw drop until I realized it meant the sea. I must have slipped accidentally across the International Season Line into summer, while the English floodwaters were still rising and mass UK evacuations even got a three-second mention on US news as light relief from the endless presidential election cliff-hanger which – however resolutely you tried – could not be ignored.

9 November 2000

Joe's good lady Edie Stern had turned up after my collapse into bed. That is, Joe had again driven miles and miles to the airport to collect her, and was scheduled to repeat this process for every remaining Tropicon/FanHistoricon guest, all of whose planes arrived late. Who'd be a chairman? In the morning, with a pause to thank small but redoubtable Aunt Madeline for vast breakfasts and overwhelming dinners, we loaded and then overloaded the car for the fatal trip to the con hotel in Hollywood Beach. As we drove the final miles through the usual blazing sun I noticed elaborate tracteries of wire strung around the palms and shrubs of the road's central reservation ... eventually realizing with a profound sense of WRONGNESS (see the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*) that they were Christmas lights and, what's more, already active in these hot "winter" evenings. Time out of joint, again. We reached the Clarion Hotel – ten storeys, bright pink – with a flat tyre, and things became complicated.

There was a pause for dumping luggage, memorizing the positions of as yet empty con function areas, and admiring each others' prizes. For the charity auction I'd successfully imported a bottle of James White Award presentation beer, as home-brewed by administrator James Bacon and conveyed to me by Mark Plummer: Joe looked long and lustfully on the coloured label with its JWA logo of serpents twining around a spaceship. Meanwhile Joe and Edie had brought their rare US monorail parts catalogues for the Fannish Antiques Roadshow event, the point being that these hardback volumes still contained many picture drafts and sketches stored between their pages by one-time owner Hannes Bok. Something to make collectors drool.

While stalwart artisans changed the car tyres, Joe and I dallied over lunch in a small fastfoodery whose distinguishing gimmick was the drinks list, there being nothing between the extremes of dire US beers like Miller Lite at \$1.99 and a lovingly displayed bottle of Dom Perignon at \$149.00. This may have started as a joke, but apparently they sell one every month or so to some reckless lad determined to impress his girlfriend by waving credit cards. Langford is made of sterner stuff.

Time was ticking away for me. Joe had reminisced with evil glee of how he'd lured Tony Lewis of the New England SF Association to the local attraction Parrot Jungle (est. 1936) and there caused this practising curmudgeon to be photographed in a pose of insane silliness with five huge parrots perching on him. Sure enough, I had been marked down for the same fate. We duly arrived at Parrot Jungle, where as well as a million parrots, cockatoos, toucans, flamingos and the like, there were highly rehearsed Educational Bits that echoed the previous day's alligator wrestling. The presenter demonstrated hands-on expertise with everything from insects, snakes and lizards to kinkajous, opossums, owls and eagles, unerringly zeroing in on the most squeamish onlookers as he bare-handedly fondled tarantulas, huge-clawed scorpions and – here is where even Joe flinched, for this in Florida is the Enemy – a gigantic, torpid cockroach. At one stage I'd convinced myself that a background prop, the Jungle's trademark albino alligator, must be dead and stuffed; it kept so still and the presenter stepped over its obese body with such unconcern. Then its little red eyes blinked.

Walking the Jungle's public paths again, I slightly disgraced myself by peering in fascination at the tiny, agile lizards that kept skittering from

(almost) underfoot, or the apparent rabbit holes down which you could glimpse the twitching claws of land crabs. No, no, crimethink: these weren't exhibits at all, just boring natural denizens of Florida, like the grey squirrels that bullied the cockatoos something rotten and stole their seeds.

The penultimate attraction was a somewhat less educational extravaganza of performing parrots, macaws, etc., which variously roller-skated, pushed a scooter, rode a bicycle, pumped and carried water in a tiny bucket, solved simple shapes-in-holes puzzles, ascended on a model moon rocket to come down again by "parrotchute", and allegedly talked. I couldn't swear to the talking part. Then, yes, I have to admit it, I got photographed with four huge parrots perching on me as I cradled a fifth which had a terribly knowing stare. "I could have your nose off if I wanted," its beady eye conveyed. At least, for the sake of solidarity, Joe suffered likewise.

After returning to Hollywood Beach and lavish Chinese nosh, I somehow found myself in the Clarion Hotel room that was due to become an art show. Immemorial sheets of pegboard and wooden uprights, handed down since the dawn of Tropicon, lay around looking temptingly easy to screw together if only you ignored all those fussy alignment numbers scrawled on them by past generations. Time passed and copious sweat flowed, until at last Mary Kay and Jordin Kare turned up to jeer at the toiling workers and insist on taking me away to the poolside Tiki Bar. The actual dialogue went approximately: "For God's sake, insist on taking me away to the bar!" "Oh, all right." Healing beer was poured, Jordin waxed technological, guest of honour Vernor Vinge joined us with scant minutes to go before closing time, and all seemed right with the convention. Upstairs, presumably, the toiling workers were still at it.

10-12 November 2000

Well, of course it gets a bit confused at this point, as one emerges from the Slow Zone into the Vingean Beyond of convention space, where drinking suddenly transcends Einstein's caution barrier and it becomes miraculously possible to talk faster than the speed of logic.

On Friday morning I got up hideously early, a mistake I tend to make at cons, and found that a semi-collapsed Joyce Scrivner had still beaten me to breakfast at around 7:30am, a feat achieved by having flown overnight from

Minneapolis and only just arrived. Hotel explorations revealed a slowly emerging art show with many a canvas and print by artist GoH David Cherry (C.J.'s kid brother) and a book-rich dealer's room where my purchases ranged from the sublime, a signed copy of John Crowley's *Demonomania*, to the ridiculous in the shape of *Master of Space and Time* by Rudy Rucker. The Tropicon hospitality suite had an awesome range of food and drink, and its riches eventually lured me away from puny hotel breakfasts. But because I get nervous about too much boozy freeloading, I was also glad of the sun-drenched outside bar where one could sprawl in the shade of those inevitable palm trees – sipping frozen piña colada, wondering about the curious hollow spherical fruit that periodically fell from other trees and split halfway open in segments like a Mercator projection (no one seemed able to identify these, and I'm probably thinking of a different projection anyway), and giggling in heartfelt sympathy with all the flood and storm sufferers back home.

Stern duty called, with various programme appearances. As revealed on a memory-jogging sheet of paper handed to me very near the end of Tropicon/FanHistoricon, I was expected at Friday's opening ceremony, where I improvised terribly unjust remarks about Joe D. Siclari and parrots, and a panel with Joe and Dick Smith on whether the web was "ruining parts of fandom", at which no one could muster up the energy to be controversial and I fear I woffled endlessly on the assumption that all this would be mercifully forgotten next day. Then came the realization that, oh dear, they were videotaping everything.

Saturday was my heavy day, with three solo talks. The rather small size of the convention (100 or so rather than the expected 250, perhaps owing to house-moving distractions that hampered publicity efforts) was evident at the retrospective talk written specially for FanHistoricon, "Twenty-One Years of *Ansible*", which was scheduled against the stupendously popular Alternate History panel and drew an audience of four. Remember, Langford, thou art but mortal.

After the Saturday evening banquet, though, all the guests took turns to toy with this captive audience: filk guest Heather Alexander ("Celtic Fiddler") strutted her stuff on what was presumably a Celtic fiddle, I unleashed the latest update of my Loathsome SF Food exegesis as seen at Aussiecon ("That was *revolting*," said Joe appreciatively. "I thought Vernor was going to explode laughing!"), mild-mannered David Cherry said something heartfelt

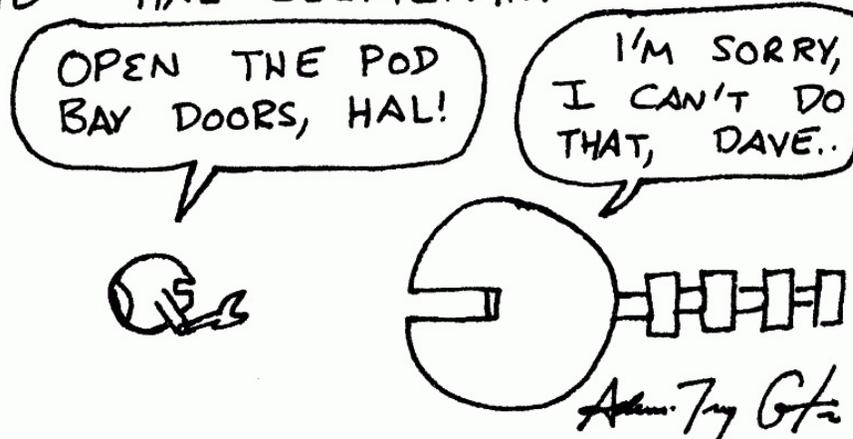
but to me inaudible, and Vernor Vinge pulled out exquisitely written but minimalist notes for a talk that sprayed futurological ideas and sense of wonder in all directions. By then I was busy worrying about the coming late-night Live Thog's Masterclass, which in the event was kindly received by a relaxed post-banquet crowd, with Jordin Kare in grave danger of total Thog-induced meltdown. The night ended in unscheduled falling over at the Boston in 2004 party, and I woke up to the starkly unimaginable horror of finding myself a paid-up presupporter of the Galactic Patrol. Cue coruscating beams of ravaging energies....

Although the DUFF panel and audience were crowded with past winners (Joyce Scrivner, Pat and Roger Sims, Dick and Leah Smith), the TAFF panel was cancelled when the non-Langfordian half (Ulrika O'Brien) failed to turn up. Was I off the hook? "We like to work our guests hard," Joe chortled as he permitted me to fill TAFF's Sunday morning spot with my emergency last-resort speech about old fanzines (see Geri Sullivan's *Idea* 11). On the whole I think I got through this without actual disaster.

In between these mercilessly fixed time slots, there was all the usual free-form lounging around and chatting. I'd been a little nervous of meeting Vernor Vinge after reading *A Deepness in the Sky*, somehow imagining him as a brooding intellect, vast and cool and unsympathetic, peering loftily down upon mere mortals and carrying a small pocket Singularity somewhere on his person. Finding I was taller than Vernor did of course help, but he's excellent company as well.... Then there was Tropicon regular Hal Clement, where my nervousness was of a different order: I'd written effusive things about him in an introduction to the new NESFA Press omnibus of his Mesklin stories, which felt somehow conversation-stopping but in the event wasn't. He bewailed the fading hearing and reflexes that prevented him from winning the SF trivia quiz as in past years, and we shared some moans about how our favourite literature had promised a future where prosthetics like hearing aids (he has twice as many as me) work *better*, dammit, than the original apparatus of puny human flesh. Also currently afflicted was Kathleen Ann Goonan, to whom I was to convey good wishes from Chris Priest: she appeared at the poolside in the hugest and most sinister sunglasses I'd ever met, thanks to a recent eye operation, and stunned me with the claim that though living in the depths of Florida she survived the summers without air conditioning. I was having intermittent trouble with the heat of November....

Adam-Troy Castro, balding and beady-eyed and fascinated by every emerging twist of the election (he'd accost you in hotel corridors with exultant cries like "I hear they found this ballot box in New Mexico!"), was a local instance of the upcoming, determinedly pushy but likeable writer, rarely seen not waving copies of his own two story collections. He's also an enthusiastic if unpolished cartoonist – the specimen below appeared in the Tropicon programme book. Dearie me.

THIS YEAR, IN HONOR OF THE
NEW MILLENIUM, WE WILL BE
HAVING A SPECIAL DRAMATIC
PRESENTATION WITH DAVE LANGFORD
AND HAL CLEMENT..



Meanwhile, just as at a Novacon back home (Novacon was on the same weekend), the Tropicon auctions went on forever. I duly made several unwise purchases, but despite auctioneer Siclari's resistless technique managed to maintain total immobility during fierce non-bidding for the most ... *skiffy* ... lot of the whole weekend, being a Jar Jar Binks toby jug. Yes, there are indeed worse things than the notorious Terry Pratchett jug.

Sunday evening saw a mass exodus of committee and guests to a Cuban restaurant, where we pondered on the authenticity of dubious ethnic dishes. Mine resembled a vast chicken Kiev, six inches square and ever so thick, with surprise deposits of ham secreted in the middle. Nice, but Cuban? Back at the now familiar Clarion Hotel, antlike toilers had dismantled all the art show panels again; these, I dimly gathered, needed to be moved. "Let me

give you a hand,” said an incautious FanHistoricon guest speaker, imagining a leisurely stroll downstairs and a little shifting of panels into a waiting van. The reality was a long drive through miles and miles of garish night – another chance to admire the Xmas lights – to unload tons of lumber at the South Florida Science Fiction Society clubhouse in a distant industrial estate. Thus, entirely by accident, I cultivated virtue and was spared several degrees of hangover by my late arrival at Tropicon’s closing dead-dog party.

This event offered a small culture shock at the sight of countless surviving bottles of hospitality-room spirits, bolstered by copious leavings from Joe’s and Edie’s Florida drinks cupboard that they couldn’t face hauling to New York. At a British convention all these would have disappeared with a loud slurping noise quite early on Friday evening (except perhaps for the lethal-looking “20-20” liqueur, melon-based and fluorescent pink). Here they’d been shoved aside into a wardrobe because hardly anyone was interested. Joe, Edie, Vernor and I worked hard to reverse this trend, but what were we few against so many?

13 November 2000

Subdued remnants of the convention gathered in the hotel’s “Palm Court” breakfast area. Vernor later confessed that owing to last night’s terrible damage he could face nothing but coffee, making me feel tough and macho for managing despite personal fragility to overcome a fresh-cooked omelette: I slipped him one of my Original Celebrated Curiously Strong Peppermints (acquired to change a \$20 bill) and he brightened somewhat.

It was Vernor’s turn for an airboat outing with Joe, and I came along expecting more of the same; but today’s location, the Sawgrass Recreational Park, was a swamp of another colour. No waterlilies, no restricted vistas forced by swamp-apples and other trees as before, just an endless expanse of sawgrass that in the sunshine looked deceptively like open prairie with patches of water. The airboat was subtly different, too: instead of there being a roof to deflect the engine’s roar, passengers were issued with earplugs. At top speed on the outward journey, Vernor had to hold on tight to his anti-sunburn beanie and I felt in danger of losing my glasses. Mating damsel flies (probably called something else in America) kept being blown into the boat, and one pair spent a long time having it off on my shoe. The alligators here

were more frequent and less sluggish, occasionally swimming all on their own across open water rather than lying inert until pelted with bread. That feeding trick was more spectacular this time, as Captain Airboat tapped approaching alligators' noses to make them open wide; the devastating **CHOMP** as their jaws snapped on traditional bits of hot-dog bun echoed flatly across acres of swampland. They seemed an awful lot closer here, and fuller of menace.

Vinge, nervously: "Alligators are of course *vegetarians*."

Langford, nodding hard: "They just need all those big teeth to crunch the stout tubers on which they naturally subsist..."

Back ashore, the park offered a yet more hands-on animal exhibit in which hapless tourists submitted to having a eight-foot albino python with lemon-yellow markings draped over their shoulders. "I *need* a photo of you two doing that," said Joe, and made off at speed to the souvenir shop for a disposable camera while his guests looked at each other with a wild surmise. The python writhed about on the parched earth underfoot, sticking out its tongue at us. Unfortunately for posterity, the handler had put it firmly and irrevocably back into its box before Joe returned.

The next photo opportunity involved patting, stroking and possibly even putting your extremities into the mouth of a (leashed) puma, but those of us accustomed to SF novel contracts did rather recoil from the form on which you had to sign your life away by agreeing to hold the Sawgrass Recreational Park harmless no matter what frightful injuries their hellcat wreaked upon you. Right then it was pretending to be asleep, but we knew that was just its cunning. Joe contented himself with a few animal-free photographs, and I found another wild lizard lurking outside the inevitable pens of alligators, crocodiles, caymans and the like.

Vernor had to get home to San Diego, and there were suitably tearful farewells at Fort Lauderdale airport. Touristy travels continued with a drive past stupefyingly opulent residences along the local waterways (Joe: "We call those the *cheap houses*") and the posh shopping street Las Olas that appears in all the movies. Evening crept onward as we pottered on foot along Miami Beach proper – improbably warm and clean, like a film-set simulation of itself, with yet more rows of palms, and young folk rollerblading down the adjacent pavement or (as I almost managed to think) sidewalk. I thriftily

picked up chunks of coral to take home for Hazel, intending in my thoughtful way not to offend her sensibilities with garish souvenirs costing actual money.

All the while Joe was steering us towards a place of literary pilgrimage in the Bahia Mar marina, a huge maze of jetties and moorings between the beach road and inland waterway, crammed with gleaming white million-dollar boats. Most locals evinced great ignorance of erstwhile SF and thriller author John D. MacDonald, but eventually a chap driving a little buggy not only recognized the name but offered us a lift across a car-park or two. There it was, a weathered plaque at mooring slip F604 (once F18):

DEDICATED TO THE "BUSTED FLUSH"
HOME OF TRAVIS MCGEE
FICTIONAL HERO & SALVAGE CONSULTANT
CREATED BY JOHN D. MACDONALD, AUTHOR
1916-1986

Sort of like visiting 221B Baker Street in London.

Nearby loomed the Doubletree Hotel where Tropicon VII had boggled fan GoH Walt Willis, who lyrically compared the penthouse convention venue to a van Vogt spaceship in the sky and made the place sound so marvellous that, Joe confided, the committee was hard put to recognize it. I promised to continue this tradition by describing the Clarion Hotel (with which Tropicon XIX had had a few little difficulties) as "not bad".

During all these travels, by the way, I was tremendously impressed by Joe's pocket GPS location device, which wherever we drove in flat, flat Florida ("The highest point is the city dump"), and even when we walked down to the sea's edge, creatively announced we were 41 feet above sea level.

Back at the auntly residence in Lighthouse Point, I proudly pulled out a reel of monofilament line I'd bought from the bass-fishing counter at the Sawgrass Park shop, and begged Aunt Madeline for the loan of a needle to patch up my suitcase, whose seam had given way on the outward trip. She brushed aside my pathetic male aspirations and restitched the case herself, so stoutly that that the homeward flight's cargo manglers could make absolutely no impression on her bombproof repair.

14 November 2000

After fond farewells to Joe's utterly splendid relatives, there was time for one last expedition before my flight home: to the International Museum of Cartoon Art. En route, a memorable ad on the side of a building seen from interstate I-95 featured a happy stick-figure in a more or less sitting posture, its rear separated by a little tasteful space from a stylized fountain of water: "MR BIDET. FOR A HEALTHY CLEAN TUSH!" I smugly spotted another unofficial, freelance lizard lurking in the foliage as we walked through an incredibly posh shopping district surrounding the museum.

Like the British Museum or V&A, the IMCA has vast deposits of material and can show only a selection at any time: the current exhibition centred on the museum co-founder Mort Walker's *Beetle Bailey* army-camp strip (50th anniversary in 2000), which although not actually SF – which would have been just too serendipitous – was unfamiliar to me and also intermittently funny, so a good time was had. Elsewhere, checking just how International this place was, I discovered a black-and-white page original from *Watchmen* and a fragment of script by our very own Neil Gaiman. Psychological note: it is possible to enjoy that worthy sense of cultural uplift that comes from visiting a real museum, even when one is doing no more than have a great time walking around looking idly at cartoons. I tried quite hard to shut my eyes and pass unscathed through the museum shop, but Joe insisted on buying me a science-fictional set of Bugs Bunny fridge magnets, including "the most important character according to Edie – the Martian!" These may be inspected by appointment.

Hospitable to the end, Chairman Joe kept me company to the Miami airport check-in and then beyond, for therapeutic glasses of Sam Adams beer at the nearby bar. Time slid by in fannish chatter. Takeoff was around dusk, and the last view of Miami tilting away outside – an endless carpet of jewelled lights – outshone any other city I'd seen through a aeroplane window.

15 November 2000

You can imagine how a planeload of passengers fresh from the tropics broke into madly ironic laughter as, approaching London Gatwick shortly after dawn, the pilot assured us that it was shaping up to be a fine bright English day with outside temperature minus four Centigrade. The odd-looking cloudscape through the window suddenly resolved itself into fields grey with

hoarfrost, with occasional clots of fog sitting around like beached clouds. Then the landing, and homeward in a blur of trains and taxis, to find no one in Britain was even remotely interested in my hot Floridan gossip gambits like, “Did you know they’ve been having some kind of election over there?”

The usual heartfelt thanks to all....

Footnote

“All” means Joe Siclari and Edie Stern, doers of heroic deeds; Mrs (Aunt) Madeline Walz for hospitality; Shirlene Ananayo-Rawlik (con suite); Geri Sullivan (a kind word in the programme book); Becky Peters (art show); Melanie Herz (registration); Judi Goodman (charity auction); the rest of the committee; Vernor Vinge and other guests; Adam-Troy Castro (cartoon); Joyce Scrivner (hanging out in bars beyond the call of duty); Boston in 2004; everyone who cheered me with Langford autograph requests; everyone else at Tropicon XIX; and Hazel Langford as ever. A final nod to Charles Platt, who on reading about these exploits was quick to point out several fatal errors in my schedule:

“I’m sad that you missed some of the really important attractions during your visit. The Police Museum includes a genuine prison cell (in which you can be photographed) and a genuine electric chair (ditto), plus some really stirring info posters about the horrors of drugs. The Salvador Dalí Museum has a collection second only to the Dalí museum in Spain. And Gator Jungle is the most repulsive of all the animal parks, as the lakes have been overgrown completely with foul-smelling algae, from which the alligators emerge literally dripping slime. A friend of mine was so nauseated by the stench of decay, she had to leave, and took half an hour to recover.

“Alas the Lee Harvey Oswald museum, featuring the actual car in which Kennedy was assassinated, has moved to a different state. When I visited it many years ago, I sent a postcard to J.G. Ballard, who was suitably impressed.”

Thank you, Charles.

Another Convention Diary

Torcon 3 (Worldcon), Toronto, 2003

Well, guess what: I went to the Toronto Worldcon in 2003. And, despite promising myself to treat it all as a relaxing holiday, I took some notes....

Wednesday 27 August 2003

A deeply uneventful outward trip, which is how I like it. By way of subtle foreshadowing, one of the in-flight films was a Hugo winner: despite spurning the offered earphones as usual, I eventually realized that this endless succession of gravity-defying martial arts setpieces must be the famous *Crouching Subtitles, Hidden Soundtrack*.

Toronto's international airport turns out to be 28 kilometres out of town. A long, long wait for the AirportExpress shuttle was enlivened by many predatory taxi drivers offering to cover the distance at the speed of light for practically no cost, a temptation easily resisted because I already had my (return) coach ticket. At last the conveyance arrived, miles of motorway unreeled and the Toronto skyline began to loom dimly through sun-filtered windows.

Since Torcon had neglected to provide maps, there was some comfort in the bus brochure's teensy, not-to-scale plan showing the various con hotels strung out along the same street and separated by, I carefully estimated, a distance. Having laboriously plodded that distance along Front Street and tracked down the Renaissance Hotel at the far end, I found it was embedded in the city's number-two landmark – the SkyDome stadium – which in turn nestled at the foot of the biggest sight of all, the 553-metre CN Tower. Oh well.

Among the strangely familiar sights were occasional bilingual direction signs, with WEST and EAST carefully glossed as OUEST and EST ... rather like home in South Wales, with TAXI subtitled TACSI for the benefit of (to

paraphrase Kingsley Amis) benighted Welsh who've never seen an X in their lives. Was it a delusion that Toronto's street crowds were already dotted with sensitive fannish faces? At one point I thought I heard someone unknown say "That's Dave Langford," but probably it was the jet lag talking: I never was any good as an eavesdropper.

Good news! My US dollar account card proved capable of sucking Canadian notes from Toronto ATMs, \$CAN400 at a time. Pausing only to stoke up at a convenient ethnic restaurant (East Side Mario's: New York Italian), I made my way to the Royal York Hotel where all the parties were to be. There Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden seemed to be running up an enormous Tor Books tab in the overpriced bar, surrounded by such thirsty luminaries as Charlie Stross and Liz Williams. What could I do but join in? This buffered me against the later Los Angeles in 2006 bidding party, where such treats as Hugo-shaped cookies and the vast presence of fan guest of honour Mike Glyer could not entirely conceal a certain lack of alcohol. Again, foreshadowing – of five days in a dry convention centre linked to yet a third hotel where loudly ongoing reconstruction work had closed the bar and restaurant for the duration.

Thursday 28 August 2003

Up morbidly early. After drafting my holiday-assignment review on the palmtop (Robin Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, fat enough to last me through an entire transatlantic flight with a chapter or so to spare), I explored the local streets and famous subterranean walkways, leading to breakfast in an underground food court obsessed with healthy eating. You could order wicked substances like hash browns, but they came with a couple of raw carrots on top to take away the curse. Next, the Metro Convention Centre and my first intimation of Torcon's organizational disasters....

That was the received version, but disaster depends a great deal on your viewpoint. Arriving bright and early and jetlagged at the Centre, I discovered that just as predicted the souvenir book wasn't ready (there had been some fuss about a public resignation and unresignation by the Torcon committee member in charge), but there were dinky little tickets entitling you to claim a copy later. The pocket programme, a substantial paperback, had also been delayed, but this was not a problem because so many scores of changes had

happened since it went to press that fans were told to rely on the new programme grids being printed every day. Surprises abounded each morning. All this made it a mite difficult to plan ahead.

When I later showed Hazel my Torcon badge, she protested: “That’s not a badge, it’s a sporran!” That is, a flexible blue plastic pouch 6.5" high by 4.5" wide, assuring fans in large friendly white print that they were, honestly, no kidding, attending **TORCON 3**, held in **TORONTO, CANADA, 2003**, and sponsored by **Tor Books**. (Of course the Worldcon was named for the city, like its predecessors, but the sheer beauty of this sponsorship proved irresistible both to the cash-starved committee and to Tom Doherty at Tor.) Beneath this information was a transparent holder containing a 3" x 4" printed badge more than half occupied by a sketched Hugo rocket, with one line devoted to the member’s name in type rather smaller than the recommended minimum of 24 points. I’ve seen worse, but would not actually have objected to a layout that let the name sprawl over more than, at most, 3.4% of the total badge area. A lot of us did a lot of furtive squinting.

Dutifully I hung this millstone round my neck (I forgot to mention the useful pockets provided on the flipside for storing souvenir book claim tickets, visiting cards, sandwiches, etc) and attached my two tiny gold Hugo-nominee rockets at the top-corner holes where the string went. Claire Brialey immediately remarked that the overall effect put her in mind of pierced nipples. I spent days trying to efface that thought from memory.

In general, although the conrunning purists were bitterly critical, tradition and goodwill kept Torcon reasonably on course – especially for lazy attendees like myself who could ignore the backstage chaos and opt for relaxation rather than a round-the-clock stint of self-promotion. Indeed, when I assured the programme disorganizer that one speech and no panel appearances would be plenty for me, there had come a hiss of indrawn breath and muttered asides about wishing more US pros had that attitude.

The first famous professional I ran into was Robert Silverberg, bemusedly looking for some action, any action. “Where’s the dealers’ room?” he demanded. Upstairs, I explained, and off-limits to mere members during setup, with an implacable security guard at the escalator. “We’ll see about *that*,” said Bob sternly, and seconds later waved from on high. Subsequently he explained: “I just said: I’m Dave Langford, I’ve got more Hugos than

anybody, and I need to be up there.” Readers are warned that Mr Silverberg writes fiction and may sometimes make things up.

When I penetrated the dealers’ room at last, I was accosted by a bearded, sinisterly hatted figure. “Mr Langford!” said Terry Pratchett in tones of deep suspicion: “Have you *permed your hair*?” I still hope this was subtle humour.

Meanwhile, Diane Duane and Peter Morwood appeared and voiced my inmost thoughts about passing the time until something happened: “Where’s the bar?” Across the road in a Texan restaurant, as it turned out, where we consumed frighteningly ethnic lunch served in ten-gallon hats – well, not *quite* – and the Owl Springs collective gloated about delivering their screenplay for a TV miniseries of *The Ring*, not Tolkien’s but Wagner’s.

The usual social scene continued. Darrell Schweitzer treated me to a lengthy spiel on self-publishing and on getting thrown out of a Hubbardite party with extreme prejudice for defending his positive review of Russell Miller’s *Bare-Faced Messiah*. David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer showed off their new offspring. I enjoyed watching Paul Barnett buy a round at the Royal York hotel bar, and seeing his face become a mask of horror as he realized that the “we try to be exactly like an English pub” motto did not extend to allowing unseemly pint glasses. “Two glasses each,” he cried, bravely but unwisely. We inferred that the policy was for fear that tourists would have heart attacks if exposed to the price of a Royal York pint in one instalment.

The Royal York also proved to house (at various remote positions in a maze of twisty corridors, all alike) the hospitality suite, where I enjoyed the occasional cup of tea, and a fan lounge organized by Colin Hinz and Catherine Crockett, whose delights included the great Steve Stiles and a bathtub full of bottles of extremely fannish home-brewed beer. This was the life. Or it would have been if my hearing hadn’t kept letting me down.

As already noted, my hotel – the Renaissance – was built into the Skydome sports arena, a science-fictional edifice with the largest retractable roof in the universe, or thereabouts. I furtively investigated its gift shop to learn what the Toronto Blue Jays team actually plays. Football? Lacrosse? Chess? The awful truth was betrayed by a plethora of tiny souvenir baseball bats. Another local team (hockey this time) generated perpetual aesthetic anguish by being called the Maple Leafs [sic]. But the next, or outgoing, Skydome attraction seemed to be the circus: from the hotel bar I peered down at a vast grey

concrete floor, littered with mobile homes, conical piles of sawdust, and in the middle – in a token enclosure of metal hurdles, not actually forming a complete barrier – three dispirited-looking elephants.

Later came the usual evening restaurant expedition with fan friends. Good stuff (Thai), but even better was the walk through evening Toronto, being boggled by eccentric public art on the way out and by the glowing night cityscape as we retraced our steps. The municipal art-forms are highly varied: here a clutch of unnaturally steep-angled stone pyramids on a grassy lot, there at a bus stop a sitting commuter who turned out to be a statue. (Seattle, I remember, goes one better with a whole group of sculpted commuters; back home in Reading, England, it may have been budget considerations that reduced this concept to a few inconspicuous bronze shopping bags.) The end wall of one vast old building had become a *trompe l'oeil* painting that cunningly incorporated the few scattered windows.

Other art, alas, was of the more familiar steel-girder genre that looks like some terrible industrial accident, foundry junkheap, or skeleton of something yet to be built. Half the convention regularly passed through one of these, a sort of high, twisted wigwam frame straddling a much-used stretch of pavement. I remarked on an extraordinary number of street beggars holding out little paper cups; the one who hopefully touched his forelock to every passer-by was not, I fear, committing Performance Art.

Los Angeles and Kansas bidding parties for the 2006 Worldcon awaited our return, both strangely garish and hellishly crowded after an initial lull of mere minutes. The Kansas theme of random glowing things was perhaps more restful than LA's ambitious conversion of hotel room doors to airlocks outlined with brilliant lights, not to mention the epileptic flicker of giant LEDs on their Space Cadet staff uniforms. (These high-tech ornaments, brought in bulk to Torcon by some mad scientist from [I think I heard] eastern Europe, were selling like hot cakes at \$CAN2.50 – I came home with a couple to show Hazel, one a gift from a kindly Kansas supporter.) After minute and flattering investigation of the date on my passport, LA decided I was old enough to be permitted a thimbleful of their pink "rocket fuel" spirit, formula undisclosed. I still insist it wasn't so much this as lingering jetlag that soon had me yawning openly in the faces of such fans as Geri Sullivan, Bob Devney and Alyson Abramowitz. To bed, to bed.

Friday 29 August 2003

Again I leapt out of bed far too early, to confront the stark new experience of hazelnut and vanilla coffee (not bad, actually). My plans to continue a day of new sensations by going up the CN Tower were thwarted because it hadn't yet opened. Around 9am in the convention centre, I found John Clute waving an early copy of his latest mighty critical collection *Scores*, while George R.R. Martin confided almost with tears in his eyes that Thog must, must, must examine that "wonderful source", *The Fifth Sorceress* by Robert Newcomb. Later Janice Gelb told me the same, and later still Mike Cule submitted a Thoggism – see *Ansible 196* – with the comment "I got about six chapters into the piece of excrement before I remembered that no-one was paying me to review it and stopped." The group mind of fandom!

By and by the CN Tower opened, and after being carefully sniffed by an explosives detector I made the ear-popping ascent. The thing is 553 metres high, over 1,800 feet, but the first lift stops at a modest 346m, where there's a reasonably spacious tourist trap, coffee shop and general bogglement area. The great psychological challenge is to walk across the famous glass floor and glance nonchalantly down at toy-sized bits of Toronto 1,100 feet below, without actually leaping back in terror. That floor is supposedly rated to carry 28 hippopotami, but one finds oneself brooding over the significant weight of one's breakfast and the possibility that this very test (carried out *just how recently?*) might itself have weakened the glass. Oo-er. The rather more cramped SkyPod, "World's Highest Observation Platform" is still further up, at 447m, and there certainly is a hell of a view. On a clear day you're supposed to be able to see the spray of Niagara Falls; for me, though, it was misty, and it occurred to me that sensible tourists probably wait until the afternoon. Still, there was the teensy convention centre, the minute SkyDome stadium (now suddenly green with AstroTurf), the bijou hotels....

Back at the convention, the day passed in much the usual sort of way, with a Live Thog's Masterclass presentation looming in the early evening. It's always nice to discharge one's responsibility before the "major" convention events, rather than fret until the far end of it all. The latest version of the Thog script was duly covered with traditional scribbles: for example, the omnipresent Torcon logo prompted me to add, from memory, Lionel Fanthorpe's classic evocation of terror in *Rodent Mutation*: "Police! Help!

We're being attacked! We're being attacked by a gigantic beaver!" With an hour to go and time to kill, I phoned Hazel to assure her that all was well, and she broke it to me that her mother had died on Thursday night.

The show had to go on, but it wasn't easy. I may not have been properly appreciative of the splendid dinner to which Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden treated me afterwards. The subsequent Tor party was a bit of a blur, and I was sufficiently on edge to be quite disturbed by David Brin's sudden, menacing remark, "*Check your stories.*" Me, struggling to think of anything horrid I'd put in *Ansible* lately: "What, all of them?" He: "Only the ones that *make me weep.*" And he stalked off, but I intercepted him a little later and begged for clarification. It was, as I should have realized, to do with the incident of Jo Walton throwing Coke over him. As you know, Bob, she apologized, but some others posted anti-Brin responses in her LiveJournal. Hence his statement of position: "My wife was reduced to *tears* by the *lies* put about by Jo Walton and her lynch mob. And your line in *Ansible* *didn't help either.*" Pause. "But you're a great guy." Exit. I didn't feel at all ready for this kind of thing, and staggered back to my hotel with the wounded air of a messenger riddled by machine-gun fire.

Saturday 30 August 2003

Hugo day. Mostly this was just an ordinary convention day, but I felt so shell-shocked by Friday's grim news that I don't think I actually ate anything. Not a good move. NESFA Press kindly let me sign books at their table for an hour in the afternoon, and I did business running well into single figures. Then the space/time continuum began to rumble with advance tremors of the award ceremony. Although common sense insists that I should be intensely blasé about these things, being actually present generated an irrational, indefinable dread....

The pre-Hugo party evoked memories of queuing at Foyle's book shop in the bad old days. There was a cash bar, but you were not permitted to give the barman cash. Instead you queued up at a cashier's desk to buy tiny square tickets which after queueing up again could be exchanged for a soft or non-soft drink, with bona-fide invitees receiving one special voucher exchangeable for either a soft-drink ticket or \$4 off the expensive alcoholic substance of your choice. All too much for the shrunken Langford brain.

To deter gatecrashers, the reception was to have been represented by a blank space in the day's final revised programme sheet, a space into which some opportunistic hand had slipped a programme item just before going to press – so in theory the reception would be enlivened by a background talk on “Eros and Near Earth Asteroids”. Hasty retractions were posted. The party food was highly praised, but seemed to be all fishy/seafoody stuff which I queasily couldn't face.

Some remarkable evening dress was on view, none more remarkable than that of Charlie Stross's good lady, in a sort of tutu-and-fishnets effect like an extremely raffish Christmas tree fairy. “Feorag is certainly dressed up to the nines,” I mentioned to Paul Barnett, who judiciously replied: “Up to the threes, I'd say.”

So to the Hugo ceremony. Agonizing tension mounted as toastmaster Spider Robinson, played his guitar, sang a little ditty called “50 Ways to Lose a Hugo”, mocked the USA, banged on about the space race, anything but actually start the presentations. The full results appeared in *Ansible 194* and every other SF forum known to anthropology, so I merely mention a statistic. Despite acquiring ridiculously many of these trophies from 1985 onward, I hadn't actually been to a North American Worldcon since 1980 and so had never personally collected the award on that continent. But when I modestly remarked that this was a completely new experience, no one seemed to believe me. I forget what else I said, but there was a suggestion in there that voters might consider giving the Fan Writer award to someone else.

Other recipients came better prepared: Gardner Dozois accepted the Best Editor rocket with “The golden age of science fiction is *right now!*”, Neil Gaiman's Novella win for *Coraline* did *not* lead to a repeat of his stunned 2002 speech “Fuck me, I've won a Hugo!”, and Robert Sawyer's litany of thanks when he bagged Best Novel (“Everything good in my life I owe to fandom”) included particularly heartfelt gratitude to “J.K. Rowling for being late delivering her MS ... and the judges for deciding *Coraline* is a novella – I've never been so thrilled by a word count statistic in my life.” Even those carpers who chafed at endless Sawyerian self-promotion before Torcon had to admit that – the convention's own publicity having been woefully inept – he'd raised the local profile of this Worldcon no end.

Towards the end of all this, my ego was crushed by the introduction of the

George R.R. Martin Hugo Award Metric. As a Torcon guest of honour, George led up to his presentation of the best-novel Hugo by defining this in leering, lip-smacking tones, as The Big One. At times he seemed to be talking about something else altogether. “All Hugos are created equal and free – but Joe Haldeman has *the big one*. Connie Willis also has a big one. Ursula Le Guin has *two* big ones. Fortunately, Gardner Dozois has twelve little ones. Howard Waldrop has ... none at all.” The inexorable logic of this Hugo hierarchy has collapsed my own record into one little one. Plus a long string of *utterly infinitesimal* ones.

At last it was over, even the interminable Hugo photo opportunities, and we made a triumphal procession down Front Street to the Royal York and the Hugo Losers’ Party – there to be greeted by unseemly behaviour from that Mr Brin, who pelted Geoffrey Landis and myself with potato crisps (or possibly chips) for daring to enter as winners. I coldly reminded him that I was still in tears after losing Best Semiprozine. Actually one couldn’t help feeling sympathetic, since DB was a strong contender for Best Novel and by all accounts his *Kiln People* was heaps better than Robert Sawyer’s winner *Hominids*. Some day I must read them both. It’s a lottery. A bad night for dear old David Brin, then, but a good one for me.

(The cruellest item in the con’s traditional spoof newsletter was a Lost and Found column: “David Brin lost the Best Novel Hugo. Could whoever has it, please return it to him?” I forget whether it was on this or some other night that Amy Thomson, luridly splendid in her Red Death evening dress, confided that she always thought of Mr Brin’s *Glory Season* as *Glory Hole*.)

It has to be said, with ill-suppressed drooling, that Torcon’s Hugos were among the best-looking ever. The trophy design frames the traditional rocket – gold-plated for the 50th anniversary of the first presentation – between two halves of a stylized maple leaf in beautifully polished golden wood, “designed to represent a blast of flames”. Many of us were instead reminded of moose antlers, with the rocket rising between them like a horn. A moosicorn.

Everybody wanted me to phone Martin Hoare with the news at 4am British time, and indeed Terry Pratchett kept offering his mobile for the purpose, but pity stayed my hand. Besides, it is a closely guarded secret that Martin doesn’t *really* get me out of bed in the small hours after accepting a Hugo: he

just pretends he will. Except the year when against all expectations I won Best Short Story and he got carried away. (Hazel: “Martin, you *pig*.”)

Sunday 31 August 2003

You don't want to know all the little details of convention and touristy routine. I bumped into Kim Stanley Robinson and mumbled the usual Hugo commiserations. “After *Years of Rice and Salt*,” he confided, “I'm going to write short books, perhaps comedies.” Next, Peter F. Hamilton moves in a big way into villanelles. Stan R. also confided total inability to understand M. John Harrison's *Light*.... When the day's programme sheet appeared, it was revealed that the two items I really had to attend, the *SF Encyclopedia* panel (in my capacity as possible co-editor of the third edition) and the Sidewise Awards presentation (in my cunning Chris Priest disguise) were in successive slots covering the entire period of the fan funds auction. Oh, guilt.

The *SFE* panel was actually called “John Clute's Encyclopedia of SF is 10 years old” – a title which John had struggled in vain to have changed, knowing all too well the geysers of wrath that can erupt from Melbourne when Peter Nicholls suspects he's being marginalized. Indeed John remained so fretful about this, and spent so much time inserting equal credit for Peter Nicholls on every possible occasion, that he nervily forgot to make several intended points. Or so he said, but it seemed fine to me, and I thought it unnecessary for *Ansible* to run his suggested public apology for not mentioning me enough. As for the Sidewise Award, Chris Priest was robbed, but what can you expect from a alternate-history jury on this side of the Atlantic when you write a tricky, subversive novel whose “other” World War II ends before it gets interesting to Americans? The usual round of parties filled the evening: the Kansas City 2006 bidders seemed cheery enough despite having lost to LA, and in police fashion had marked the outline of the bid's corpse in tape on the floor. By now I had learned to stay up much, much later....

Monday 1 September 2003

And at last I was sleeping better, snoozing happily until 10:48 and the realization that I was supposed to be doing an interview for radio, conducted

by one Rick Kleffel, in the Royal York Hotel some distance away ... at 11am. A frantically sprinting figure might have been seen dashing down Front Street, plying a cordless shaver with simulated nonchalance. I was late, but apparently it didn't matter, since the Kleffel recording kit was suffering complex problems which I strove not to understand.

Emerging after what seemed an adequate interview, I met Rich Lynch of *Mimosa* coeditorial fame, who as his hair recedes looks more and more like James White, especially from the side. What, asked the acute *Ansible* newshound, would he and Nicki do after folding *Mimosa*? "We're waiting for the economy to recover." More random wandering, a little unscheduled autographing, and Torcon began to shut down. The book room closed outright; the exhibits area dwindled steadily.

Much bizarreness broke out at the closing ceremony, with Torcon chair Peter Jarvis gassed at his very lectern and superseded by Noreascon 4's Deb Geisler in a little *Prisoner* spoof: "You are number 61 ... I am the new number 62." He: "I am not a number ... I am a free fan!" Then, of course, peals of mocking laughter. Sixty-two, once the magic gavel had been passed to Noreascon, also seemed to be the approximate number of their committee members who proceeded to fill the stage.

To climax this final event, George R.R. Martin's ill-concealed, Viagraesque longings were gratified at last. In the form of a glittering, inflatable Hugo rocket – liberated from the Noreascon party and fully seven feet long – George received The Even Bigger One.

All that remained was the Dead Dog Party, or Dead Beaver Party, over which we draw a merciful and sanitized veil. Looking back over the whole event, I reflected that, as is more and more usual, I'd enjoyed meeting people in small groups but didn't hear much at the very few programme items (especially the panels) that I attended. No blame attaches to others. Although I have to blame myself for being slow on the uptake when invited to what I belatedly realized – partly through slow reprocessing of words not entirely heard, and partly from preparatory rituals in the relevant hotel room – was a pot party. Being nervous of unusual chemical combinations so far from home, I extricated myself with some highly unconvincing excuse. (Appointment with dentist? Urgent need to wash my hair? Memory fails.) Apologies and thanks to the kindly party-giver....

Unsolved Mysteries of Toronto. Why, one day in the excessively posh mezzanine men's room of the Royal York, was there a small, neatly knotted plastic bag of (what certainly looked like) urine hanging inside the door?

Tuesday 2 September 2003

Finally, curiosity overcame me and I looked behind the wall notice oddly placed at floor level by the Renaissance Hotel lifts: "Please excuse our appearance as we conduct our maintenance repairs", sounding like the defensive apology of some unprepossessing crew of Morlock repairmen. As I'd rather suspected, it was covering a hole in the wall.

This was the "extra" day I'd set aside to do touristy things with brother Jon, who'd madly planned to fly up from Chicago. But life had become complicated for him, as usual, with desperate house-hunting in order to move away from unspecified "bad vibes" in his Chicago neighbourhood, the search interrupted by a sudden need to make an appearance in Nova Scotia, all this conveyed in terms of such chaos and confusion that it seemed he was moving permanently to Nova Scotia. Anyway, he didn't make it to Toronto.

Instead, prior to lunch with some of the NESFA people (more of my esteemed publishers), I walked down to Lake Ontario and peered into the enviably clear water just for the sake of having been there. Next came a peep behind the scenes of final closedown at the convention centre, where I marvelled as usual at the transformation of the bright dealer and exhibits areas to a single vast expanse of semi-gloom: exactly one ninth of the total lighting was active in these End Times.

My general instinct for second-hand bookshops took me on a long, long walk up Yonge Street, Toronto's main shopping road, which – in contrast to the posh parts of town that I'd come to know – grew steadily sleazier to the north. I resisted buying a t-shirt that modestly asserted:

- I SURVIVED TORONTO
- SARS
- MAD COW DISEASE
- WEST NILE FEVER
- SARS AGAIN
- BLACKOUT 2003

Grubby little bookshops, often with porn sections at the back, started to

appear as the street numbers passed 500. In number 584, Eliot's, I came across an old fan acquaintance, Taral Wayne, who'd contributed nifty artwork to my early fanzine *Twll-Ddu* and the first series of *Ansible*. He led me unerringly to Toronto's SF speciality shop Bakka, not a very taxing native-guide task since it was just a little further on at no. 598. There I committed typical acts of auctorial vandalism like signing their copy of *The Space Eater*, and tottered back south, sore-footed but happy, in search of dinner. One small item remained on the wants list, I remembered: a roll of packing tape. Around the next corner, just as though I were back in Reading, I found the local branch of Staples.

Wednesday 3 September 2003

Time at last to face the challenge that had supposedly got a whole lot worse since 11 September 2001. How to take a massive, solid metal, very obviously rocket-shaped object through airport security? The kindly Torcon committee had offered free Hugo shipping containers – that is, the boxes they arrived in – but I didn't see this newsletter item until several hours after the relevant convention office had closed forever, with all surplus cardboard presumably junked. Instead I opted for the ecologically friendly “wrapped in a couple of spare shirts in a paper carrier bag” option, and headed for the shuttle bus. Conveniently, my waiting time outside the Crown Plaza Hotel was occupied in chat with a passing fan who mentioned liking Thog but whose name, in this post-badge era, I failed to discover. “At least I'm not the only fan left standing,” she said, as I tactfully left her standing and climbed into the airport coach. Toronto receded.

In due course, 28 kilometres later, the young woman at the X-ray scanner displayed a range of fascinating symptoms. Her jaw dropped, her eyebrows vanished into her hairline, she made strange inarticulate noises. I detected my cue and began: “I think I know what you're looking at....”

And so, after a certain amount of very careful explanation, my 23rd Hugo came safely home to Britain. I really must try to give them up. Thank you, Torcon. Thank you, Canada. And thank you, fandom.

I Was a Dunnikin-Diver Discworld Convention IV, Hinckley, Leicestershire, August 2004

The guest of honour came on stage in a black t-shirt with the white-lettered slogan: **“Tolkien’s Dead.”** Beneath, in smaller print: “J.K. Rowling said no.” Below and smaller again: “Philip Pullman couldn’t make it.” The minuscule bottom line of this optician’s chart read, “Hi! I’m Terry Pratchett.”

Yes, another Discworld convention has come and gone. Mr P. opened the ceremonies by announcing that he wasn’t dead. Certain reports of his recent hospital visit for an angioplasty (the best way to a man’s heart is through his groin) had been GREATLY EXAGGERATED. I watched him carefully during a weekend of tireless performance, closely monitoring his bowel movements for reasons which will emerge, and confirm that he continued at all times not to be dead. Although the head of the Assassins’ Guild was brutally and multiply assassinated....

These biennial conventions have loosened up over the years. Back in 2000, everybody seemed to attend every programme item, except for aged, case-hardened SF fans – me and the SF Foundation administrator – who were amazed to find ourselves sole patrons of the hotel bar through one long afternoon. Now there’s more of a social buzz, and the bar is rarely empty, so I don’t feel so guiltily conspicuous.

Doubtless to Terry’s relief, the programme doesn’t focus solely on him ... though I seized the opportunity to quote the US bookstore website that declared, “Terry Pratchett is one of America’s most entertaining writers.” The other guests (comprising seemingly everyone even slightly involved in the mighty Discworld empire) witter about their own hobby-horses.

Recommending different authors is actively encouraged. I plugged Susanna Clarke’s debut fantasy *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, and read from James Branch Cabell’s *The Music from Behind the Moon* (1926), which weirdly anticipates the Pratchettian common-sense solution to fairytale dilemmas.

(Here no word may under any circumstances be changed in the immutable record of Fate, but there's just room to insert a useful decimal point.) Stephen Briggs pushed several favourites, from Anthony Buckeridge of Jennings fame to some guy called Douglas Adams.

There was also a Vogon poetry competition, from whose winning entry we reluctantly learned that the *"hotel has a certain cachet / As the recognized meeting place for fans of Terry Pratchett."*

But the mindboggling enthusiasm of Discworld fandom remains very different from the laid-back SF conventions I'm used to. This year's event went completely ape, or completely orangutan, thanks to the committee's ice-breaking idea of dividing the membership into Ankh-Morpork city guilds who competed for status points – small tokens dispensed by organizers and guests. "Ten points to Gryffindor!" That sort of thing.

Most guests found themselves appointed as guild leaders. "CMOT" Briggs was disgusted to be landed with the Merchants despite (as he remarked, many times) being cool and wearing black, a natural Assassin. Diane Duane, in her ladylike way, took charge of those ladies of negotiable affection the Seamstresses ... and so on. I hope no special type-casting was in force when I was named leader of the Plumbers and Dunnikin-divers.

Forewarned of this, I'd lavishly expended £1.99 on guild insignia in the shape of a large rubber plunger, for a one-off gag at the opening ceremony. Little did I know what madness would follow. Seamstresses offered hugs for tokens, Assassins found that selling insurance paid better than wholesale inhumation, Alchemists subjected other guilds to drug tests, Thieves enthusiastically nicked personal property but always left a receipt, and Fools developed sad ploys like: "If you give me one token, I'll tell you a bad joke. If you give me two, I won't." The Merchants, under the disaffected Mr Briggs, spent their time plotting furiously against the Assassins and eventually ranked last.

I expected the Plumbers and Dunnikin-divers to fade quietly away, since hardly anyone chose this uncool option. My approach to the daily, compulsory guild meetings was to round up the usual cesspits ... that is, to march the tiny membership to the bar and buy them drinks. But mass enthusiasm infected even this loyal though malodorous few! I'd rejected the idea of bringing some peanut butter to, ahem, personalize the official plunger.

My trained fanatics substituted runny chocolate dip from the hotel shop, daubed themselves horrifically, and stalked the hotel corridors with cries of “Gissa token and we’ll go away!” I don’t know what the opposition thought, but by God they frightened me. In the end, although the seething hordes of Assassins and Seamstresses contended for top honours, the Plumbers with their single-figure membership placed fourth. Amazing.

Unexpected support came from Terry Pratchett himself, whose sense of fundamental justice compelled him to slip me a token every time he personally went through the motions. “When it was a biggie,” he later explained, “I gave him two.” Terry became fascinated by escalating free-market economics in the guilds’ savage competition for tokens. “Margaret Thatcher’s nirvana,” he called it, and demanded a replay at the *next* Discworld event – where, he proposed, every single convention member should be given an equal number of tokens and Nature allowed to take its course.

A Terryfying vision of the future, indeed. Will the results of this bold socioeconomic experiment be reflected in the city finances of Ankh-Morpork? Wait for 2006, and we shall see. Meanwhile, reverting to real money, the convention’s charity auction raised well over £10,000. Lucky Orangutan Foundation.

Potterdammerung Sectus (Harry Potter), London, July 2007

In July this column [*for SFX magazine*] intended to give up boy wizards as well as smoking in public places – but then I found myself speaking at the tenth-anniversary Harry Potter convention in London: Sectus 2007, held on the weekend when our world was convulsed by book seven. It was a weird experience to babble on-stage about my spinoff volume *The End of Harry Potter?* in full knowledge that nine hours later, at one minute after midnight, this book would be magically transformed into a pumpkin.

Sectus had a peculiar innocence, like early Discworld conventions before the fans realized they could skip occasional programme items to socialize in the bar. On the Thursday evening I sat bemusedly on a bench outside a deserted pub near King’s Cross, watching a very, very long queue move very, very slowly into the Camden Centre for the Sectus opening ceremony.

They nearly all seemed to be women: apparently less than 20% of the 450 members were male. Most were *interestingly* dressed. With me on the bench was the noted Irish SF fan James Bacon. “God,” he kept saying Irishly, “Lookit THAT girl with the knee socks. Aren’t those school uniforms GREAT?” He dribbled particularly about women with loosely knotted school ties dangling between their bosoms. It was like a flashback to the sixth form at St Trinians. Did I mention that no under-18s were permitted?

As a guest speaker I was allowed to jump the queue and lurk in the bar/buffet while fascinatingly clad ladies (and a few chaps) lined up for authentic, institutional “Hogwarts” school meals. In the auditorium, long before anything was actually scheduled, huge crowds patiently watched an endless slide show of Ministry of Magic directives. My sole duty that night was to get introduced at the opening ceremony, which seemed just about within my capabilities ...

Next day any sensible person would have stayed home during the tropical storm and floods that hit England, but I am not a sensible person. I staggered

dripping into the University of Westminster, clutching a much-rewritten speech titled “Hogwarts Proctology Class: Probing the End of Harry Potter” and thinking profound thoughts like “Oh God!” James Bacon was on the prowl, eager to photograph dishy young ladies. His cunning ploy was to ask the leggiest ones if they’d mind posing with this famous guest speaker. Your columnist was too damply weak-willed to resist.

That university venue seemed strangely unpopulated, because virtually everyone was earnestly listening to talks like “The World Turned Upside Down: Harry Potter and the Queerness of Children’s Literature.” I chatted to a long-time *Star Trek* fan who was reminded of the early, mostly-female 1970s *Trek* conventions. Her t-shirt was blazoned with a short-skirted woman (or so I thought) with long black hair and a nasty expression. She had just bought the original artwork for this. Er, who was it? “That’s Severus Snape in a little black dress,” she explained patiently, and again I realized there are mysteries of the Potterverse with which I shouldn’t meddle. Indeed the Sectus art show had enough material inspired by slash fanfiction to make me reconsider thoughts about innocence.

My own performance (“testing, testing, Imperio, Crucio, Avada Kedavra ...”) seemed to go well enough and they laughed at some of the jokes, even the unreliable predictions that Harry would find true love with Dolores Umbridge and learn his father was in fact Darth Vader. Splendid people. Still, it was a relief to finish without developing symptoms of the Bat-Bogey Hex.

Time was running out as the ten-year phenomenon built towards its final splurge. As I paddled home through a maze of rail cancellations, Sectus awaited its midnight delivery of 300 copies of book seven to be swotted up as homework for the Saturday-morning classes in Applied Pottery which – as early as 10am – assumed the whole audience would have read it. The spoiler and non-spoiler convention zones were carefully marked; a system of coloured ribbons and “I Have NOT Read The Book” stickers identified fans unwilling to hear who got killed off. Several suspiciously red-eyed folk had already squinted at the whole thing as blurry digital images on line. You don’t see this kind of frenzy when Martin Amis publishes another novel. Or even Dan Brown.

Meanwhile the entire book trade was moaning that, thanks to heavy discounting and supermarket pressures, this would be a colossal worldwide

bestseller from which none of them made any actual money. Funny old wizarding world, eh?

I was relieved not to be too embarrassed by plot developments in The Welsh Holly Data (anagram).

Moose in Darkest Berks

Plokta.con 4.0, May 2009

What's an SF convention really like? My favourites are the small, eccentric, untypical events. Last year saw Cytricon in Kettering, with much wallowing in arcane nostalgia on the fiftieth anniversary of the last UK Eastercon held in that same town and hotel. No, I didn't attend in 1958, but both Cytricon guests of honour did. That event was ... strange. But fun.

The same goes for my favourite so far this year, Plokta.con 4.0. This was masterminded by the dread UK cabal behind the fanzine *Plokta* ("Press Lots Of Keys To Abort"), a regular Hugo nominee which – thanks no doubt to the editors' famous Orbital Mind Control Lasers – bagged the award in 2005 and 2006. They marked their first win by Photoshopping the Hugo rocket into an old *Missile Command* screenshot to form part of a spoof videogames-magazine cover. As one does.

Plokta.con happened in Sunningdale Park, which to the terror of many was once the Civil Service College but has been rehabilitated. It reminded me vaguely of Portmeirion and *The Prisoner*: Mini-Mokes (or modern equivalent) offering thirty-second rides between buildings to save you a tiring thirty-second walk, rhododendrons everywhere, a giant lawn chess set, and random outdoor weirdness like antique agricultural machinery or an old-style red phone box containing a table with a dinner-place setting for one.

However, Sunningdale Park cannot be held guilty of being obsessed with moose. That's one of *Plokta's* mysterious foibles, explaining the Moose On Road warning triangle (probably nicked from Canada) and the giant black pirate flag with a Moose and Crossbones design that might conceivably relate to International Talk Like a Moose Day. ("Aaaaaarrrrrrrrrr!")

The honoured guests were Diana Wynne Jones of *Howl's Moving Castle* fame, who was ill and sadly couldn't make it, and Paul Cornell of *Doctor Who* script fame, who terrified slower performers by improvising his speech on the spot. The Cabal wheedled new stories from both of them for the souvenir book, cunningly disguised as the fortieth issue of *Plokta*. This may already be a collector's item.

What actually happened at Plokta.con? There was a regrettable amount of drinking despite eye-watering bar prices. (One of the bar staff reads this column in *SFX*. Excuse me while I wave to him.) Science fiction was discussed. Fans wandered the Sunningdale Park grounds looking for clues in the manifestly incomprehensible treasure hunt: I was frightened off this by the starter clue in Cyrillic script. In a side room a dedicated party of paper engineers was constructing the official model of Howl's Moving Castle as imagined by Studio Ghibli. I missed the controversial panel on Web 2.0, where someone who felt Twitter was the one true way (since you don't have to interact, just broadcast your important opinions to the masses) stormed out when others dared to interact by inserting their different and clearly less important opinions.

Oh yes, and there was the musical. Perhaps I'd better not try to describe the musical. Well, if you *insist* ... The evil genius Ian Sorensen has been producing spoof rock operas at SF conventions for many years. As a joint tribute to Diana Wynne Jones and Paul Cornell he came up with the starkly inevitable title *Harry Plokta and the Half-Cut Prince*. If J.K. Rowling's solicitors are reading this, could they please stop now?

The included *Doctor Who* homage, besides some Slytherin/Slitheen confusion, was extremely practical. Since there was a clear shortage of male fans who could actually sing, the original Harry Plokta was quickly killed off (by Draco Malfoy. With a light-sabre. In the conservatory. Don't ask) and equally quickly regenerated as female and tuneful. Later, an important plot point required Hogwarts school to have been secretly dismantled and, with the help of those famous messenger birds, moved stone by stone to a new location. *Harry/Harriet*: "It's not possible!" *Dumbledore*: "Surely you've heard of owls moving castle?"

Other parts of the production were less sensible. I was tickled by one of Snape Sorensen's deadly incantations: "Ansible!" A Cabal mother fretted that someone would tell her daughter the significance of Hermione's pink vibrator "wand", and was horrified to find her daughter didn't need to be told. The final ensemble piece involved many pelvic thrusts from the whole cast – including a gaggle of *Scream*-masked Dementors – to the somehow vaguely familiar song "*Let's do the Tomb-Walk again ...*"

Not all SF conventions are like Plokta.con. For a start, there are usually fewer

moose.

Glimpses of Loncon Loncon 3 (Worldcon), London, August 2014

Did I still have the stamina for this kind of thing? I'd drifted out of the Worldcon habit since Glasgow in 2005 and was worried that Loncon 3 would be a long haul. The jolly email confirmation sent to some members implied no less:

You have bought Adult admission for Saturday Saturday Saturday
Saturday Friday Friday Sunday Saturday Sunday Monday Saturday
Saturday Saturday Thursday Sunday Saturday Saturday Sunday
Saturday Sunday Saturday Saturday Thursday Sunday Thursday
Thursday Monday Friday Saturday Saturday Friday Sunday
Thursday Friday Saturday Friday Saturday Saturday Saturday
Saturday Saturday Saturday Thursday Sunday Sunday Saturday
Sunday Friday Friday Saturday Sunday Friday Saturday Saturday
Friday Friday Thursday Friday Monday Sunday Saturday Sunday
Saturday Saturday Sunday Saturday Sunday Saturday Saturday
Friday Saturday Sunday Saturday Friday Thursday Thursday
Friday.

Though missing that particular excitement, I was a lucky recipient of the mailmerge extravaganza that began: "Hi, Steve Cooper / With Loncon 3 only a few days away we thought you might like details of what to do when you arrive at the ExCeL centre [*much text snipped here*] Your membership number is: 11 / - You have bought admission for / We hope you enjoy Loncon 3. Hi, Alice Lawson / With Loncon 3 only a few days away we thought you might like details of what to do when you arrive at the ExCeL centre ..." and so on for every member up to my own number, 443 ("Hi, David Langford"). The march of the mailmerge robots continued well into four figures before they managed to stop it.

Everything went swimmingly once I'd reached the London ExCeL venue, though hours late because my fast train wasn't. Thus, tragically, I missed the

opening ceremony with its promised Harry Potter theme (Ian Sorensen later praised his own peculiar brilliance in using a propeller beanie for the Sorting Hat). First fan sighting: Lisa Tuttle on the Docklands Light Railway. The first in ExCeL itself was Kees van Toorn, a lucky meeting since I was about to join what looked like the end of an interminable registration queue. Kees spared me the humiliation of being frogmarched to the queue's *real* entry point – a long flight of stairs and several hundred yards farther away – and wafted me to a programme-participant desk with no queue at all. What a hero.

Fans wise in the ways of registration tut-tutted at the delays for mere mortals, but the Loncon machinery otherwise hummed along nicely. When it was all over, the infallible Langford notebook proved to contain only two notes (perhaps a measure of the distracting power of the Fan Village bar, whose entirely drinkable beer and cider *did not run out*). One is a Thog's Masterclass contribution dictated to me by GoH Bryan Talbot: "Under his beard, Torin frowned." (Keith R.A. DeCandido, *Dragon Precinct*, 2004.) The other, an unattributed Overheard, gave me a moment's sense of wonder: "Is *Ansible* still going? I haven't seen it nominated for a Hugo for years." Between the otherwise pristine notebook pages I found an unused badge ribbon lettered SAUSAGE MAKER OF FANDOM. So much for note-taking.

Though strenuously avoiding the programme for traditional deaf twit reasons, and failing to memorize a million cheery conversations, I committed the public nuisance of taking photos. If our nice editors will indulge me with one of their famous URL footnotes, your eagerly anticipated namecheck may be here.* Were there really 5324 programme events for me to miss? The numbering ran from 1003 to 5324, but this proved to be secret code for Day 1 Item 1 to Day 5 Item 108.

* Photos since made invisible to the general public by the whim of Google Picasa. So it goes.

Mostly I hung around the Fan Village, whose cunning plan of breaking up ExCeL's featureless Level 0 Capital Hall with stalls and marquees might have sounded a little desperate at the planning stage but was very effective indeed in practice. Besides tents full of eager-to-please SF societies and convention bidders (including a bevy of dishy young Chinese ladies unsuccessfully promoting the Beijing Worldcon), and not quite enough places to sit down, there were assorted games, attractions and follies. David

B. Wake provided a life-size Tardis as a much-exploited photo backdrop, with another in reserve at the rear of the hall. What was inside the locked Tardis? I happened to be looking when the dread portal opened to reveal a life-size Captain Tartan puppet. Now you know. Other landmarks included a fake tree and the now inevitable Iron Throne: “This throne will be leaving at 6pm Saturday”. The library area – strong on Gollancz omnibuses – was soothing, and when attendees were asked to help disperse the collection I bagged a battered hardback of William F. Temple’s *The Fleshpots of Sansato* in hope of learning what fearfully hot stuff caused the NEL paperback to be abridged. One day....

Fan Village food (more basic than a very basic thing) and drink were OK if you remembered to keep intoning the mantra “London prices.” Several recognizable sights featured in David Ziggy Greene’s “Scene & Heard” cartoon spot in the next *Private Eye*: the Tiki Dalek (with coconut-shell knobs) that terrifyingly grated “DO YOU LIKE PIN-A COL-A-DA?”, the heart-rending Lost Tribble alert on the noticeboard (US fan Sarah Gulde, whom I’d met before she lost the tribble, was cheered to have her plea immortalized), our very own Omega with an enlarged inset of her multi-ribboned badge, the *Millennium Falcon* in Lego from the splendid exhibits area above, and more. Greene has irritating stylistic tics, like the identikit Big Gabby Mouth he draws for all his talking-head characters, but clearly did serious research. His panorama omitted the terrifying spectacle of organized Humming & Swaying, actually Tai Chi exercises on the “village green”. What strange folk we are.

The Guardian agreed; but though its Friday headline scored highly on the SF journalism bingo card with “World Science Fiction Convention 2014 beams into London / Nowt so queer as filk as Loncon at the ExCel centre allies sci-fi and fantasy to draw a horde of fans”, the coverage was friendly and even appreciative. Strange, after all, is the new normal.

As a reminder of which city we were in, there were big white 3D letters on Level 1 spelling out .LONDON, albeit in mirror capitals when viewed from the Loncon halls. Liberties were taken: a security guard was spotted turning the D the right way around, and later a plaintive sign told fans, “Please do not sit on the letters.”

Wandering round to ExCeL on Friday morning, I found Robert Silverberg

taking the air at what he confided was his sixtieth worldcon without a single year's respite (though "I missed the earliest ones because my mama wouldn't let me go when I was of single-digit age."). This seemed to be preying on his mind: "Everyone who won a Hugo before me is now dead." Remembering I was a newshound from the gutter press, Bob kindly added a vital statistic: "I've calculated that George R.R. Martin's annual income exceeds my total net worth. And I am *not a poor man*." Distracted by this solemn thought, I failed to take a Silverberg photo and never got another chance.

Let's not get too linear. Random Loncon memories include breakfast in the Travelodge hotel with Nina Allan and Chris Priest, during which various characters were blackened; afternoon tea with Jo Walton courtesy of an ExCeL teashop called Mint Leaves, with much deploring of the report that Tor doesn't dare publish John M. Ford's last novel *Aspect* for fear of litigation by his appalling, genre-hating relatives; George R.R. Martin, also in the fast-food arcade, plotting graphically horrid butchery of his fans' most beloved snacks; Jim Burns's embarrassment at missing his Chesley Award win for lifetime artistic achievement – not being on the ballot, he'd thought he could safely go to a party instead; twelve issues of a rather good newsletter (*The Pigeon Post*) masterminded by Flick; Sandra Bond worrying about a controlling *Puppet Masters* slug on my back (harmless lipoma; it's been there forever); and being accosted by Pat Cadigan with "Langford, you dog," the seal of a Real Convention.

At some stage I met famous collaborators Chris Evans and Roy Kettle – who would like a plug for *Future Perfect* here, but I am incorruptible – and ghoulishly told Chris about the American author who shares his name and is known for the Iron Elves fantasy series. Chris pretended to be stoical, but was later required to sign one of his namesake's novels for an eager young fan. Someone else (Peter Crump) confided to Roy that he thought Chris Evans long dead. Chris: "He'd conflated me with Dr Christopher Evans and was pleased to discover that I was still alive, though not half as pleased as I was."

Friday presented a challenge as the day of nearly every party on my list – the other two clashed on Saturday – with my sole programme item wallowing amid hours of boozy hospitality. The Long March to the semi-secret ExCeL South Gallery rooms reserved for private parties (also rehearsals, left-wing conspiracies to manipulate the Hugos, gatherings of the Illuminati, etc.) began with a prolonged trudge through the huge bare unused Hall S8 and up

many stairs to an endless corridor overlooking the gigantic combined emptiness of Halls S4 to S7, the whole suggesting a parking bay in one of Iain M. Banks's General Systems Vehicles. Weaklings turned back, but Langford is made of sterner stuff when vital issues like free wine are at stake. From the South Gallery party balcony, high over the waters of the Royal Albert Dock, you could see another, subtler Banks homage in the form of a dry-docked *vessel out of its element*, causing *Use of Weapons* fans to nudge one another significantly. Well, I'm almost sure they did.

The hugeness was such that several more conventions of equal size could have run simultaneously in that kilometre-long venue. A music festival called Jabberwocky nearly did share ExCeL but got cancelled through general ineptitude, happily for Loncon since it gave us the run of the long Level 1 Boulevard (caffs and fast-food outlets) without an official Berlin Wall to prevent illicit event-mingling. One music website also approved the Jabberwocky cancellation: "The ExCel Centre is not a known music space. Not only is it kind of a pain in the arse to get to, but nobody wants to see Nils Frahm in a sparsely populated, untested conference centre with a fucking science-fiction convention next door."

Parties began at 3pm on Friday, with spry youngsters Dave Clements and Charlie Stross celebrating their fiftieth birthdays. This and subsequent thrashes held in indistinguishable South Gallery rooms now tend to blur together. (*The Plain People of Fandom: We think we know why.*) Next I formed part of a large rabble of editors musing on "The Evolution of the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction", where we shamelessly bragged about reaching 4.5 million words on 1 August, and I was allowed a bit of business regarding the size of the first edition, an inch and a half thick; the second, three inches thick; and now the third on a teensy USB stick, two millimetres thick and only 0.5% full at that. The room was gratifyingly crowded despite eighteen rival attractions in the same time slot. Peter Nicholls, self-confessed Editor Emeritus, watched benevolently from the front row. No one hurled rotten tomatoes, or asked hideously technical questions as at our 2005 Worldcon panel. That seemed to count as a win.

The SFWA party, in the same rooms as the Clements/Stross thrash, followed almost immediately. Though not a member I'd been invited by kindly Michael Capobianco, who surely earns a Get Out Of Thog Free pass. No industry secrets to report, alas. With Connie Willis I shared a brief flashback

to our first meeting as Hugo nominees – never then winners – at Noreascon II. Thirty-four years ago. Gulp. I did not disgrace myself as in 1987, since no tiny Scientologists were present to pick fights, but Michael Swanwick strangled me for the benefit of various cameras. Fade to black ...

Some conscientiously healthy exploration of the surrounding area next morning proved hazardous, with “Rat Race” charity runners charging in clumps along the path between ExCeL and the Royal Albert Dock, apparently with an unlimited licence to trample. Later I saw them jumping merrily off a high platform to splash down in the doubtless sewage-laden dock. [IRONIC FOREBODING ALERT:] Surely even a Worldcon must be healthier than that? Next came a secret meeting of the InTheBar email list, where TAFF delegate Curt Phillips was taught such arcane passwords and countersigns as “It’s My Round”. What else transpired behind closed doors in the Ramada Hotel is too boring to relate.

On Saturday afternoon, carousing with low companions in the Fan Village, I remembered the bag of TAFF auction stuff to be retrieved from in Martin Hoare’s big red van. Text messages ensued, leading to Martin’s once-in-a-lifetime triumph of creeping up behind me and texting “Boo.” The ExCeL motif of vastness extended to the car parks beneath – fitfully illumined by phosphorescent fungi, with the occasional sound of drums in the deep. Large areas were swathed in bulgy tarpaulin, maybe concealing the crushed vehicles and bones of parking-fee defaulters. It was a relief to thread my way back to civilization and dump the TAFF bag at the Operations tent in the happy belief that [HEAVILY IRONIC FOREBODING ALERT] I needn’t worry about it again.

I missed the double victory of Rob Jackson’s amazing steampunk mechanisms in the Great Pork Pie Race, which clashed with the *other* panel about the *SF Encyclopedia*: a “Reunion” of survivors from the 1979 first edition, long before I became ensnared in the Clutean web. (“Why didn’t I ask you in the 1970s?” Peter Nicholls wondered: I reassured him that I was then an insignificant neofan with a day job.) Supported by world-bestridding critic John Clute and galaxy-spanning publisher Malcolm Edwards – both Loncon guests of honour – Peter overcame the ravages of Parkinson’s to spill the beans, more slowly than of old but still fluently, about the creation of the original *SFE*. At panel’s end, following a hint from Malcolm, he received a long standing ovation as First Founder ... a very nearly tear-jerking highlight

of the weekend. I really shouldn't have congratulated Peter afterwards on a better-timed ovation than John Brunner's in 1995. Still, he did laugh.

By then, after a further trudge along that South Gallery corridor that recalled the one-dimensional infinity of Greg Bear's *Eon* ("The seventh chamber went on forever."), we were at the Becon Publications party. Roger Robinson's alcohol-fuelled trebuchet duly launched Messrs Clute and Kincaid, or rather their new collections *Stay* and *Call and Response*, into the literary empyrean ... with a share of glory for Judith Clute (*Stay* cover art) and Leigh Kennedy (both indexes).

Here I met Henry Wessells of Avram Davidson Society fame, often described as a snappy dresser, and marvelled at his resplendent striped suit and bow tie. The Langford reminiscence subroutine disgorged a memory of struggling in vain with a bow tie just before the 2005 Hugos in Glasgow, until deterred by a passing Greg Pickersgill's remark that this was the sartorial choice of a fucking great pansy. Faintly shocked by the notion of struggle, Henry assured me that he could tie that bow *in his sleep*. I didn't have the heart to explain that the problem had been a too-small shirt (I never usually button them at the neck), while the bow was of the pre-tied variety. This datum might have provoked distressed noises echoing the title of Henry's latest Davidson chapbook, *The Wailing of the Gaulish Dead*.

Saturday night saw one of the Fan Village tents converted to a mock casino – Jim Mowatt's fundraising brainchild. For those immune to the glamour of high-stakes gambling with paid-for wads of not otherwise negotiable "fan money", the great attraction was former GUFF winner Kylie Ding. She'd responded nobly to Jim's call for a "really tarty" casino cigarette-girl, and sold fan-fund memorabilia from a little tray which was perhaps her most voluminous item of clothing. This heroism won Kylie a deserved hall costume award. The curtain is now briefly lowered and raised to spare you the sordid details of the night's further public partying. Balloons were involved.*

* See cover photograph.

At Sunday lunchtime there was no time for such fripperies as lunch: the Fan Funds auction ran from noon to 1:30pm. I'd steeled myself to part with three small stained-glass panels made by the late great Bob Shaw, acquired for peanuts at some 1980s Novacon art show. Would anyone buy such

memorabilia now? The point became moot when halfway through the auction an ashen-faced, panic-stricken Jim Mowatt whispered: “We can’t find them!” He’d made multiple searches of the secure store and crawled round the Ops tent on his hands and knees, to no avail.

This was my cue to run all the way from the auction room (ExCeL Level 3) to the official Ops-tent repository where I’d handed in the stained glass for pickup (Fan Village, Level 0), and to exercise my secret superpower of knowing what that bag of auction stuff looked like. Then, even faster, back again. Puff, gasp, is this what heart attacks feel like? With Justin Ackroyd – who very much wanted one for himself – as auctioneer, Bob Shaw’s creations sparked furious bidding: one went for £140, the next for £250 and the third for £400, but *none of them to Justin*. Racked with powerful emotions, he had to let Jim take over while he reflectively chewed the carpet.

Let us also honour the living. A large disc of soap hand-illustrated with a Jim Barker cartoon (“very early in my career,” he nervously admitted) went to Jerry Kaufman for three quid. More popular was a remarkable “External Brain” woolly cap knitted by Ulrika O’Brien, with lifelike pink lobes. I failed to match the frenzied bidding for a jar of Vegemite, or for GUFF delegate Gillian Polack’s stash of ethnic delicacies known as Tim Tams, small objects of chocolate-coated desire. Each packet’s nine or eleven (it varies) individual morsels of unhealthy eating proved to be separately and lucratively auctionable. I forget whether their many flavours include Vegemite.

Chatting to Henry Wessells again by the Village bar, I noticed a wooden crate of buns on the food counter, lettered S.DORE GLAPWELL. It became clear to our cosmic minds that S. Dore Glapwell was an SF author of the pulp era, who probably knew G. Peyton Wertebaker and inspired Vector Magroon. We both photographed him for posterity. If this evocative name should turn up in some future Avram Davidson Society publication, you now know its esoteric origin.



Sunday night was Hugo night, an occasion so fraught with past engrams of personal stress that I cravenly fled to have dinner in the Fox pub. No, not *that* Fox pub where several publishers held parties; the *other* Fox pub that was once the Connaught House Hotel. (Multiplying the possibilities of hilarious confusion, the ExCeL environs also boasted two Travelodges and two Ibis Hotels. Amusing complications ensued.) Martin Hoare was there, having a drink with Pebbles Karlsson Ambrose from Sweden, and a few pints later checked the Hugos online. All bloc-voting efforts appeared to have failed and Ann Leckie, having won practically everything else, added the novel Hugo to her collection.

Back at Loncon, internationally celebrated Hugo pundit Kevin Standlee was wearing a broad smile of relief. This may or may not have been connected with the revelation that the unlikely nominee Vox Day was ranked below No Award in the full statistics for best novelette. Cory Doctorow had accepted Randall Munroe's short-story Hugo wearing the red cape and goggles which according to Xkcd.com are his canonical vestments, and I found novella winner Charlie Stross counting on his fingers: "All right, Langford, I just need another twenty-six to catch up with you." Ah, egoboo.

Ian Sorensen, with Julian Headlong egging him on, urged me to add an unofficial ribbon to my badge reading "Ashamed of my Tribe". This, along with a deeply cryptic Weeping Shield of Umor cartoon in the souvenir book, was apparently all about Jonathan Ross withdrawing as Hugo ceremony MC because certain people said horrid things on Twitter. Noted for the record, though I'm more of an uncertain person myself, perhaps inhabiting the Wimpy Zone.

Loncon ended on Monday 18 August with a flying visit from Brian Aldiss, who was at the first Loncon in 1957 and who turned 89 that day. At the closing ceremony, unforgettably, the entire audience serenaded him with “Happy Birthday To You”. It is not recorded whether he murmured, “It’s a long time since you sang me that, you miserable bastards.”

Some time that day, a last Fan Village chat with Charlie Allery and Wendy Bradley pondered the question of why female mages in the Wheel of Time sequence spend so much of their lives doing laundry. It must be a mystic exercise, I suggested, part of the career training. Like the chaos wizards in L.E. Modesitt’s Recluce books who have to practise their fireball-hurling on fatbergs and other smelly blockages in the Evil Wizard City’s sewers.

Laundry, Charlie opined, shapes the careers of Jedi Knights. Those white robes are such hell to get blood off that they had to develop nice clean cauterizing lightsabres. Offscreen, Yoda says things like “Never your whites with your coloureds mix.”

Me: “You need a portentous Gandalf voice for that kind of thing. *‘Rinse, you fools!’ he cried, and was gone.*”

After which there seemed nothing to do but go home.

Discounting the subsequent seven weeks of coughing up varying forms of unpleasantness (several attendees were diagnosed with whooping-cough: Farah Mendlesohn and I think we had it too), I confirm that Loncon 3 was hugely enjoyable. If only I could remember some of the other 5,271,009 conversations.

Afterword: The Last Convention?

Since then, I fear, it’s been a slow drift away from the con-going scene. I dutifully went to the close-at-hand Eastercons, Dysprosium at Heathrow in 2015, Innominate at the Birmingham NEC hotel in 2017 and Ytterbium at Heathrow again in 2019, while wimpishly skipping the long railway haul to Manchester for Mancunicon in 2016 and Harrogate for Follycon in 2018. Though Novacon 3 in 1973 was my very first con and led to instant addiction, Novacons had also begun to feel problematic because I’m not really fond of the current seedy, run-down Nottingham hotel (though the staff, as everyone agrees, are very nice) and the grim choice between

enduring its grottness all the way through to Monday or suffering the hell of the Sunday rail service, often so overcrowded that I couldn't even get to my "reserved" seat for the epiphany of being told to fuck off by the yob who got there first. Once in a while I'd fantasize about teleportation booths making it possible to drop in just for the day, whereupon Greg Pickersgill would look at me with narrowed eyes and denounce this crimethink as Not Fannish At All.

Despite my brilliant Easter 2019 ploy of easy travel by taxi to and from the Heathrow strip, Ytterbium had several bad passages. One was being conscripted as Hearing Aid Man to check the induction loop in the main programme hall – I've never been comfortable with those things and it was like having an embarrassingly difficult hearing test in public. Another, more prolonged, was seeing my oldest friend Martin Hoare obviously unwell even though running the real ale bar and personally tapping all the barrels with his usual panache. He died in July.

My last chance, as it turned out, was Picocon in February 2020, where I had the magic right of free admission as a past guest of honour. It's a short train journey to London and a pleasant walk (weather permitting) from Paddington across Hyde Park to the Imperial College venue; but on that particular Saturday the joy of cheap drinks in an acoustically horrible students' union bar seemed insufficiently compelling. Maybe I'd have made the effort if I'd known what was coming in March. Or there again, maybe not.

2021

Acknowledgements

These unreliable convention reports by David Langford first appeared as follows.

- “Another Convention Diary”: Torcon 3 (Worldcon), Toronto, 2003 – *Argentus* #4, 2004, edited by Steven H Silver. Slightly revised for the Langford website, whose text is used here.
- “Back in the Jug Agane”: Oxcon (Unicon), Oxford, August 1984 – *Xyster* #7, 1984, edited by Dave Wood.
- “Boskone Postcards”: Boskone 29, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1992 – *Ansible* #56, March 1992, edited by David Langford.
- “The Charity Con”: Compute for Charity, Hull, July 1990 – *Sglodion* #3, April 1991, edited by David Langford.
- “Conquassation”: Various, 1991 – *The Fanzine Sampler* edited by Eve Harvey for Mexicon 5, May 1993.
- “Contrivance Memories”: Contrivance (Eastercon), Jersey, Easter 1989 – *Contrivance Progress Report* #6, 1989.
- “Cosmic Harmonie at Novacon”: Novacon 6, Birmingham, November 1976 – untitled in *Twill-Ddu* #5, November 1976, edited by David Langford.
- “Di Ex Machinis”: Mexicon 5, Scarborough, May 1993 – *Lagoon* #5, September 1993, edited by Simon Ounsley.
- “Dreamtime Guilt”: Aussiecon 3 (Worldcon), Melbourne, 1999 – written 2008 and, as far as I know, previously published only on the Langford website.
- “Easter ’77: A Novacon Action Replay: Eastercon ’77, Coventry, Easter 1977” – *Twill-Ddu* #7, May 1977, edited by David Langford.
- “First Contact: Another Introduction” – *Maverick* #12, February 1995, edited by Jenny Glover.
- “Follies of ’88”: Various, 1988 – *Pulp* #11, December 1988, edited by Avedon Carol, Rob Hansen, John Harvey and Vincent Clarke, as an instalment of the Langford column “Jetbuff Ltd”.
- “Glimpses of Loncon”: Loncon 3 (Worldcon), London, August 2014 – *Banana Wings* #57, November 2014, edited by Claire Brialey and Mark

Plummer.

- “Group Dynamics of Conventional Assemblies”: Silicon 4, Newcastle, August 1980 – *Energumen* #16, 1981, edited by Mike Glicksohn.
- “The Illuminoids”: Illumination (Eastercon), Blackpool, Easter 1992 – *Ansible* #58, May 1992, edited by David Langford.
- “I Was a Dunny-Diver”: Discworld Convention IV, Hinckley, Leicestershire, August 2004 – *SFX* #124, December 2004.
- “Langford Meets Swamp Thing”: Tropicon/Fanhistoricon, Florida, November 2000 – *Langford Meets Swamp Thing*, December 2000, a one-off fanzine and Christmas card substitute from David Langford; revised for *Banana Wings* #17, May 2002, edited by Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer.
- “Mexicon Jigsaw”: Mexicon 2, Birmingham, February 1986 – *This Never Happens* #8, March 1986, edited by Lilian Edwards and Christina Lake.
- “Microcon: ‘The Absolute Con’”: Microcon, Exeter, February 1988 – ; *Pulp* #8, April 1988, edited by Avedon Carol, Rob Hansen, John Harvey and Vincent Clarke, as part of an instalment of the Langford column “Jetbuff Ltd”.
- “Minicon Diary”: Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998 – *Idea* #12, 2000, edited by Geri Sullivan.
- “Moose in Darkest Berks”: Plokta.con 4.0, May 2009 – *SFX* #186, September 2009.
- “My First Ever Report”: Mancon 5 (Eastercon), Manchester, Easter 1976 – untitled in *Twill-Ddu* #2, May 1976, edited by David Langford.
- “The Novacon Records”: Novacon 11, Birmingham, November 1981 – *Tappen* #4, July 1982, edited by Malcolm Edwards.
- “Potterdammerung”: Sectus, London, July 2007 – *SFX* #162, November 2007.
- “Pratchettcon”: Discworld Convention 2, Liverpool, September 1998 – *Ansible* 146, September 1999, edited by David Langford (originally written for *Odyssey* magazine, which folded before publishing it).
- “The Scottish Convention”: Intersection (Worldcon), Glasgow, August 1995 – *Ansible* #98, September 1995, and *Cloud Chamber* #62, September 1995, both edited by David Langford.
- “Several Days In May”: Including Mexicon 3, Nottingham, May 1989 – *Sglodion* #1, June 1989, edited by David Langford.

- “Six Day Warp”: Intervention (Eastercon), Liverpool, Easter 1997 – *Attitude 11*, 1997, edited by Mike Abbot, John Dallman and Pam Wells.
- “Strange Vibrations”: Conspiracy ’87 (Worldcon), Brighton, August 1987 – *Conspiracy Theories*, 1987, edited by Chris Evans.
- “Swan Song”: UK Year of Literature and Writing, Swansea, December 1995 – *Ansible* #102, January 1996, edited by David Langford. (Slightly rearranged and augmented with a line or two from my similar account in *SFX* #11, April 1996.)
- “Things To Do In Docklands When You’re Dead”: World Fantasy Convention, London, October-November 1997 – *SFX* #34, January 1998, plus footnote from *Cloud Chamber* #79, November 1997, edited by David Langford.
- “What Has Fourteen Protons and Lives in Newcastle?”: Silicon 3, Newcastle, August 1978 – *Twll-Ddu* #14, October/November 1978, edited by David Langford – untitled on first appearance; title added for *By British – A Fanthology of the 1970s*, August 1979, edited by Ian Maule and Joseph Nicholas.

Special thanks to Rob Jackson for heroic proofreading.

Index by Convention Name

- [Aussiecon 3 \(Worldcon\), Melbourne, September 1999](#)
- [Boskone 29, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1992](#)
- [Compute for Charity, Hull, July 1990](#)
- [Conspiracy '87 \(Worldcon\), Brighton, August 1987](#)
- [Contrivance \(Eastercon\), Jersey, Easter 1989](#)
- [Discworld Convention 2, Liverpool, September 1998](#)
- [Discworld Convention IV, Hinckley, Leicestershire, August 2004](#)
- [Eastercon '77 \(Eastercon\), Coventry, Easter 1977](#)
- [Follycon \(Eastercon\), Liverpool, Easter 1988](#)
- [Illumination \(Eastercon\), Blackpool, Easter 1992](#)
- [Intersection \(Worldcon\), Glasgow, August 1995](#)
- [Intervention \(Eastercon\), Liverpool, Easter 1997](#)
- [Loncon 3 \(Worldcon\), London, August 2014](#)
- [Mabinogicon, Bangor, July 1991](#)
- [Mancon 5 \(Eastercon\), Manchester, Easter 1976](#)
- [Mexicon 2, Birmingham, February 1986](#)
- [Mexicon 3, Nottingham, May 1989](#)
- [Mexicon IV, Harrogate, May 1991](#)
- [Mexicon 5, Scarborough, May 1993](#)
- [Microcon, Exeter, February 1988](#)
- [Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998](#)
- [Novacon 6, Birmingham, November 1976](#)
- [Novacon 11, Birmingham, November 1981](#)
- [Oxcon \(Unicon\), Oxford, August 1984](#)
- [Plokta.con 4.0, May 2009](#)
- [Sectus \(Harry Potter\), London, July 2007](#)
- [Silicon 3, Newcastle, August 1978](#)
- [Silicon 4, Newcastle, August 1980](#)
- [Torcon 3 \(Worldcon\), Toronto, 2003](#)
- [Tropicon/Fanhistoricon, Florida, November 2000](#)
- [Twentycon, Birmingham, July 1991](#)
- [UK Year of Literature and Writing, Swansea, December 1995](#)
- [Wincon \(Unicon\), Winchester, August 1991](#)

- [World Fantasy Convention, London, October 1988](#)
- [World Fantasy Convention, London, October-November 1997](#)

This free ebook is exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

The End

Table of Contents

Don't Try This At Home

Contents

Introduction

First Contact Another Introduction

My First Ever Report Mancon 5 (Eastercon), Manchester, Easter 1976

Cosmic Harmonie at Novacon Novacon 6, Birmingham, November 1976

What Has Fourteen Protons and Lives in Newcastle? Silicon 3, Newcastle, August 1978

Group Dynamics of Conventional Assemblies Silicon 4, Newcastle, August 1980

The Novacon Records Novacon 11, Birmingham, November 1981

Back in the Jug Agane Oxcon (Unicon), Oxford, August 1984

Mexicon Jigsaw Mexicon 2, Birmingham, February 1986

Strange Vibrations Conspiracy '87 (Worldcon), Brighton, August 1987

Microcon: "The Absolute Con" Microcon, Exeter, February 1988

Follies of '88 Various, 1988

Contrivance Memories Contrivance (Eastercon), Jersey, Easter 1989

Several Days in May Including Mexicon 3, Nottingham, May 1989

The Charity Con Compute for Charity, Hull, July 1990

Conquassation Various, 1991

Boskone Postcards Boskone 29, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1992

The Illuminoids Illumination (Eastercon), Blackpool, Easter 1992

Di Ex Machinis Mexicon 5, Scarborough, May 1993

The Scottish Convention Intersection (Worldcon), Glasgow, August 1995

Swan Song UK Year of Literature and Writing, Swansea, December 1995

Six Day Warp Intervention (Eastercon), Liverpool, Easter 1997

Things To Do in Docklands When You're Dead World Fantasy

Convention: London, October-November 1997

Minicon Diary Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998

Pratchettcon Discworld Convention 2, Liverpool, September 1998

Dreamtime Guilt Aussiecon 3 (Worldcon), Melbourne, September 1999
Langford Meets Swamp Thing Tropicon/Fanhistoricon, Florida,
November 2000
Another Convention Diary Torcon 3 (Worldcon), Toronto, 2003
I Was a Dunnikin-Diver Discworld Convention IV, Hinckley,
Leicestershire, August 2004
Potterdammerung Sectus (Harry Potter), London, July 2007
Moose in Darkest Berks Plokta.con 4.0, May 2009
Glimpses of Loncon Loncon 3 (Worldcon), London, August 2014
Acknowledgements
Index by Convention Name