

IN BATH OF THE FANGLORD



Wrath of the Fanglord

David Langford, editor

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Dedication: To the memory of Bob Shaw and Arthur “Atom” Thomson, the contributors whose copies I’ll have to deliver by hand ... as late as possible.

This free ebook version of *Wrath of the Fanglord* 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.

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Introduction

Dave Langford

When Minicon 33 – speaking with the voice of its awesome pythoness Geri Sullivan – suggested that I should compile a fanthology of my favourite fan articles for them to publish, I made evasive noises. First, it sounded suspiciously like work. Second, comparisons are invidious and I'd have to live with the undying vengefulness of all the writers whom I forgot to include. Third, the mere suggestion caused all memories of favourite pieces to flee screaming from that tiny crevice known as my mind. Fourth, it *really did* sound like work.

We now turn up the soundtrack to cover the noise of Geri persuading me otherwise, with the aid of several forcibly administered volumes of the Mission Earth dekalogy.

[FX: *clung ... clickedy ... click ... Flappppp ... thwipp ... thunkkkk ... hhhnnnnn ... hhhnnnn ... hhhhnnnn ... thump ... slurrppp ... thump ... thump ... hhhhnnnnn ... thump ... thump ... Thweeeeett ... Wheeee ... eee ... Whheeeee ... Whheeee ... eeeee ... Snick ... Whhstttt ... tu ... whuuuu ... tu ... whuuuu ... Whuuu ... uffffff ... Thhuummpp ...]*

The high concept that so painfully emerged was that of a collection which would be more or less self-selecting, consisting as it does of material I've already liked enough to publish in the far-off past. Fan editors should beware of such seeming short cuts. For the infamous newsletter *Ansible*, I save the effort of writing it myself by allowing contributing newshounds to do all that, so that instead of wasting hours inventing news snippets I spend days editing other people's prose into something I can face printing. For this project I merely had to reread all my ghastly old fanzines and scan the articles not available in electronic form, which ...

[FX: *Whhhheeeee ... rrrmmmm ... rrrmmmm ... thrummbbllle ... wehhhhheeeee ... craccckkkkkk ... crackkkk ... Creeeaaakkk ... Creaaakkk. Squeakkk ... Whhhsttt. Squeaakkk ... Click ... clickedy ... click ... ooooo oooo Whhnnnnn ... nnnun ... burrruppp ... Clunk! ... Thrap ... thrap ... Creakkkkk ... Whuuuffff ... crummp Crummmppp*

*... Whufffff ... Whhnnnnn ... Crummmpppp ... Whuffff ... Thrap ...
Clunngggg ... clunngg ... Crack! Crack! Crack! Creakkkk ...
thunk ... clung ... Clung ... Wheeee ...]*

As for the title, we chose *Wrath of the Fanglord* not only to give Steve Stiles an interesting challenge for the cover art, but because all the other possibilities that came to mind seemed even worse. A transcript of our editorial discussion of the topic will make this clear enough.

*[FX: Wheeeee ... Whhheeeee ... Keee ... aaa ... keee ... aaaa ...
Kee ... aaaa ... keee ... aaaa ... Crumpppp!! Wheennn ...
Thwannnnngggg ... Wheee ... eeeee ... Fwwwuuphhh ... fwuppp ...
Fwwwuuppphhh ... fwuppp ... fwuppp ... Clunk ... Creaakkkkk ...
creakkkk ... WHHHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE ... terwhit ...
CRRRRRuuummmmmpppp!!!! CRRRRRuuummmmmpppp!!!!
CRRRRRuuummmmmpppp!!!! CRUUUMPPPPPP!!!!]*

You will surely agree. Meanwhile, I think all the articles here do make sense without vast explanations. But please note the dates, mostly back in the fog-shrouded 1980s or primordial – in terms of my fannish career – 1970s. Occasional obscure British and Australian terms and (bad) attitudes are made less clear in the concluding Glossary. One preliminary reader who shall be nameless wanted a definition of the recondite Anglicism “farrago”, but we’d rather not go into competition with dictionary publishers.

*[FX: Wheeee ... terwhit ... Terwhit ... terwhit. Sccffff ... Click ...
click ... WHHssttt! Crack ... thump ...
whummmmmPPPTTTTTT ... EEEEEEEIIIIIIiii!
Thurrrrummmmmmmmm ... thuruummmmm ... fwwwuuphhh ...
fwuppp ... Fwwwuuppphhh ... fwuupp ... fwuppp ... PHsstttt ...
PHHsstttt ... Phhssst ... plattt!!! Shhhh ... plattt ...
CRRRuuummmppp! Gee-ahhh ... Whhhstttt ...]*

My thanks to all the splendid contributors; to Minicon 33 and especially Publisher Geri Sullivan, who dedicatedly flew across the Atlantic for an editorial meeting on this project; to Jeff Schalles, master of artwork, who successfully disproved Smith's First Theorem that scanners live in vain; to Steve Stiles, god among fan artists; to photocopier boss Garth Danielson, who was even prepared to print this on furry Fibertone and risk Piper's Disease (fuzzicosis); to Karen Cooper, Pamela Dean and John Foyster for

glossary assistance; to Kevin Smith, my co-editor on the fanzine *Drilkjis*, whose TAFF report (I'd just like to mention) is now sixteen years overdue; and to the great L.E. Modesitt for the soundtrack.

L.E. Modesitt? Well ... I was so fascinated by the subtle examples of onomatopoeia in his *The Magic Engineer* (Tor 1994) that I extracted them all in order of appearance, just as you see them above, as a veritable prose poem. So in a way I've now published L.E. Modesitt too. Must ask permission some day.

[FX: *TTHHHHEEEeeeeee ENNNNnnndd!!!*]

Alien Christmas

Terry Pratchett

A postprandial speech following “Christmas Dinner” at Beccon '87 ... this is, the pre-awards banquet at the 1987 UK Eastercon.

This is a great idea, isn't it? So much nicer to have Christmas at this time of the year instead of at the end of December, when the shops are always so crowded. Reminds me of those clips you used to get in The Queen's Christmas broadcast to the Commonwealth back in the 50s, with the traditional shot of Australians eating chilled prawns, roast turkey and Christmas pudding on Bondi beach. There was always a Christmas tree planted in the sand. It was decorated with what I now realize was probably vomit.

Last week I got this fortune cookie sort of printout which said *Your Role Is Eater*. I thought fantastic, I like role-playing games, I've never been an Eater before, I wonder how many hit points it has?

And then I saw another printout underneath it which said that at 2200 my role was After Dinner Speaker, which is something you'd expect to find only in the very worst dungeon, a monster lurching around in a white frilly shirt looking for an audience. Three hours later the explorers are found bored rigid, their coffee stone cold, the brick-thick after dinner mint melted in their hands.

That reminds me why I gave up Dungeons and Dragons. There were too many monsters. Back in the old days you could go around a dungeon without meeting much more than a few orcs and lizard men, but then everyone started inventing monsters and pretty soon it was a case of, bugger the magic sword, what you really needed to be the complete adventurer was the Marcus L. Rowland fifteen-volume guide to Monsters and the ability to read very, very fast, because if you couldn't recognize them from the outside you pretty soon got the chance to try looking at them from the wrong side of their tonsils.

Anyway, this bit of paper said I was to talk about Alien Christmases, which was handy, because I always like to know what subject it is I'm straying away from. I'll give it a try, I've been a lot of bad things in my time although, praise the Lord, I've never been a *Blake's 7* fan.

Not that Christmases aren't pretty alien in any case. It's a funny old thing, but whenever you see pictures of Santa Claus he's always got the same toys in his sack. A teddy, a dolly, a trumpet and a wooden engine. Always. Sometimes he also has a few red and white striped candy canes. Heaven knows why, you never see them in the shops, and if any kid asks for a wooden engine these days it means he lives at the bottom of a hole on a desert island and has never heard of television, because last Christmas my daughter got a lot of toys, a few cars, a plane, stuff like that, and the thing about them was this. Every single one of them was a robot.

Not just a simple robot. I know what robots are supposed to look like, I had a robot when I was a kid. You could tell it was a robot, it had two cogwheels going round in its chest and its eyes lit up when you turned its key, and why not, so would yours. And I had a Magic Robot ... well, we all had one, didn't we? And when we got fed up with the smug way he spun around on his mirror getting all the right answers we cut them out and stuck them down differently for the sheer hell of it, gosh, weren't we devils.

But these new robots are subversive. They are robots in disguise.

There's this sort of robot war going on around us. I haven't quite figured it out yet, although the kids seem incredibly well-informed on the subject. It appears that you can tell the good robots from the bad robots because the good robots have got human heads, a bit like that scene in *Saturn 3*, you remember, where the robot gets the idea that the best way to look human is hack someone's head off and stick it on your antenna. They all look like an American footballer who's been smashed through a Volkswagen.

They go around saving the universe from another bunch of robots, saving the universe in this case consisting of great laser battles. The universe doesn't look that good by the time they've saved it, but by golly, it's saved.

Anyway, none of her presents looked like it was supposed to. A collection of plastic rocks turned out to be Rock Lords, with exciting rocky names like Boulder and Nugget. Yes, another bunch of bloody robots.

In fact the only Christmassy thing in our house was the crib, and I'm not certain that at a touch of a button it wouldn't transform and the Mary and Josephoids would battle it out with the Three Kingons.

Weirdest of the lot, though, is Kraak, Prince of Darkness. At £14.95 he must be a bargain for a prince of darkness. He's a Zoid, probably from the planet Zoid in the galaxy of Zoid, because while the models are pretty good the storyline behind them is junk, the science fiction equivalent of a

McDonalds hamburger. I like old Kraak, though, because it only took the whole of Christmas morning to put him together. He's made of red and grey plastic, an absolute miracle of polystyrene technology, and he looks like a chicken that's been dead for maybe three months. Stuff two batteries up his robot bum and he starts to terrorize the universe as advertised, and he does it like this, what he does is, he walks about nine inches ver-ry slowly and painfully, while dozens of little plastic pistons thrash about, and then he falls over.

Kraak has got the kind of instinct for survival that makes a kamikaze pilot look like the Green Cross Code man. I don't know what the terrain is like up there on Zoid, but he finds it pretty difficult to travel over the average living room carpet. No wonder he terrorizes the universe, it must be pretty frightening, having a thousand tons of war robot collapse on top of you and lie there with its little feet pathetically going round and round. You want to commit suicide in sympathy. Oh, and he's got this other fiendish weapon, his head comes off and rolls under the sofa. Pretty scary, that. We've tested him out with other Zoids, and I'm here to tell you that the technology of robot fighting machines, basically, is trying to fall over in front of your opponent and trip him up. It's a hard job, because the natural instinct of all Zoids is to fall over as soon as you take your hand away.

But even Kraak has problems compared with a robot that was proudly demonstrated to us by the lad next door. A Transformer, I think it was. It isn't just made of one car or plane, it's a whole fleet of vehicles which, when disaster threatens, assemble themselves into one great big fighting machine. That's the theory, anyway. My bet is that at the moment of truth the bloody thing will have to go into battle half finished because its torso is grounded at Gatwick and its left leg is stuck in a traffic jam outside Luton.

We recently saw *Santa Claus: the Movie*. Anyone else seen it? Pretty dreadful, the only laugh is where they apparently let the reindeer snort coke in order to get them to fly. No wonder Rudolf had a red nose, he spends half the time with a straw stuck up it.

Anyway, you get to see Santa's workshop. Just as I thought. Every damn toy is made of wood, painted in garish primary colours. It might have been possible, in fact I suppose it's probably inevitable, that if you pressed the right switch on the rocking horses and jolly wooden dolls they turned into robots, but I doubt it. I looked very carefully over the whole place and there wasn't a single plastic extrusion machine. Not a single elf looked as though

he knew which end to hold a soldering iron. None of the really traditional kids' toys were there – no Rambos, no plastic models of the Karate kid, none of those weird little spelling and writing machines designed to help your child talk like a NASA launch controller with sinus trouble and a mental age of five.

Now, I've got a theory to account for this. Basically, it is that Father Christmases are planet-specific and we've got the wrong one.

I suspect it was the atom bomb tests in the early 50s that warped the, you know, the fabric of time and space and that. Secret tests at the North Pole opened up this, you know, sort of hole between the dimensions, and all the stuff made by our Father Christmas is somehow diverted to Zoid or wherever and we get all the stuff he makes, and since he's a robot made out of plastic he only makes the things he's good at.

The people it's really tough on are the kids on Zoid. They wake up on Christmas morning, unplug themselves from their recharger units, clank to the end of the bed (pausing only to fall over once or twice) playfully zapping one another with their megadeath lasers, look into their portable pedal extremity enclosures and what do they find? Not the playful, cuddly death-dealing instruments of mayhem that they have been led to expect, but wooden trains, trumpets, rag dolls and those curly red and white sugar walking sticks that you never see in real life. Toys that don't need batteries. Toys that you don't have put together. Toys with varnish on instead of plastic. Alien toys.

And, because of this amazing two-way time warp thingy, our kids get the rest. Weird plastic masters of the universe which are to the imagination what sandpaper is to a tomato. Alien toys. Maybe it's being done on purpose, to turn them all into Zoids. Like the song says – you'd better watch out.

I don't think it will work, though. I took a look into my daughter's dolls'-house. Old Kraak has been hanging out there since his batteries ran out and his mega cannons fell off. Mr T has been there for a couple of years, ever since she found out he could wear Barbie's clothes, and I see that some plastic cat woman is living in the bathroom.

I don't know why, but what I saw in there gave me hope. Kraak was having a tea party with a mechanical dog, two Playpeople and three dolls. He wasn't trying to zap *anyone*. No matter what Santa Claws throws at us, we can beat him....

And now your mummies and daddies are turning up to take you home; be sure to pick up your balloons and Party Loot bags, and remember that

Father Christmas will soon be along to give presents to all the good boys and girls who've won awards.

Up the Conjunction: An Investigation into Astrology

Bob Shaw

Bob's preface: The following article which you are, I hope, about to read was originally given as a talk at the Skycon [Eastercon 1978] in London – and for that reason it is written as a talk. There is a vast difference between material which was written to be read and material which was written to be spoken. Choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, type of humour, pacing, emphasis – all these things are affected, with the result that a speech comes out looking rather different from an article proper. Possibly these considerations are important only to the author, but I thought I'd let you know....

The science talks I've been giving at conventions in the last year or two have – as well as making Isaac Asimov start fretting about the competition – have been reprinted in a few magazines. This pleased me no end, except that some letters of comment accused me of occasionally wandering away from the point. I took the criticisms to heart, and included in my New Year resolutions a stern directive to myself: Always stick to the point during talks!

It's important to me that I keep this resolution because I had more of them than usual this year, and broke them sooner than usual. You know how it is ... you start off the year full of high hopes and lofty ideals ... 1978 was the year I was going to save some money, 1978 was the year I was going to get more exercise, 1978 was the year I was going to read *Dhalgren* right through to the end....

They've all gone by the board, except for this one about sticking to the point, so I'm not going to start off with one of my usual preambles about what I was doing at room parties last night. It was just the same old routine, anyway – about 200 people all crammed together, drinking, smoking, making a hell of a noise, falling down, being sick – and that was just in the lift on the way up!

Actually, when I did get into a party in one of the bedrooms it was so

noisy that we got a lot of complaints – from the pilots of Concordes. This afternoon they’re going to hold a protest march to stop science fiction fans landing at Heathrow.... (They tried phoning the Noise Abatement Society, but the people at the other end of the line couldn’t hear them because of the noise.)

Anyway, I mustn’t stray away from the subject of this talk, which is about astrology and all its underlying facts and fallacies, and a fascinating new scientific truth I have uncovered about the relationship between human affairs and the movements of the planets. My old sparring partner – the German/Irish writer and researcher, Von Donegan – is going to be sick with jealousy when he hears what I’ve found out. Old Von Donegan (VD to his friends) is quite peeved with me, you know – over those jokes I made about him in my last talk.

He wrote to me from Germany and threatened to make me into sausage-meat, but I wasn’t scared. I wrote back and said, “Do your wurst.” I thought he would have enjoyed that little bilingual pun, but he told me he had seen it before – on a 20,000-year-old tablet he dug up in Africa.

However, that is beside the point and I promised that all my remarks would be relevant and pertinent. You’ll note that I’ve given the talk a concise clear title – if there’s one thing I detest it’s this modern propaganda technique of the tricky euphemism which allows unscrupulous people to disguise their motives with fancy words. Like that society that was in the news lately, the one for people who like interfering with small children – Paedophile Information Exchange! It sounds so respectable it could be the governing body of the British Medical Association, or even the British Science Fiction Association.

And there’s an even sneakier one on the go now!

The other night I was having a drink in a pub in Bermondsey when I was approached by this shifty-looking character who asked me if I was interested in necrophilia. I said to him, “Do you mean having sex with dead people?”

He looked a bit uneasy at that, glanced all around the place, lowered his voice and said, “Actually, old boy, we prefer to refer to it as posthumous caring.”

Horrible and underhanded, isn’t it? – but that’s the technique they use. I’ll bet that if you set up a Society for Posthumous Caring you could get it established as a registered charity and get a member of the Royal Family as your patron.

Dear me – have I wandered away from the point again? No more of it! Belief in astrology has been with us since ancient times, and it is deep-rooted in our thought and language. Men have always had the desire to know what the future held for them, and they have tried many different ways of getting this advance information. They used to, for example, poke around the insides of chickens, inspecting their entrails for signs. Or sometimes they used to sit and inspect the palms of their hands – which is what I’d do if I had mine stuck inside a chicken all day. It was a filthy habit, that, though no doubt its practitioners had a great fancy name for it, which made it sound respectable. Prediction and Prognostication by Poultry Manipulation, perhaps.

But of all the traditional ways of trying to know the future – cards, divining, consulting oracles, subscribing to the Racing and Football Outlook – the stars seemed to offer the best prospects. They were a mysterious and ever-changing spectacle, quite obviously connected with the gods in some way, and it was only logical to assume that they influenced men’s destinies. Thus the profession of astrologer sprang up, and it has been with us rather a long time – in spite of the fact that the stars have an infuriating habit of telling us things we don’t really want to know, and of presenting the information in language of such peculiar vagueness that any value it might have had is completely dissipated.

Imagine what it must have been like to be an ancient Roman general leading an army which was going to face another army in battle the following morning, a battle whose outcome could shape the future of the world. He goes to his astrologer and asks him for advice about how to run things the next day, and should he throw in his cavalry first and keep the archers till later, and will the barbarians overthrow the empire or will the guttering candle of civilization be kept alight for another decade. The astrologer does a quick horoscope and gives him the following inside dope straight from the Horse’s Head Nebula: “Personal relationships at the office could be difficult this month, but an old friendship could lead to a new outlook on life. Don’t conceal anxieties from your steady boyfriend, and your lucky colour is blue.”

That’s the sort of thing they always say! Sometimes, in an effort to avoid a general air of vagueness, they particularize a bit, by saying things like, “If you were born on a Thursday and have red hair and blue eyes – don’t fall out of any tenth-storey windows. The outcome could be distressing.” Nobody’s going to argue with him on this one, especially anybody who has ever fallen out of a tenth-storey window. Or anybody he landed on. Or

sometimes they say, “Wednesday is a day for being careful in business dealings.” Of course it is! *Every* day is a day for being careful in business dealings – although, strangely enough, astrologers themselves don’t always appreciate that simple truth.

One of my prized memories from my days as a full-time journalist is the one about one of the big Fleet Street publishing empires which, about fifteen years ago, decided to cash in on the general superstitious interest in astrology by starting a new weekly magazine devoted to nothing else but horoscopes and predictions. It was called, I think, *Your Stars*, and they got about a dozen of the very best astrologers in the country on the payroll so that they could guarantee to tell all their readers exactly what the future held in store for them.

Unfortunately, the magazine only survived for about a month – because sales didn’t come up to expectations! The irony in that is so beautiful, and it sums up all my views about astrology.

Astrology as we know it is all a load of bunk.

“That means it isn’t a very good subject for a Serious Scientific Talk,” you might say. Others might say the whole talk is a bit of a farrago, anyway, and I’m inclined to agree with them, because I was born on a Thursday. You know the old rhyme – “Wednesday’s child is full of woe, Thursday’s child has farrago.”

But please note that I qualified my condemnation by saying astrology as we know it is bunk. Other people could have an entirely different approach to astrology, and it is worth remembering that some of the thinkers of old were men of genius. Leonardo Da Vinci, for example, was ahead of his time in many ways. I have revealed elsewhere how he created the world’s first blue movie. Also, he was famous for his anatomical studies, but not many people know of his connection with early diagnostic medicine...

It came about because he liked working in tempera, which is a type of paint which has eggs as one of its constituents. He also liked working *alfresco* – he had some funny habits, old Leonardo – and once, when he was living on a hill outside Florence he covered the entire outside of his house with a magnificent painting which all the townsfolk used to admire. Unfortunately, the land around his house was infested with a kind of insect which was attracted by the egg in the paint and kept climbing up the wall and eating Leonardo’s painting away from the bottom upwards.

He used to counteract this by going out and repainting the picture day by

day, but on the days when he wasn't feeling too good he couldn't do that, and the picture used to slowly disappear from the bottom. The townsfolk would look up at his house, shake their heads and say, "Leonardo mustn't be well today – his tempera chewer is rising." And that's the true origin of that saying.

But that's beside the point – The discoveries I made about astrology came about because I'm an amateur scientist and therefore do not go in for narrow specialization in one subject. The professional scientist often fails because he channels his mental energy into knowing more and more about one limited subject, whereas I go in for the interdisciplinary, broad spectrum approach. In fact, it's got to the point where I know practically nothing about almost everything. In this case, I succeeded because I brought in my experience in the apparently unrelated fields of neurology and optics.

It started a few months ago, when I got a bit tired of writing SF and decided to have a break from it. Actually, I was *advised* to have a break from it – by my agent and publisher. Looking back on it, I don't see what my agent got so annoyed about. I had just outlined to him what I thought was a great plot, all about how Winnie the Pooh developed a third eye in the middle of his forehead, a third eye which, naturally gave him second sight, the way it always does in stories. In the plot he used this extra-sensory perception to spy on two meetings of the London SF Circle in the One Tun. My agent seemed a bit uncertain about the commercial value of the proposed story, and he seemed to blow his top all together when he heard I was going to call it "One Tun, One Tun, Middle-Eye Pooh." [1]

Anyway, the upshot was that I turned my restless enquiring mind to other activities for a while. I didn't delve into astrology immediately, or even neurology or optics, because I had got involved with the mystery surrounding the legend of the Flying Dutchman. I have always felt sorry for that poor bloke, condemned to sail around the oceans and seas of the world forever, never able to take a minute's rest, like somebody working his way through college by selling subscriptions to *Science Fiction Monthly*.

Eventually I proved to my own satisfaction that he wasn't haunted or anything like that – he had simply lost control of his ship. The culprit was a wood-boring parasite (related to Da Vinci's insects) which originated in Holland and had a special liking for the hardwood used in the steering wheels of all ships built in Holland. It used to eat them away, leaving the captain with no means of steering. You may have heard the name I gave it – Dutch

Helm Disease.

Having disposed of yet another famous mystery, I was looking around for something else to do when Joe, the owner of a local lawn mower factory up in Ulverston, telephoned and asked me to have lunch with him to discuss a problem. He sounded as though it was pretty urgent, which surprised me because one of the things I like about Ulverston is that nothing ever happens there in a hurry. The town's chief claim to fame is that Stan Laurel was born there. When I first went to Ulverston I used to think it was quite remarkable that Stan Laurel should have been born there, out of all the places in the world – then when I got to know the place I realized he couldn't have been born anywhere else. It's a sleepy Stan Laurel sort of a town, where there's never any rush about anything. In fact, I said to one of the men in local pub, "The philosophy around here seems to be *mañana*." He said, "What does *mañana* mean?" I said, "You know – I'll do it tomorrow." And he said, "Oh, there's nothing as urgent as that around here."

But Joe was obviously in a hurry, so I arranged to meet him that day, quite pleased at the prospect of a slap-up business lunch. My wife didn't seem too pleased, though. She warned me that I had a habit on occasions like that of eating and drinking far too much.

"It's all right," I quipped, "I'll put it on my Excess card." (She believes in moderation, but I think moderation is only all right in moderation. Excess is better, provided you don't have too much of it.)

I then went out and jumped into my new car. I have to jump into it – there aren't any doors. That's because it's a souped-up job – a Morris Oxtail. The thing I like about it is that it has a very reliable Italian engine whose manufacturers didn't put it into production until no less than two thousand Italian engineers had checked the design and given their approval and consent. That means, of course, that it is a two thousand *si-si* engine.

All that aside, I went and met Joe for lunch and, to give him his due, I must say he really lashed out. He missed me though. Actually, it was a pub lunch and he bought me a Cumbrian pheasant, which is a sausage with a feather stuck in it. I had been recommended to him by a mutual friend, a fellow journalist who is the science correspondent for the *Beano*, but he seemed a bit doubtful about my qualifications, especially my connections with science fiction.

"Science fiction," he said, "isn't that those magazines with covers showing girls dressed in nothing but little bits of brass?"

“Yes,” I leered, “but just think of the new dimension that gives to the hobby of brass rubbing.”

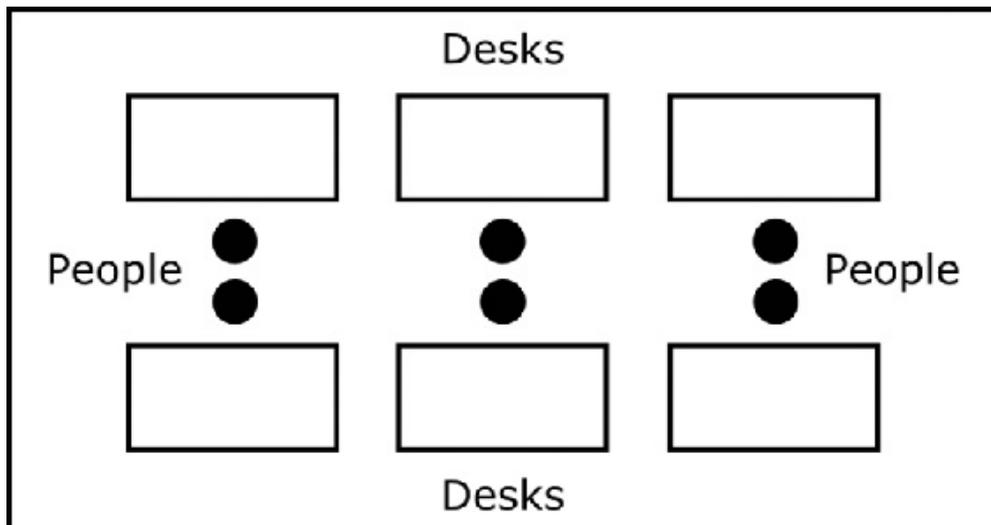
That seemed to reassure him, because he was a really lecherous looking character – the sort of person who could think impure thoughts about Margaret Thatcher. He said, “Doesn’t James White write science fiction?”

“Yes, but not only science fiction,” I told him. “He’s now working on an Irish political musical called *Don’t Cry for Me, Ballymena*. It’s a follow-up to his successful nude review, *Oh, Balbriggan*.”

That seemed to allay all his fears, so he told me about his problem, which was that his firm had built a new office block, but when the staff had moved into it their productivity had fallen away to almost zero.

“They don’t seem to think properly any more,” he said. “The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they’re in the lavatory.”

It was obvious from the look on his face that he thought the problem was insoluble, and when I asked him to sketch a typical layout for one of his offices he complied without much enthusiasm, and did a drawing like this:



“Aha, I *thought* so,” I said triumphantly. You should have seen his little face light up – he looked like a NASA official being told that the Mars landers had dug up definite proof of the existence of Ray Bradbury.

“Do you mean,” he said, with a hopeful tremor in his voice, “you know what’s wrong?”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s a clear-cut case of encephalic field interference.”

It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that the look of joy on his face died out of his face a little when I said that. I went on and

explained to him that the active human brain is surrounded by a faint electromagnetic field which extends several feet beyond the skull. (The only known exception to this is in the case of fans of the TV show *Space: 1999*. Their skulls are too thick to allow anything to pass through.)

When people are crammed too close together their brain fields interfere with each other and that causes a severe damping down of the powers of thought – as you will be able to prove for yourself if you go to any of the room parties tonight. I explained to Joe that all he had to do was move his staff round to the other side of their desks, thus separating them enough to allow their brain fields full play, without any unwanted reflection from walls either, and everything would be all right.

“This is marvellous,” he said, finally convinced. “The firm has lost so much money lately that I can’t pay you in cash, but if you like I’ll give you a lawn mower out of my factory.”

I said, “No mower for me thanks – I’m driving.”

We parted and I returned to my study to embark on some more vital scientific research. On the face of it, it appeared that I had wound up yet another successful case – and yet something was troubling me. I had a feeling that I had been on the verge of a major scientific discovery, that something that had been said during our meeting had contained a small and apparently insignificant clue to something else, a clue that I had missed. And as anybody who watches *Horizon* and similar TV shows will tell you, small and apparently insignificant clues are the very best sorts for scientific researchers. Big significant clues are a complete waste of time – but when you get a small and apparently insignificant clue you know you’re really on to something good.

With the small voice clamouring at the back of my mind, I got down to work on another project of mine – the design for a spaceship engine powered by the heat from continental quilts. Continental quilts, or duvets, are marvellous things, you know – even though they’re so expensive. When I was a kid, and this shows how times have changed, every bed in the country, even the poorest, had a duvet on it – only we didn’t know they were duvets. We called them eiderdowns.

And because we didn’t know how they worked – there were no Sunday colour supplements to explain it all to us – we used them wrongly. In the wintertime we put a sheet on the bed, followed by about twenty woollen blankets, and put the duvet, or eiderdown on top of all that – and we still

froze every night. What was happening, you see, was that the duvet was heating the top ten layers of blankets, but that heat couldn't filter all the way down to us.

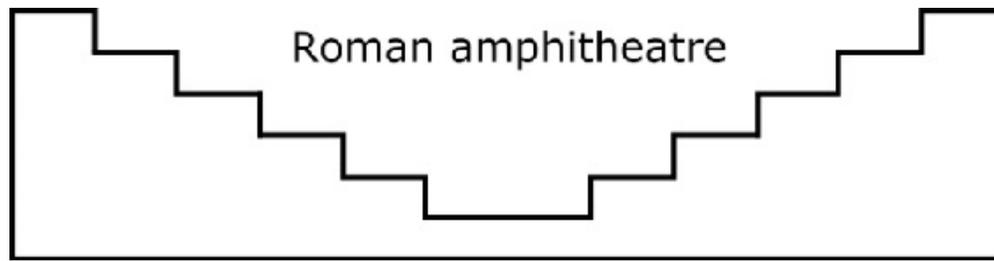
I worked on the spaceship engine for a while, but my mind wasn't able to grapple properly with the problem. I put it aside and dabbled a little with a paper I was writing on criminology which puts forward that, just as some people claim that sex education in schools can lead to juvenile rape, the teaching of economics can incite schoolboys to go out and rob banks. But my heart wasn't in that project either, so I picked up a book on the science of optics and was idly glancing through it when, by purest chance, my gaze fell on a paragraph about Fresnel lenses. There was a diagram there showing what a Fresnel lens looked like, and as I looked at it I felt something strange and powerful begin to well up inside me. It was the sausage I had eaten in the pub at lunchtime. A couple of indigestion tablets calmed my stomach down a bit, and I began studying the diagram again with the beginnings of a heady intellectual excitement. I knew I was on the verge of a breakthrough. (So was the sausage, but I was too busy too care.)

An ordinary lens has a single continuous curve, which means that a big lens tends to be very thick and heavy, which is a drawback for most applications. A Fresnel lens follows the same curvature, but keeps stepping down at close intervals so that you get roughly the same focusing effect with far less volume of glass or plastic.



I stared at the cross-section of the Fresnel lens – with half-formed ideas heaving in my subconscious – and tried to identify what it reminded me of, something from another field of knowledge altogether. Suddenly I had it! It was all there in front of me! No, not the sausage – I don't believe in flogging a joke to death – but the answer to the questions that had been niggling me all afternoon.

The Fresnel lens resembled nothing more than a cross-section through an ancient Roman amphitheatre!



Like a man in a hypnotic trance, I heard Joe's voice once again saying, "The only time they seem to get any good ideas is when they're in the lavatory." That was the small and apparently insignificant clue I had missed. People do tend to think well when they are in the toilet, but according to my theories of encephalic field interference that should have been impossible because of the notorious smallness of office toilets. It dawned on me that I had made the mistake of thinking like a Flatlander – only considering the brain field in the two-dimensional terms of a plane. And the solution to this sub-problem lay in the fact that office toilets, although small in floor area, are usually high-ceiling affairs – and that allows the brain fields to extend upwards without hindrance. I had been making the mistake of forgetting all about the third dimension.

What has all this to do with Fresnel lenses, Roman amphitheatres, and astrology?

Well, just imagine thousands and thousands of people packed onto the terraces of the amphitheatre. It's just like a lens – or, more correctly, a mirror – focusing all their brain fields upwards into a psychic beam of unimaginable power. A concentrated torrent of human mind force which is being shot into space like an invisible searchlight beam!

The mind-shaking question was: What effect would such a beam have on any distant planet it happened to strike?

With trembling fingers I got out the calculator I had borrowed from Robert Silverberg – it's the one he uses to calculate how many novels he can write in a week – and did a few sums. A minute of high-speed computation showed me that at 3.15 on the afternoon of July 2nd in the year 80 AD ... just as the newly-completed Colosseum in Rome was being used for its first gladiatorial combats ... with the terraces filled with 100,000 blood-crazed spectators ... the planet Mars was precisely at zenith.

We may never know what Mars looked like before that fateful moment.

It may have been a green and pleasant world ... a place of tinkling streams and peaceful meadows, where colourful birds chattered among the

gently nodding trees – but in an instant it was transformed, by the ravaging force of all those minds filled with images of blood-stained sand, into the Mars we know today. The planet of endless red deserts.

Venus got the treatment next. It strayed into the beam from the big amphitheatre in Tunisia, but it was during the interval and there was nothing going on in the arena – so it just got turned into a ball of hot white sand.

Jupiter was unlucky enough to be caught in the beam emanating from one of the very earliest Welsh poetry and song competitions, held in a natural amphitheatre in Glamorgan, and it got turned into a huge ball of hot gas.

My researches haven't yet revealed what happened to the other planets in the Solar System, but at least now we know that there is a direct link between human beings and the planets and stars. The only trouble is that the astrologers, not being coldly logical thinkers like me, have got everything backwards. Astrologers on distant worlds must be important people because they can warn their customers about Earth being in the ascendancy. When they talk about Earth being in the seventh house, you'd better sit up and pay attention. We influence the heavenly bodies – and what a dreadful responsibility it is. Just think what the audience at a Linda Lovelace film could do to an unsuspecting little planet like Mercury. It hardly bears thinking about.

The only bright spot I can find in all this is that in August next year when the Worldcon is being held the Moon will be high in the sky above Brighton. If the convention hall is the right shape, and if we all work very hard at it and think the right kind of thoughts, we might be able to turn the Moon into a permanent science fiction convention. It seems to me that that's the sort of novel, yet practical, common cause which is just what the science fiction community needs to prove to the rest of the world that we aren't merely impractical visionaries.

See you up there!

[1] Younger and non-British fans may possibly not remember the legendary radio *Goon Show*, one of whose recurring bits of nonsense was the Ying Tong Song: “*Ying tong, ying tong, iddle i po ...*” This was reportedly a favourite of Prince Charles – a True Fact. [DRL]

A Message From Our Founder Chris Priest

Once upon a time I was met at an airport by a rabbi, and the rabbi was wearing a track-suit, and the track-suit had paint stains all over it. This was the earliest impression I had of our great former colony south-east of India, namely, Australia.

During the summer of 1977 I got a distinct impression that people were avoiding me. Why, I wondered, did people yawn when I talked about Australia; why did doors slam in my face when they saw my bush-hat and boomerang? Was I *really* going on about it as much as my friends (who had obviously seen too many Lifebuoy adverts) were claiming? In the end, I found I was boring even myself ... so perhaps there was some truth in it all.

The fact is I had a terrific time in Australia, and I'm proud to be one of the small but growing band of Yanks and Pommies in the sf world who have made the long journey south. Bob Tucker, William Rotsler, Ursula Le Guin, Terry Carr, Bob Silverberg, Vonda McIntyre, Brian Aldiss are a few of the others. As far as I know, we all retain much the same sort of happy impression of the place ... I had what I think of as the best time of my life down under. It's hard to say why, exactly ... because it's true that Australia can offer little more than is readily available in Britain or the States, except perhaps the novelty of a different accent, and awe-inspiring scenery.

I think that one of the strongest feelings I had out there was one of reassurance. When you fly from London, you pass through most of southern Asia, with the countries you visit briefly becoming progressively more alien and confusing: in the case of the flight I was on, Iran, India and Malaysia. Then, when you are least expecting it, you land in a place that looks like a cross between Torquay and Oxford Street, where the natives speak English (OK, a garbled form of English, I know, I know), and where they play cricket and watch *Star Trek* and drive on the left and collect old runs of *Astounding* and generally act in more-or-less comprehensible ways.

There was also reassurance in the feeling that Australia is a *long way* from everywhere else, that if nuclear war broke out no one would get around to bombing the place until you'd had time to dig a nice safe hole. And

reassurance in the fact that it is so culturally old-fashioned; Melbourne in 1977 felt to me like London used to feel in 1967, a sense of things beginning to open up, and general health and prosperity ... and girls wearing *mini-skirts* (which alone brought a few nostalgic tears to the eyes of this particular sexist pig).

And why should the science fiction world be interested in Australia? They've got nothing there we can't supply for ourselves. They've a few sf writers, and they've run a Worldcon, and they've got fandom, and they have feuds and alliances and monthly meetings, just like us. I must confess (and indeed, have hitherto made no secret of it) that before I made the trip I shared this feeling in some measure. Australia, considered in prospect, felt as if it was going to be a cultural and social suburb, one where the only possible difference would be that strangers in pubs would call you a Pommy bastard. I was wrong, and I grovel in abject apology for ever letting the notion occur to me. Not only did no one ever call me a Pommy bastard (and they didn't call me "cobber", either), but the whole time I was there I experienced a quite indescribable and intangible sense of *difference*, one which was all the more confusing for being overlaid with apparent similarities.

Whatever the cause, I felt energized and inspirited by the visit in ways I hadn't felt since I first encountered fandom in 1962. Because they *are* just like us, in the sense that they read *New Worlds* and *Astounding* and *Hyphen* and *Vector*, and they have cons where boring people drone on about boring things on boring panels, and they have the other sort of cons where interesting people drink too much and become indiscreet and highly entertaining. Ok, they haven't got the Astral League, but they've got a Magic Pudding Club (or at least they had one while I was there), and they've got the Paul Stevens Show and the Golden Caterpillar Awards ... and what amounts to a sort of parallel fannish tradition, where the differences became apparent because I was no part of them, but where the similarities also were apparent, because it was all unmistakably fannish.

(And in case anyone's interested, the art of sf writing has the same quality of difference/similarity. There is a certain amount of Australian sf which is derivative of Anglo-American writing ... but there is also a new kind of Australian sf, practised most by the newer writers, naturally enough, where there is a new inwardness, a new sense of response to their own cultural/literary environment.)

Anyway, if you look back at those names I listed of visitors to Australia,

you'll see that most of them are of writers, not fans. (Though some of the writers do have fannish links.) During the first weekend I was in Australia there was a con, and during this I was struck by one of my occasional IDEAS. We've had TAFF for years, in which, as everyone in fandom knows, a fannish visit from or to Britain or America is paid for by fannish charity ... and more recently DUFF has been in existence, in which fannish visits between America and Australia are arranged. It suddenly occurred to me that it was time the third side of the triangle was closed, and after a few minutes of non-sober reflection in the bar, GUFF was created by unanimous consent.

The Get Up and over Fan Fund was created with the specific intention of bringing an Australian fan to Britain for **Seacon '79**. After a few early hiccups, GUFF came into formal being, and, mostly because of the hard work and dedication of the two Administrators, Dave Langford in Britain and Leigh Edmonds in Australia, not only was sufficient money raised, but a clear winner was found. That winner was John Foyster, who is here at **Seacon**. Foyster was my own nomination for GUFF (based on the entirely unprejudiced fact that I have met neither of the other two candidates, Eric Lindsay and John Alderson), which gives me special pleasure in the fact of his win.

Which brings me back to the rabbi in the paint-smearred track-suit, for it was none other than he.

I'm at a loss to describe John objectively, because my knowledge of him before my Australian visit was minimal. I knew his writing through his work in *Australian Science Fiction Review*, where he went in for intelligent if idiosyncratic criticism of sf. Later, I read *JOE (The Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology)*, which was a sort of round-letter discussion fanzine about sf. I had heard he edited something called *BOF (Boys' Own Fanzine)*, in collaboration with Leigh Edmonds. And I knew he had been on the committees of various cons in Australia. What I didn't know was he looked like a rabbi.

Later, I heard him in action at the con ... he goes in for a sort of sly fannish troublemaking, with a style and wittiness that gladdens the heart; he is an excellent extempore speaker. After the con, while I was drifting around on the fringes of fandom, I began to get to know him a little better. There are three things about him, events really, that I remember.

Firstly, he had the pleasant habit of taking me to bookshops; not the glossy, obvious bookshops, but the sort of hidden-away secondhand shops I

wouldn't have been able to find without either a much longer stay in Melbourne or a native to show the way. Secondly, he introduced me to friends of his outside the fannish world; although this perhaps sounds like an anti-fannish sentiment, it was actually something I appreciated a lot at the time. Thirdly, he showed me the true essence of Australia. We were waiting for a tram one hot evening in Swanston Street, a long straight road that runs through the centre of Melbourne on a roughly north-south line. Suddenly, John looked solemn. "This street," he said, "contains the very essence of All That Is Australia." I glanced around at the numerous Chinese restaurants (one of which we had just left), and said something smart, cynical, and unoriginal. "Listen you Pommy bastard," he said, contradicting what I said earlier, "I'm being serious. This street is symbolic of The Essence of Australia. There we have the Symbol of Australia's Past" ... and he pointed towards the south, where on a small hill stands the Shrine of Remembrance, all Corinthian pillars and steadfast architecture. Duly sobered, I nodded with appropriate solemnity. "And there," said John, pointing towards the north, "we have the Symbol of Australia's Future." I looked, and at the other end of Swanston Street, almost as impressive in its own way, was Foster's brewery....

GUFF doesn't, or shouldn't, end with John Foyster's visit to SEACON. I'd like to think that his is the inaugural fannish trip between Australia and Britain, and that many more will follow in years to come. Don't let us allow it to wither away in indifference! It strikes me that the next opportunity for a GUFF trip could be in 1983, when Australia is bidding for the Worldcon. Then it will be our turn to send a British fan on a visit which, I can promise sincerely, will be highly enjoyable and eternally memorable. Here's what we have to do:

Support GUFF with cash. Treat it as a fannish charity on a par with TAFF and DUFF. Give freely ... or donate auction-material whenever possible. Support the **Australia in '83** campaign. Join the Worldcon of 1981, and vote for Australia in '83. When the GUFF campaign begins, lobby for the chosen candidates, vote for your choice ... and give freely.

And if Australia doesn't win the '83 bid, support GUFF anyway ... because after all, a Worldcon is just a slightly better excuse for a trip, and there are numerous regional and national Australian cons which will do almost as well.

Meanwhile, make the effort to seek out John Foyster and make him feel

at home. If he calls you a Pommy bastard, what you have to do is call *him* a drongo (Australians don't like this), or alternatively, if you're the peace-loving type, buy him a drink (and we'll send out a gunboat later). Incidentally, if he doesn't look like a rabbi these days, don't blame me.

The Regency Buck Stops Here

A Seacon '79 Report

Peter Nicholls

Whenever I see the voluptuous Simone Walsh at a convention these days, she approaches me with a menacing expression, and a visible effort not to look maternal, and says, “Nicholls – you’ve got to see this one through – none of this sneaking off home after two days.” The woman’s a cretin, and hasn’t realized that after Yorcon my allergy to conventions took a 180-degree turn. I now have a severe allergy to *not* being at conventions. Symptoms: sitting round at home not working, and brooding over what turned out to be imaginary peptic ulcers.

But this one was different. Not only a Worldcon, but a Worldcon where, it seemed to me, it was my job to mingle with the rich and famous, in order to publicize the *SF Encyclopaedia*. Granada co-operated in a predictable manner by delaying the binding of said work by ten days, thus ensuring that no copies would be on display. Clearly I couldn’t waste time talking to fans and friends; my task, as I saw it, was to approach all 150-odd pros present in an unctuous, cunning and insinuating manner, and they would then tell the world to buy the book. I would speak to Bob Sheckley with levity, and Hal Clement with gravity. (The system had several flaws, one being that most of the pros wanted to read their own entries, and this often resulted in a vindictive refusal to speak to me thereafter, rather than unstinted praise and warm promises of future support. Even such naturally friendly types as Alexei Panshin and A. Bertram Chandler looked at me reproachfully, the former for the use of the phrase “rather less successful” as applied to all of his books but one, and the latter for my chauvinist omission of all the awards he has won in Japan.)

I drove Terry Carr and Susan Wood down on the Thursday; the one tall, affable and witty, the other, generally speaking, short, affable and witty, but in this instance handicapped by a slight tendency to vomit which had overtaken her a week earlier, and which she imputed to British Rail sandwiches. I dropped them at the hotel, took my car to the car park, spiralled up and down the fourteen levels looking for a place, found one behind a wire fence inexplicably empty, drove into it, and then found myself locked in. Half

an hour later a police car, attracted by my plaintive whimpers, pulled up outside the bars of what I now realized was a private area, and inside two constables convulsed with laughter. “Looks like a fair cop, Jones.” “Yes, Smithers, I’ve seldom seen such a vicious criminal expression.” After my shouting, “Will you cretins go and get the key?” for ten minutes or so, they staggered off, the car weaving from side to side on account of the constabulary’s tasteless tendency to giggle helplessly, and I was ultimately released. This was my introduction to Seacon.

This is meant to be the briefest of reports, impressionist in the manner of Seurat rather than your classical Corot con-scape in my usual long-winded manner. Adopting the principles of General Semantics (by which George Hay and I have attempted to live ever since *The Players of Null-A* came out, George emerging from this régime rather stronger on style and enigma than myself) I will abandon linear narrative in favour of a non-Aristotelian juxtaposition of totally trivial events.

No point in going into how well the con was run; these military operations are tedious for lazy pacifists like me. It was amazing though, and raised the eyebrows of several American fans who had arrived ready to make all kinds of patronizing allowances for the inexperienced British. The hotel was good, too, and with a large enough variety of comfortable rooms and bars to absorb 3,000 customers without overcrowding. My duties were simple enough: I chaired a morning’s session without trouble and also chaired an afternoon panel of almost unendurable tedium during which everyone except Vonda McIntyre gabbled, and I panicked, and nobody knew any more at the end than at the beginning about what sf had to do with *The Imagination*.

“Meet the Celebrities” in the Wintergarden was a session cunningly designed (followed instantly as it was by a very loud Disco) to make it impossible to meet the celebrities, as Jerry Pournelle pointed out with his usual belligerence and high decibel rating. Pournelle is not lovable. (He was later seen looming some five stone and eighteen inches above Charles Platt, bellowing “Why don’t we settle this thing now, man to man?” perhaps bribed by Pete Weston. Platt had called him a fascist pig, in print, but doubtless not meaning to offend. Indeed, Platt’s behaviour was generally impeccable, other than his disparagement of Hilary Moorcock’s [*Bailey’s*] abilities at motherhood; unfair, surely since Hilary has raised three children who all look exactly like Mike, yet during their brief descent on Seacon they all behaved like angels, as did she – rather damp ones, since with well-trained British

masochism they spent half their time in the water.)

There seemed to be about a hundred celebrities introduced, and I was the penultimate, rather to my surprise. “Gee, Malcolm,” I said, pleased, “it was nice of you to put me on the list of celebrities.” “I didn’t,” little Mal [*Malcolm Edwards*] responded chillingly: “Bob Shaw must have made a mistake.” This was the first of many remarks designed to chip pieces of yellowing paint from my self esteem. Another was my dialogue with Robert Silverberg towards the end of the convention. I’m rather shy of Silverberg, even though I met him at Aussiecon in 1975; I think it’s his resemblance to Christ that worries me. Eventually, I found myself face to face with him at a pro party in David Hartwell’s suite, and had to speak. “Well, Bob,” I feebly began, “this is the third convention where I haven’t talked to you.” “Don’t feel badly about it, Peter,” riposted the saintly Silverberg, “I’ve noticed, but I simply put it down to your natural inarticulacy.”

(This entire report is being written in the South of France – such is my dedication to fannish causes, fear of Langford and his hideous ear-death-ray, and desire to postpone real work. I’ve just been out to dinner with the Hungarian shrimp, and have proved yet once more that the Ian Watson theory of linguistics is correct. The evolutionary imperative, subject to conceptual pressures when the going gets tough enough, can create language. I have no French at all, but faced with hunger pains, I just ordered a head waiter in unbelievably fluent *patois*, to bring me – I said this in French or Provençal or something locally decipherable – “something very large involving whipped cream, meringue, ice cream, and a variety of disgusting fruit” – and received an authentic, gross, American Sundae. I think I might be very sick, very soon.)

I was not alone, hoping to meet the rich and famous. Every time I went off in search of them, usually finding them in large clusters in close proximity to their natural nutrient, free booze offered by publishers in extravagant suites, I found that little Mal had got there first, calling Frederik Pohl Fred, Laurence van Cott Niven Larry, but not making my mistake of calling Chelsea Quinn Yarbro Chelsea (she’s called Quinn). One of my worst moments involved Malcolm’s friend and soon-to-be bride, Chris Atkinson, also present at most of these occasions. Pissed as a newt, she sat, swaying on a bed (you can sway while seated if well-coordinated like Chris), and I approached her. “Hello Nicholls,” she breathed seductively, “I was hoping you’d come over.” Hello, hello, hello, I thought, yer well in ’ere Nicholls.

“Yes my dear,” I muttered reassuringly. “Peter, there’s something I’ve always wanted to tell you ...” she shyly commenced. Oh well, I thought, this forthcoming admission of hitherto suppressed passion will upset Malcolm for a while. but he’s a philosopher ... “Peter,” she continued, with an upward curve of her drunken but still desirable lips, and I began to breathe rather hard, ... “I’ve always looked upon you as a” (long pause) “father.” I felt very old suddenly, and went to bed, thus missing the notorious David Pringle orgy.

(This may be the point to reveal that I was unable to locate Linda Hutchinson, with whom I fell in love at Yorcon, perhaps because I’d forgotten what she looked like. However, I fell in love twice more at Seacon, but shyness prevented my even saying hello to Caroline Cherry (or, according to the manic Wollheim, “Cherryh”), because I’d heard she was a teetotaller, which is a pretty terrifying thing to be, or to Victoria Schochet, because I thought she looked too busy. I did say Goodbye to Vicki, but in the absence of a prior Hello it came out sounding feeble.)

In the old days, my sister used occasionally to appear at conventions, to everybody’s admiration but ill-concealed horror, with Chris Priest. This time she turned up, to everybody’s horror but ill-concealed admiration, with John Clute, the scourge of the writing classes. Helen, my sister, is in my view quite adorable, but her sentiments about me do not, recently, necessarily reciprocate this feeling. This failure may have to do with my often repeated observation to her at the convention (her appetite for alcohol will become an instant legend if I have anything to do with it), “Do you know that your eyes have narrowed to mere slits?” She doesn’t appreciate keen observation, that’s her trouble. Clute’s trouble was that for many years he’s been hideously insulting people in his occasional *F&SF* review column, not least Theodore Sturgeon whom he once unwisely referred to as “Steamy Ted”. My threat to introduce him to Sturgeon had very nearly resulted in his non-appearance (he’d never attended a convention before), and when I actually got the chance, I’d only got as far as “Steamy Ted, I’d like you to meet John ... ” when he miraculously vanished, some form of jaunteing being involved. (Incidentally, my only contact with Alfred Bester was quite enigmatic ... I was crossing the bar trying to hold five drinks, and Bester came up and took them from me. “Here,” he said soothingly, “let me carry those for you. You look very tired.” This from my long-time hero, a man 26 years older than me, was bad for morale.)

Later that same day, I was sitting at 1 a.m. in the bar with Clute, Disch

and others, and managed to half-persuade Clute that the real action was elsewhere. "Where?" he asked cautiously. "Anywhere," I said; "if we walk upstairs we're bound to run into parties all over the place. We don't need to be asked, we just walk in." Clute bridled, but followed, only to jib completely at mounting the stairs. I grabbed his arm, but he backed away, his face a mask of panic. "What's wrong, John?" "I don't want to be a fan," he wailed, in absolutely stricken tones. God knows what dreadful initiation rites he was envisaging.

At the top of the stairs there was, indeed, a party in the SFWA Suite. Here Malcolm Edwards, who had thus far been a boringly sober administrator, could be recognized across the room by the familiar, idiotically wide smile and wholly owlsh gaze, that he gets while drunk. "You're drunk, Edwards," said someone. "Only on the outside," said Mal, "because I haven't had enough to eat." He swayed alarmingly to the right, and slowly swayed back to the vertical. "Inshide I'm purfly shober, but wordsh come out wrong." "Prove it," challenged a belligerent American. "How many fingers am I holding up?" Mal took on a look of intense concentration, and squinted closely at the problematic hand. There was a long pause, and he could be seen to be inwardly counting. "Between one and five," he finally announced, triumphantly, and fell over. "You'd better get some food," I said to the body. "Yesh," it replied, and looked thoughtful as it struggled yet again to its feet. "I know: Room shervice!" Mal tottered to the wall where there was a phone, and could be heard muttering pathetically, "ham sanwishes, ham sanwishes, ham san-wishes" into the mouthpiece, which he clutched to him as with infinite grace he slid down the wall he was leaning against, the friction ensuring that this phenomenon took place at no more than one m.p.h. Miraculously, the sandwiches (turkey) eventually arrived and Malcolm took on new life, just like Frankenstein's monster after being recharged with a few thousand volts.

This is not the report in which to find out about the Programme (I only heard the bits I was connected with), the films, the Video Room, or even the Art Exhibition (serried ranks of fantasy pictures, nearly all unbelievably imaginative in exactly the same kitschy way as each other). I spent most of my time in or about the downstairs bar, which was a fine place from which to observe the passing parade. It was here, early one afternoon, that a lovely and celebrated sf lady could be seen in close conversation with the less drunk but more obscene looking of the two actors who had performed so well in the

Sturgeon-Campbell play, *Some of Your Blood*. (The other, such is the power of Aussie coincidence, was Johnny Joyce, with whom I was in the Melbourne University Dramatic Society 21 years ago; he was a good drinker then, too. Indeed, the Aussie past reared its head in various strange ways, none stranger than talking to GUFF winner John Foyster for an hour or so, before realizing that the sense of *déjà vu* I'd been feeling was on account of his wearing a monstrous jacket in vertical gold, scarlet and blue stripes, which I ultimately recognized as my Old School Blazer. Foyster's lady friend, what's more, turned out to be the granddaughter of the man who was my headmaster in 1953.) Anyway, back to the lady and the actor in the bar. Talk gets more intense. Joints get rolled. People start staring. Actor's arm sneaks round lady's waist, then onto lady's breast. Lady's nipples get visibly much larger, so that they can readily be seen from right across bar. Lady finally disappears upstairs with actor just as public copulation seems inevitable.

Two hours later, lady walks unsteadily downstairs into lobby, hair a mess, mascara run, and huge happy smile on her face. I approach, and ask, coarsely, "How was it?" Unable to speak, lady sways and smiles, and holds up two fingers. "You did it twice?" I ask, intrigued by this game of charades. She shakes her head impatiently. "No," I gasp, my sophistication taking rather a battering, "you didn't have – (pause) – both of them? Both actors?" Lady nods head with great enthusiasm, and at last speech rises to her lips. "They were *ACES*," she breathes ecstatically.

Indeed, the appetites of this lady, normally a sober and respected member of society, had clearly been much expanded by the inhalation of medicinal herbs, for she approached me half an hour later. "What are you doing tonight, Nicholls?" she asked with a lascivious smile, her little tongue darting out to moisten her lips. Thinking fast I fell back on the old excuse, and quick as a flash claimed a prior dinner engagement with a French lady. "What are you doing after dinner?" she persisted. "Dinner might go on for a very long time," I said, alarmed at her state. There was a long pause for thought, and then, as the solution to the quandary dawned upon her, she smiled in victory. "Well then, you bastard, Nicholls, what are you doing at nine o' clock tomorrow morning?" Such devotion to duty is seldom seen in these decadent times.

This was not the night, though perhaps it should have been, when Quinn Yarbrow (who used to be a professional fortune teller) read my palms, head bent in thought. "You're in a very anxious state," she informed me finally,

but although this seemed an amazing diagnosis at the time, in retrospect I wonder if it might have had more to do with sweatiness than the reading of magic lines.

The following bit of dialogue was reported to me. “Do you know that you look exactly like the young Einstein?” said an admirer to American physicist-fan and hot-tip-for future-Nobel-Prize, Sid Coleman. “Really?” drawled Coleman, “the effect I was aiming at was more the young Ringo Starr.”

Unusually for me, I did nothing very terrible at this convention, and I even exchanged words with such old enemies as John “Mad Dog” Brosnan, Christopher “Hangdog” Priest and Colin “Bite The Hand That Feeds You” Lester, though the latter’s revoltingness was superior. After MC-ing a morning’s session of the main programme, so my printed instruction sheet informed me, I had earned a free drink in Room 109. Imagine my horror on knocking at said door, to see Lester open it. I explained the situation. He looked at me with loathing (he was now the all-powerful Press Officer). “Very well, Nicholls,” he barked, “you can have your free drink, but pour it yourself and make sure you’ve finished it in three minutes.”

The first night I met and talked to a man, now rather elderly, who must surely be one of the pleasantest and most knowledgeable in the whole history of genre sf, Jack Williamson. I was ready to be unnerved, because I already knew from photographs that he exactly resembled my own late father. However, I managed to speak to him for fifteen minutes or so without too much in the way of Oedipal references coming out, though my half-memory of saying “Goodnight, Dad” when he left the party is, I hope, a false one.

Cathy Ball, the next day, to me: “Gee, Peter, I didn’t know you could write!” “But Cathy, I’ve been a professional writer for some years.” She shook her head impatiently. “I don’t mean that sort of writing,” she said, dismissing the world of the higher criticism with contempt, “I mean proper writing, FAN writing.” This was one of the best backhanded compliments I’ve ever received, and was due, I suppose, to an earlier Con Report of mine which had accidentally found its way into a compilation of British fanwriting that Kev Smith had brought out for Seacon. I was really very chuffed about the inclusion, and would have kissed Cathy in gratitude, except that the queue was too long.

The best public moment at Seacon was Charlie Brown’s half-hearted announcement that Dick Geis had once again won a Hugo as best Fan Editor,

for *Science Fiction Review*; no-one was there to receive it, but finally an unhappy looking Fred Pohl was prevailed upon to make the acceptance. Those present will never forget the way Pohl drawled out: “Dick Geis is a man that I admire ... but .. not .. very .. much.”

The convention was simply too big for any single observer to give a coherent report of it, though interestingly enough, it had very much the same feeling as earlier, successful Eastercons (Coventry in 1975, Leeds in 1979, for example), with the same sort of lift parties, stair parties, obligatory glimpse of Brian Burgess’s wholly disgusting nether parts, and so on, even though the programme side of things was so very much more highly organized than ever before, with fandom showing an alarming capacity to spawn NCOs on demand, and a number of willing enlisted men of lower ranks as well. Weston, as Field Marshal, was no more offensive than had been generally anticipated, and layabout Colonel Leroy Kettle showed a capacity for hard work that will get him into terrible trouble if he ever reveals it again. The Metropole Convention Manager had sworn, so Pete Weston told me, that it was impossible for the lager to run out. “We’ve got 3,000 pints on tap.” It was with a feeling of great accomplishment, then, that we observed it actually to run out, quite soon, more especially as the Americans were by and large more sober than the British, and this feat of hard drinking was definitely down to Motherland with some assistance from Empire.

The only sour note was borne witness to by the large number of American pros wearing badges reading *AMERICAN TRASH*. Most of the Americans had very much hoped to meet their British counterparts, and also the higher-ups in British sf publishing, but the general feeling was that the British professionals were a little stand-offish, and not too readily available for talk. Too many British publishers had arrived with only small expense accounts, and as a result their entertaining was modest or non-existent. Some, such as Granada, were represented by amiable but really rather junior staff. It was Gollancz and Futura who raised the most ripples of annoyance, by throwing closed parties and turning away people of some distinction from their doors. Futura, it is rumoured, wouldn’t let Joan Vinge in (though they’ve published her), nor the artist Freff (though they had used some of his *illos* without permissions being properly granted), nor even Karen Anderson, whose husband was actually inside the sacred party. She was not only turned away at the door, but the security guard (so rumour had it) said quite loudly and deliberately in her hearing, “I’ve had about enough of this American

trash trying to gatecrash.” Hence the badges.

All this was a great pity, and rather puzzling. John Bush of Gollancz, for example, is normally the most hospitable of men, and his closed-door policy, if correctly reported, is uncharacteristic, and can't have done much to improve transatlantic relations. I boycotted the Gollancz champagne party in the Brighton Pavilion, to which I had been invited, after hearing this; perhaps I was silly. Anyway, I doubt if anyone noticed. By contrast, some of the larger American publishers were very hospitable indeed, and some of the pleasantest entertainment at the convention was due to senior editors like David Hartwell and Victoria Schochet. At Hartwell's first party, however, no more than two British writers bothered showing up.

For years now loud masculine rumours of a kind of feminist mafia in American sf have been drifting to these shores. If such women as Suzy McKee Charnas, Vonda McIntyre, Susan Wood and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro are meant to represent this supposedly unwholesome clique, then the rumour is unjust. All nice, friendly, and rather shy people, whose only visible belligerence seemed aimed not so much at men as at smokers. As someone trying not too successfully to give up smoking myself at the moment, I can for the first time understand just how sickening clouds of cigarette smoke must be to the non-smoker, and with reservations I applaud their stand. Suzy Charnas leafed through my *Encyclopaedia* (I had an unbound copy with me), and looked up the entry on Women. She read it carefully through, while I watched nervously. Was this feminist lady going to call me a male cretin? Tonelessly she asked, “Who wrote this?” “I did,” I confessed, and waited for the blow to fall. “It's really very good,” she said. This compliment pleased me more than any other single event at the convention, and I am hoping in future to be accepted in the USA as an honorary woman, at least for purposes of public social contact. Susan Wood, in her few conscious intervals between lying in bed with gastroenteritis, nibbled my ear several times (a sovereign remedy), and this was nice too. Thank you, Susan.

The other *Encyclopaedia* compliment I appreciated (sorry about all this boasting, but the subject obsesses me right now, only 2 1/2 weeks before publication date) was from Greg Benford. He said the physics in the article on Tachyons (also written by me) was correct and up-to-date. I'd had nightmares on that one.

Unremarkable things about remarkable people: Fritz Leiber's private voice being soft and gentle, but the public voice so strong, orotund and

professional; Sprague de Camp so spruce; Tom Disch's wonderfully inappropriate tattoo, and his magnificent Hawaiian shirt (and his unpleasing suggestion that I looked as if I needed a health farm almost as much as he did); Harry Harrison's familiar, barking laugh ("the trouble is," said someone, "that talking to Harry's so exhausting – it's obligatory to laugh every two sentences – I wouldn't mind if it were voluntary.").

Harry doesn't really approve of me, I don't know why, and he does have a wonderful way of getting hold of the wrong end of the stick; I was amused to catch him warning a lady about what he was describing as my predatory sexual habits, as if she were a timorous virgin, whereas she was in fact (a) an old and intimate friend, and (b) very distinctly after my virtue. I confess to some irritation about this – I always get annoyed about the presumptuousness of creating entire scenarios on the basis of purely circumstantial evidence.

I drank a lot: starting at around 11 a.m. every day and going through to at least 3 a.m. the following morning takes very careful pacing. I didn't really get drunk, but every now and then fatigue overtook, and I felt the pressure of too many people around too much of the time. I don't think affability faltered, but the eyes glazed every now and then from too much input. It was a happy convention, but unlike Coventry in 1975, my feelings stopped a little this side of euphoria. Despite the magnitude of the convention, the kinds of enjoyment it offered were curiously gentle. If Coventry '75 offered all the red-litten pleasures of the Inferno, Seacon '79 was rather more an elegant Limbo, or perhaps something rather stately, like the lower circles of Purgatory.

I did find out that Peter Roberts has a job collecting dead seagulls from Devonian beaches at £1 an hour. This strikes me somehow as the ultimate in satisfactorily fannish modes of employment.

On the stairs, dressed spectacularly (purple silk being involved), was the handsome black man who'd been in the Fancy Dress Parade, looking just like the Moor of Venice. "He looks very cheerful," observed my sister. "Yeah, but what's he done with Desdemona's body?" I responded. It's a pity he heard; the remark was intended to be literary rather than racist.

The single strangest person present was R.A. Lafferty. With a benign and Buddha-like smile, rope sandals, and a jutting pot belly, he floated through the convention, always alone, always apparently happy, but living in some other universe. It's as if there were some invisible force-shield protecting him from any mundane contact. I've always admired his stories,

but lacked the nerve to speak to him, and possibly prick the invisible bubble. He was awesome. The French, who are braver than we, could not resist the temptation. Elisabeth Gille of De Noel books tried first:

“Allo Mr Lafferty. I am Elisabeth Gille, and I ’ave published several of your books in France.”

Absolutely no response. Elisabeth’s friendly smile becomes a little tense. The seconds drag on. Lafferty’s eyes seem fixed on some cosmic event taking place behind her left ear. Had he heard? Suddenly, and with some vigour, the Lafferty right arm shoots out, and gives her a little punch on the shoulder. “Well kid, keep publishing me, keep publishing me.”

While not encouraging, this was not a total disaster, and Robert Louit of Calmann-Levy books decides to try next. “Er, Mr Lafferty, I have long been an admirer of your work, and in fact it was in a series which I edit that you were first published in France.”

Lafferty’s benign smile continues, unabated, unaffected and possibly unfocused. Louit presses on. “There is a curious feature of your work, Mr Lafferty, that I have never seen commented on; in some ways it reminds me of the English writer G.K. Chesterton.”

Lafferty, although his forward motion has been arrested by Louit’s speaking to him, shows no visible signs of awareness, though clearly he is in tune, in some metaphysical sense, with the infinite. Louit is feeling a little desperate. “Well, of course, I could be completely on the wrong track.” A man of great charm, Louit manages a self-exculpatory Gallic shrug. “For all I know you have never heard of Chesterton.”

Louit stares beseechingly at Lafferty, entreating some response, any response. Lafferty smiles enigmatically, just as before. Does he know Louit is there? Robert, like Basil Fawlty when confronted with intolerable social situations, is considering escaping this one by fainting. Time is in stasis. Has it been seconds, minutes or hours? Infinitely slowly, the Lafferty eyes focus. “You’re on the right track kid.” And he drifts on.

In some symbolic sense, Lafferty’s invisible bubble seemed to focus for me something of what I, too, feel about conventions. But too all those people I spoke to through the force-field, and especially the Committee: “Thanks kids. You were on the right track.”

This report has been the truth and nothing but the truth, but for reasons of security and length, is *not* the whole truth.

Wild Canadian Boy, The Tom Holt

There was a wild Canadian boy; I dare not tell his name
For fear that on the printed page he'll give me doubtful fame.
But science fiction, fantasy and such was all his joy;
There never was a scholar like the wild Canadian boy.

He studied hard by night and day until his brain was packed
With constipated wisdom and a solid wadge of fact.
And though his brain was bigger than the state of Illinois,
It left no room for thinking for the wild Canadian boy.

And when the headache grew so bad he could endure no more
He sadly left his native land and made for Albion's shore.
And oh! his heart was gladdened when they shouted "Land ahoy!"
"At last I am in England," said the wild Canadian boy.

In nineteen hundred and sixty-nine he started his wild career,
A critic some would come to love and others grow to fear.
And every book with furrowed brow like finest corduroy
He'd scrutinize and comment on, that wild Canadian boy.

And when his taste and judgement were acclaimed throughout the
land

He said "To write my masterpiece the time is now at hand;
A vast encyclopaedia – half a ton, avoirdupois –
Will be a fitting project for the wild Canadian boy."

By Sol's effulgent splendour and by Luna's silver beams
He tabulated wonder and anatomized our dreams.
By phyle and genus and such types that botanists employ
He pressed and dried them in his book, that wild Canadian boy.

And when the work was over and the mighty task was done
He looked around him, yawned and said "I'll write another one."
And on his quest he pottered forth, like Ulysses from Troy;
He never had a moment's rest, that wild Canadian boy.

And great stupendous words he used to frame his thoughts serene,
Though there were times he wasn't sure exactly what they mean.
Some writers he would fawn upon, and others he'd destroy,
But nothing was omitted by the wild Canadian boy.

Imperious his language is, and complex is his style,
But mostly you can work it out, although it takes a while.
And wild and woolly paragraphs that puzzle and annoy
Are frequently the trademark of the wild Canadian boy.

So now the second volume goes galumphing through the press:
It may not be quite perfect but it's awesome nonetheless.
And some may mutter "Oh my God," but most shout "Attaboy!"
If only 'cos they daren't offend the wild Canadian boy.

Ansible's special correspondent Yvonne Rousseau admired this greatly, but pointed out that – unlike the original – it seemed to lack a chorus. Thus, without the slightest consultation with Tom ...

Chorus: Come, my co-editors, the deadlines they are nigh,
Together we'll cross-reference, nor ever say "sci-fi".
We'll thunder through the verbiage, like mighty Sherman tanks,
And we'll scorn to lean on textbooks that were written by the
Yanks!

Believing SF

Ian Watson

Guest of Honour speech at Yorcon II, the 1981 UK Eastercon.

Friends and Fellow Fen ...

I stole that opening from Ken Bulmer, who impressed me mightily with this amiable and impassioned piece of oratory at the first Convention I ever attended, at Birmingham in 1973. He also impressed me greatly by tearing up his prepared speech ... then finding the real one in his other pocket. Alas, I can't afford to tear up paper today owing to the dire straits that Tory policies have reduced this country to. So the verbal echo will have to suffice, to remind me of that fatal day in November 1973 when I first became addicted to attending science fiction conventions ... and look what has happened to me now: up here in the firing line, about to deliver what Progress Report number 4 described as my Quest of Honour speech. I think they confused me with Jerry Pournelle....

Of course, I had become addicted to sf itself at a much earlier and more tender age. I blame Dan Dare for it – and don't we all! As soon as I saw the green faces of the Treens, I knew that this was for me; and curiously enough, nowadays when I get up for breakfast in the morning at a convention I notice that my face, and the faces of many of those around me, for some reason seem to be a delicate shade of green.

But of course Dan Dare was kids' stuff. Foolishly tossing away my bundles of old *Eagles*, which I could have sold for a fortune today, I graduated to pulp novels such as the famous *Antro the Life Giver* by the immortal Jon J. Deegan. And trust Peter Nicholls to ruin my golden memories by publishing an encyclopaedia revealing that this was only a house name.

I remember clearly the newsagent's shop where I bought this remarkable work, and several others, with my pocket money. In the window a little yellow plastic ostrich bobbed its head in and out of a glass of water all day long, as an example of perpetual motion; and it says something about the emptiness, barrenness and deprivation of the Tyneside of my childhood that this plastic ostrich was a thing of wonder and amazement, a star attraction. Since there was little else of wonder or amazement in the vicinity, I cast up

my gaze to the actual stars instead, and fantasized. Which demonstrates that sensory and environmental deprivation do have some connexion, at least in my case, with the genesis of science fiction. And if that's true for me, then how many future cartographers of the cosmos or of inner space are being compelled to dream right now, as this country is forced back by economic madness to the deprived condition of my childhood?

But in case you feel that this speech is becoming politically one-sided, I must – speaking as an sf writer – say one thing in favour of the Conservative government. They have invented time travel. They have successfully built a time machine, which takes us right back to the Nineteen Thirties. Unfortunately, that's the only place that it does go to. And it can't travel into the future. In the best tradition of van Vogt, they are busily constructing a *radioactive* barrier to prevent any access to the future.

But now that I have mentioned van Vogt, I must confess that I moved on from pulp novels by the immortal Jon J. Deegan to even more immortal, or at least reprinted, things – namely the *classics* – though little did I know then that they were classics (I thought Virgil's *Aeneid* was), and little did I know that I was living through the Golden Age.

I discovered “mature” books, with hard backs on them. (That's what mature books are – like trees.) And it was obvious to me at once, finding these in the local library amid the works of Graham Greene and D.H. Lawrence and Jane Austen; it was obvious from a mere glance at the authors' names on the spines that, compared with Greene or Lawrence, writers with names like A.E. van Vogt or Isaac Asimov or editors called Groff Conklin were far from ordinary. Obviously they must possess alien wisdom.

Now, I have entitled this speech “Believing SF”. And first I wish to talk about *readers'* beliefs – remembering my own epiphany (which my dictionary defines as “a moment of manifestation of supernatural reality”) when I first espied the name Groff Conklin.

Frequently readers do believe intensely in what one is writing – which means that an awesome responsibility rests on the shoulders of us science fiction writers. I can demonstrate this from my fan mail.

But far be it from me to brag about my fan mail. So in the modest and self-effacing spirit of the editorial matter in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* ... [*Laughter*] Now, let us not joke about *IASFM*: I've heard pointed references to it several times, but I think it's a good thing because they bought a story from me a few weeks ago. In fact the contract came in the

post, and Judy said, “Hey, let’s have a read of the story.” So I got down the carbon copy for her, and a while later she shouted, “Hey, Ian, you’ve got two page nines – both the same.”

“Oh,” I said. “That means one is the carbon copy, and one is the top copy. That means that *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine* has just bought a story with the last page missing!” What was funnier was that we read through the story carefully, and there was a damned sight better ending at the bottom of page eight. Well, you may complain about editors intervening: sometimes the Editor in the sky takes a little reach into your pile of sheets, and disarrays them, and you sell to *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine*. So remember that. If you’ve got unsold stories, just take the last page off and send them out again.

Anyway, the reason I mentioned that was my fanmail. I want to read you a postcard which I received a while ago from an American soldier stationed in New York State. It was sent to me, care of Ace Books, postmarked “Army Postal Service” – and if you believe I’m making this up, I have it right here.

“Hey Ian! I been reading your books, man. Far out! Like, where do you get your dope, man? The Amazon? East Africa? Do you snort it man, raw. Chapter 13, *Alien Embassy* can only come from mainlining! I bet you do that tantric fucking too, huh man, keep it hard for hours, right? You got an old lady, man? I bet she’s a fox. Any kids, any whole chromosomes? Were they born with their brain sticking out of their heads?” (This is a literary allusion to *The Embedding*, showing that this guy is deeply read in my works.) “Hey, do you know Jerry Pournelle left ‘The Event Horizon’ out of his book *Black Holes*? You got screwed, man. You sure know your needles, man, i.e. ‘Thy Blood Like Milk’. Sicko. But I liked it!!! I like all your shit, man. Does that make me nuts too? How you know about the seedy side of Hamberg [*sic*], GER? Send me some info like Heinlein and Herbert did, huh? and I’ll buy another book and you’ll get back the money for the envelope and stamp!”

Of course, out of politeness I did reply to this card, providing my eager correspondent with the appropriate addresses of cocaine shops in Brazil and brothels on the Reeperbahn.

Yet it is *not always* a good idea to reply to such things. I replied to one person in America who wrote to me that he had made love to a dolphin and was in telepathic communication with a sperm whale, and thought I had

stolen *The Jonah Kit* from him ... This wasn't completely fair, actually, as Scribner's in America published *The Jonah Kit*, while two years earlier Gollancz had published it in Britain. And this guy had written his book about how he made love to dolphins and was in telepathic communication with sperm whales; he'd mailed it to Scribner's and they turned it down for some reason. I don't know why. Anyway, he assumed that, because Scribner's then published *The Jonah Kit* a couple of months later in an American edition, they had quickly got onto me as someone slick and sadistic who could turn his humanitarian and uplifting work into a bit of slick, commercial sci-fi ... using his experiences and selling them. They'd just airmailed the manuscript over to me, and I'd done a quick job on it. I did write back, which was my initial mistake in corresponding with him; and pointed out that it was originally published in a different country, called England, which some Americans have heard of – a couple of years earlier. The ultimate upshot of all this was a five-page letter in dramatized form fantasizing about how he would visit me in Moreton Pinkney (if he could find it!), slash the telephone wire, and beat my face to a pulp, because I had, quote, “mindfucked” him ... so I ought to get something back in kind.

Risky business, “mindfucking” people – writing stuff that interferes with their belief structures, affecting them deeply.

Alas, John Lennon found this out, and I will always bear in mind the statement made by his assassin: “I understood the words, but I didn't understand the message.”

In a sense, the only equivalent impression you can make on an artist who has affected you deeply is to kill him. (*[Audience noises]* Ah – well – you can get him to sign books if you go to science fiction conventions, but otherwise –) For some it is the ultimate, total act of commitment. Which raises the spectre, in some alternate or future world, not of autograph hunters but of scalp hunters. And in that world, no doubt, Maxim Jakubowski's smash-hit of last year from Virgin Books, *Rock Stars in their Underpants*, is entitled *Rock Stars in their Coffins*.

And, of course, dead artists are usually preferable to living artists – which must be the reason why the Government has crippled the publishing industry, and in the process writers too. (Indeed the Government seems convinced that a dead population is better than a living population – a curious philosophy for a government, unless this is the only way they can think of to remain in power ... forever.)

Yet some aspects of the publishing industry deserve a little bit of censure too.

Recently, a curious thing happened. Bob Sheckley bought a story from me – no, that was not the curious thing. The story is called “Bud” and appears in his anthology *After the Fall*. It’s about the difference between sexual and asexual reproduction. So when I received a copy of the British edition, I looked through my story with the usual nervous anticipation – having already noticed at an idle glance that the name of Roger Zelazny was misspelt four times in the book....

And just here I must insert an aside to the effect that when paperbacks are costing £1.50, £1.75, some editorial staffs could possibly take a little more care in producing them. Have you noticed the back cover of John Varley’s *Wizard* in the UK edition? (A rather fine book, I think, since Varley has bravely done the opposite of what everyone expected.) “Isaac Asimov has compared John Varley to the young Robert Heinlein and George R.R. Anderson called him ...” Now, ordinary hype I can put up with – though it is getting out of hand – but who the hell is George R.R. Anderson, and do the publishers even care? I shouldn’t be surprised to find jacket endorsements, soon, by Ursula K. Le Sheckley, or Philip José Holdstock.

Anyway, I looked within my story and found that in the crucial sentence which explained all, the word “asexual” had been printed as “sexual”. Thus making the story slightly difficult for readers to understand. After gnashing my hair and tearing my teeth for a while, I despatched a letter to the paperback house in question, and received in reply an apologetic letter saying: “We’ve no idea how it happened, we’re terribly sorry, please accept any free book from our catalogue, enclosed ...” Rather as though I had complained about a bad pack of sausages.

Scanning through the catalogue of this leading British paperback house I came upon the sf list and discovered that roughly 88 of the titles were by American authors and only 6 by British; and of these 6 titles, only 3 were by living authors. (I would be tempted to suggest that the others died of starvation, but actually H.G. Wells passed away for different reasons.) So I wrote back saying: “You’d better send me a free copy of your edition of *Repairing Houses*, as we’ll jolly well have to repair our own, given this kind of purchasing policy.” To which a letter came back, saying: “You know, actually our list *does* seem rather disproportionate. Thanks for pointing it out.”

But actually, can one really blame the publishers for spelling authors' names wrong? This is the upshot of straitened circumstances, high interest rates and fear. It's more expensive and less efficient to be poor. This applies right through from heating one's home to publishing a book.

And of course publishers are going to take fewer risks publishing intelligent or original books, and simply pump out old Asimov reprints, when they're scared out of their minds by falling sales (as more and more potential buyers tramp into the dole queues) and by interest rates which are still far too high and by a level of the Pound which must make Margaret Thatcher's manhood swell with pride.

So, if you want good fresh quality sf, you should know how to vote at the next election. And if you happen to believe in the future which we all write about, or if you want a future at all, ditto.

And need I mention, too, that you won't be able to borrow much new sf from the libraries, either, because the libraries have had to stop buying books. And because of that, in Britain at least, the publishers who rely on library sales are going to search their souls, and need a lot of faith, before they risk publishing any new home-grown science fiction. This applies particularly, and devastatingly, to hopeful new writers – of whom, no doubt, there are quite a few in this audience. With the Tories in charge, you've got a cat-in-hell's chance of having your first novel accepted. (I shall leave aside the possibility of a spending spree leading up to the next election. It's quite possible, but it does cost an awful lot of North Sea oil revenue to dismantle industry instead of boosting it, to pay to make three million people unemployed, and to buy all the Trident missiles and bigger nuclear submarines that we need ... like a fish needs a frying pan.)

Sf may in many respects be an escapist literature – though personally I would argue otherwise, at least regarding my own – but, if you do like escapism, you're going to have to make a political commitment to fight for even that, down here on Earth in Merry England.

How does all this affect a writer's belief in what he or she is doing? Aside from the fact that it has compelled me finally to join the Labour Party and to devote time and energy to standing as a candidate in the coming County Council elections, I have noticed a curious phenomenon in my writing over the past year, including the novel which I'm currently working on. (This particular novel, of course, will not be the next one to be published. Writers are usually some way ahead of the book currently due to be

published; so that, by publication day, the novel which is brand new to the readership is already part of the writer's ancient memories.) I have noticed that I have begun to write comedy. Or what I think of as comedy. The themes remain connected to my previous themes, but now they are receiving comic treatment. Or what I think of as comic treatment ... Perhaps this is a natural progression for a writer – an expansion of the range of voice – and would have happened anyway. But perhaps at least partly circumstances are dictating it. Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford, wrote in 1776 in a letter to the Countess of Upper Ossory (which sounds like a title of nobility straight out of Jack Vance): “The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.” Though I wouldn't deny that I have thought before, now I have been compelled increasingly to act on thoughts, to put thinking into practice.

Actually, I consider that all of my books to date have been examples of putting thinking into practice in the fictional domain. But now I have to apply that thinking to what is at the moment, unfortunately, the real world.

And so should we all – if we are thinking clearly about the real causes of what is happening these days, and not just reacting emotionally and instinctively, seeking consolation in sabre-rattling about supposed Russian threats, or in hatred of “greedy” workers and gratitude that they are at last being stomped – which, translated into actual terms, means that the real producers of the wealth of this country are being destroyed, body and soul, and that the next generation is being ruined in advance in terms of health, housing, education and morale, thus laying up fearful problems for the future. A house which is deliberately encouraged to fall into ruins – here we are back at house repairs again – a house neglected to save money on the upkeep costs vastly more to put to rights later on – if it can be put right. And the same applies to a country: a country within which we hope to be able to go on reading sf and creating it and attending conventions such as this one.

Last year *Fantasy & Science Fiction* published a short story by me, “The World SF Convention of 2080”, which was reviewed – enthusiastically – as a triumph of black sarcasm. Well, yes. But again, it was also something of an affectionate tribute. I feel a great deal of affection for those who could go on attending sf conventions, in pursuit of their dreams and their joy in life, even if they had to hike there across a savage terrain, pursued by wolf packs, and even if the high point of the banquet is squirrel stew – though come to think of it, maybe squirrel stew might win out over Supreme of Chicken Dragonara

[the main dish served at the Yorcon II banquet – Eds]. Or maybe Supreme of Chicken Dragonara is squirrel stew!

But I would much rather that this delightful institution of sf conventions carries on without our having to drag our crutches around the luminous bomb craters or through the new hunger marches, and when we arrive at the tent in which we can afford to stay, finding that the only exciting novel this year exists in just two copies, both handwritten in the author's blood.

Comedy, at such a time! Should I not be writing fictional polemics – instead of merely delivering them as a Guest of Honour speech?

In fact, downright polemical fiction is too often a crime against art; and worse still, a bore – so that it is also a crime against the very ideas that it is trying to put over. This is true of right-wing polemics, though these are pretty well doomed in advance, since people of a right-wing cast of mind rarely possess a coherent philosophy. They tend to react instinctively, not intellectually, no matter how fluently they rationalize these instincts – and of course our instincts are still concerned with the desire for power and prestige, acquisitiveness, defence of territory and supposed territory. In an age of nuclear weapons, and of increasing competition for resources, one dare not trust to instinctive reactions. But it's true of left-wing polemics too. Orwell's *1984* works as well as it does because it is *not* a polemic; it is a work by a politically committed writer of non-fictional polemics, now very angry at the betrayal of the hopes embodied in those polemics and at the corruption of language and thought infecting the writings and actions of those whom Orwell had once thought to be on the side of the angels. And the same applies to *Animal Farm*. If an overtly left-wing apologist is in difficulties here, a right-wing apologist is in double trouble.

Whatever one's prior vision of a book – one's pre-programming of it – if the book is to be any good at all, it has to grow organically as a separate living entity. It has to make its own decisions, rather like a child growing away from the parent.

And this raises strange questions about the relationship of the author to the world which he or she creates and which establishes its own independent existence: questions about the responsibility of the author towards his or her creations, and questions about the relationship between the book-reality created and the consciousness of the author. These are questions which are perhaps at the root of artistic creation-and which, if we posit for the moment the existence of a God, must be a fundamental dilemma at the root of His

own cosmos-creation.

I must introduce a side-note here, to the effect that as soon as one mentions the word “God”, associative lightbulbs start popping on in people’s heads automatically. The predictable question, “So do you believe in God?” – expecting the answer “Yes” or “No” – is as meaningless as the question “Do you believe in UFOs?” The questioner already knows in advance exactly what a God or UFO is, in his estimation – but he doesn’t quite realize this. I would answer that question “Do you believe in God?” simply by saying that a number of my books are devoted to exploring the question of *what a God might be*, with different possible answers, or approaches to answers. There is one “God” in *God’s World*. There is an entirely different kind of “God” in *Under Heaven’s Bridge*, which I wrote with Michael Bishop. There is yet another entirely different kind of “God” in the novel I’ve just finished writing – and it’s a God, let me assure you, that no one has thought of to date.

Anyhow, Godly creation – whatever a God might be – and artistic creation do have in common the paradox of the relationship between one’s creating consciousness and the reality created: a paradox which is becoming increasingly central to the cutting edge of modern Physics, by the way, and to scientific attempts to explain the universe coherently.

Sf, which includes in its domain attempted explanations of the nature of the universe, and of mind and of reality, is in fact particularly well adapted to address this problem central to artistic creation. Hence, indeed, there are many novels and stories which concern themselves with the reality problem – from such as Daniel Galouye’s *Counterfeit World* through to most of the works of Philip Dick. Obviously I would include my own books in this category. In a sense, quite a lot of sf is already meta-fiction: fiction about fiction.

The reality problem, by the way, provides a perfectly good rationale for one feature which most offends some readers of sf: namely, the fact that in book after book, it always happens to be the darned hero – even if he is a nitwitted thug, or someone marooned on a rock near Arcturus, or somebody stuck in a space ark or a deep cave who starts out filled with the most absurd notions about the nature of the world – it is this idiot who turns out to be central to (a) the explanation of the universe, (b) the rescuing of space/time from collapse, (c) the salvation of the human race, (d) the detection and defeat of the ravaging mind-horde from Ursa Major. How often, and how arbitrarily, does the central enigma of the cosmos thus converge upon the

central character, whatever his qualities! This, if one wishes to apologize for it – and sometimes it needs apology – is perhaps rather more than just a genre cliché. It is a reflection of the reality problem and of the artistic problem, tuned up to fever pitch in sf precisely because in sf one can evoke the whole of the rest of the universe. And precisely because this central problem is tuned up to fever pitch, and sometimes exaggerated almost to parody or absurdity, we may find the writer beating his brow and expostulating: “How the hell can I *believe* this shit I’m writing?” Precisely what makes some sf unbelievable, even occasionally to the writer who is producing it, is one of the most potentially valuable and productive aspects of sf: the attack on the reality problem. This is why there is often gold amidst the ghastliest dross.

The writer who grows aware of this, during his or her career, is of course faced with a meta-problem: the need to incorporate his awareness of the problem into his texts which reflect it. Or he can try to ignore it entirely. Or he can hit the bottle, to stave off impending insanity and disconnection from the real world. (This is the case of Jonathan Herovit, in Barry Malzberg’s novel – and is indeed a dominant theme in Malzberg’s work.) Or he can refuse fully to believe it, as a deliberate strategy for carrying on – whilst accepting it in practice. (Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever is able to function because of chosen, sustained unbelief – which is why Donaldson’s books are so powerful, sustained and successful. Donaldson addresses the reality problem very skilfully and honestly.)

Thus, in my own books, I note that by the time I came to write *Alien Embassy*, the aliens had become fictions, simulations. They were pretend aliens, constructed by some of the characters in that world to fool the others in various ways. And indeed I feel, in retrospect, that I was able to invest more reality, and inventiveness, in the three alien races because of this.

By the time I wrote *Miracle Visitors* the problem of the reality of events themselves demanded to be explored. And this seemed to me best explored through the UFO mythos – wherein events seemingly occur which hover tantalizingly between reality and unreality. Through the triple viewpoint of that book – with three principal characters experiencing UFO events, yet choosing ultimately to react in quite different ways – I was able (thanks to my characters, who willed these choices) on the one hand to wind back into the baseline reality of the constructed world again. With, as it were, the middle hand I was able to sustain the fantasy events imposed on this reality. And finally, on the other (or third) hand, I was shown the way right outside

all this into a meta-reality which the world of the novel could not enter. I say “I was shown” this, since I write my books hoping to be shown things by them: things I did not know before – and hoping, too, to show these things to the readers of them.

By the time I wrote *God’s World*, the journey to the stars in that book was presented (and presented itself to me) necessarily as a journey *through imaginative space*. And I was able to reach an actual, “objective” alien world in that book precisely because I envisaged the physical journey to it in a starship as also being a journey through the imagination – a journey which the characters had to create for themselves, as much as the author himself had consciously to create it. If the characters had suffered a failure of imagination, they would not have reached their destination. Thus, in a sense, the problem involved in the cry “How can I, the writer, possibly believe this?” was shouldered by the characters themselves. Thus I, and they, arrived at journey’s end; and returned.

The Gardens of Delight involves another alien world, but this time, in order to reach it, its own inhabitants – who are the creators of that world, and of themselves – must use their imagination to construct, out of their own being, a human starship to arrive and explore the nature of their own reality. This is the situation of *God’s World* turned inside out; though I only see this in retrospect.

And in my forthcoming book *Deathhunter ...* but I must not give the plot away in advance; and perhaps I am not yet quite far enough from that book to know exactly what its place is in this progression, what exactly its statement is about the reality problem, for the author.

I only became fully aware of the reality problem while writing *Miracle Visitors*. In this sense, though there is a strong continuity of themes with my four earlier Gollancz novels, those first four were “innocent” books. *Miracle Visitors* embroiled me in the problem, because this was where my exploration was leading to; and for that reason it was the most worrying book I have written. The worry was not merely caused by the fact that I had just given up my job as a Senior Lecturer to write full-time; nor by the fact that while I wrote this book about UFOs, the local newspaper was filled with reports of UFO sightings thirty miles away, then twenty-five miles away, then twenty miles away ... It began to seem as though I needed to finish the book quickly before they found me.

And actually, we were visited by a Man In Black. I don’t know if you

know the UFO mythos, but after you've seen a UFO – or generated one – you get visited, if you're American or rich, by a Cadillac with two men dressed in black, who threaten you or warn you, and suggest that they're from Army Security or something. And they usually do something in your house. Well, this was just Britain, so we were only called on by one Man In Black. He knocked on the door; he was dressed in black; he claimed to be a commercial traveller, and asked if he could use the toilet. This was a funny request, because there's a pub just down the street and a toilet round the corner – public variety. But we said "Come in," – we knew about Men In Black, so we watched him very carefully – and we have constructive proof that he did something in the house. Now this wasn't the only worrying thing about writing a book on UFOs. Another worrying thing was being invited to talk to UFO groups ... but I mustn't describe, here, my visit to the British UFO Research Association two weeks ago.

The main worry was caused by the fact that if I couldn't solve the reality of this book – which was about the undermining of reality – then of course the novel could never be finished; nor perhaps any other honest novel, since this was the book that, at the moment, required itself to be written. And I had to trust my characters to do this for me; which they did in the end by winding back into the ground-reality of the book, while at the same time winding out into the meta-reality, into the imaginative zone from which the book came, and linking the two together even though there was no simple common ground between them.

I think that sf writers who decide that they are no longer really writing sf, or are no longer interested in writing it, or who can no longer bear to write it – sf writers who can no longer convince themselves of the authenticity of what they are writing – are in fact suffering from an unresolved reality problem; and this will be much more acutely evident in sf writers – particularly the best and most thoughtful of these writers – than in writers in other fields ... precisely because of the nature of science fiction itself.

That sf presents this problem of belief at its very heart is not, for me, a cause for criticism of the deficiencies of the genre; but rather of elation at the prospect of tackling the problem. Because it is a problem that is at the heart of art. And it is a problem that is at the heart of the existence of the physical universe itself.

One cannot exactly *solve* the problem – any more than one can define the nature of God, or pin down an actual UFO. There is no ideal sf novel

which balances all the terms of the equation self-consistently and demonstrably, like Gustave Flaubert's ideal of a novel which could sustain itself entirely by the power of style alone. Perhaps mainstream literature can produce the perfect novel, time and again. And perhaps by definition sf *cannot, ever.*

But one can try to edge closer to the problem all the time, by varying one's tactics – and my most recent approach, in the book I'm writing just now, is (as I've said) a comic one. Because that is the way the characters – who are engaged in reinventing themselves, in body and mind – wanted it to be. Not comic, I hasten to add, in the sense of sending up the genre. To me, that is rather like stealing sweets from children and selling them back to the children again, with the wrapping turned inside out. But simply, a tactic of hilarity.

And by the time the current book is published, in what – to the writer – always seems like the distant future, I hope and expect to be somewhere else ... in the literary sense.

The writing – and the reading – of much sf sometimes seems rather like the performance of a record on a turntable. The stylus moves ever onward (whilst apparently standing still), making much noise, and always in the selfsame track. And sometimes the stylus really does get stuck, and the same phrase is repeated over and over again throughout the rest of the writer's career. Or the reader's career. But, by and large, the stylus of sf moves on inwards – or will do so, if I have anything to do with it – towards the central point, from which all else radiates: the point of fusion between the inventing mind and the invented reality, between creation and consciousness.

Of course, it will never reach the central point, any more than Achilles will overtake the tortoise – and occasionally it might appear in the case of sf that it is the lumbering tortoise which is chasing the unattainable and ever more remote Achilles. But I would say that the stylus is heading in the right direction. And what wonderful tunes will it play on the way?

What more can we ask?

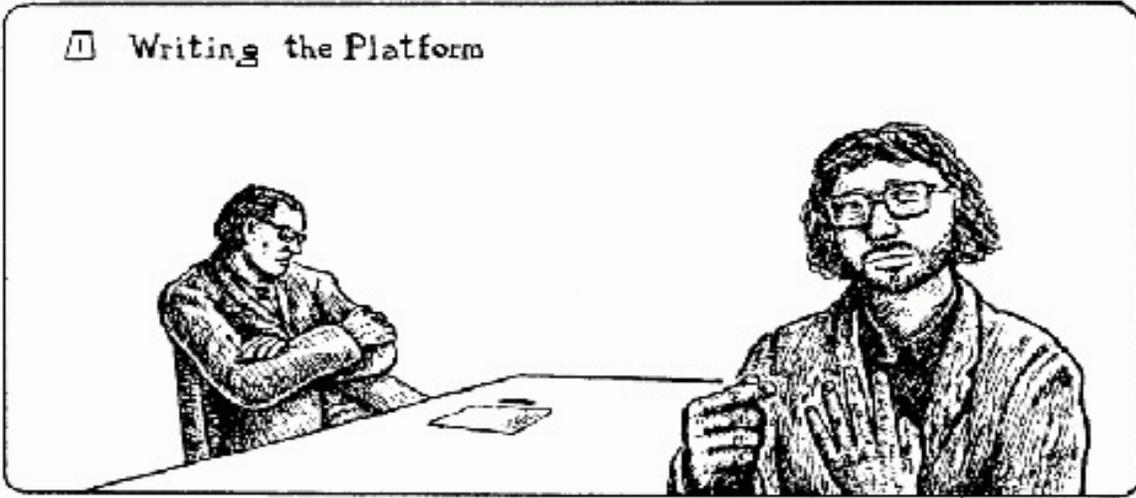
Thank you, all.

Recorded by Gerald Bishop, to whom many thanks.

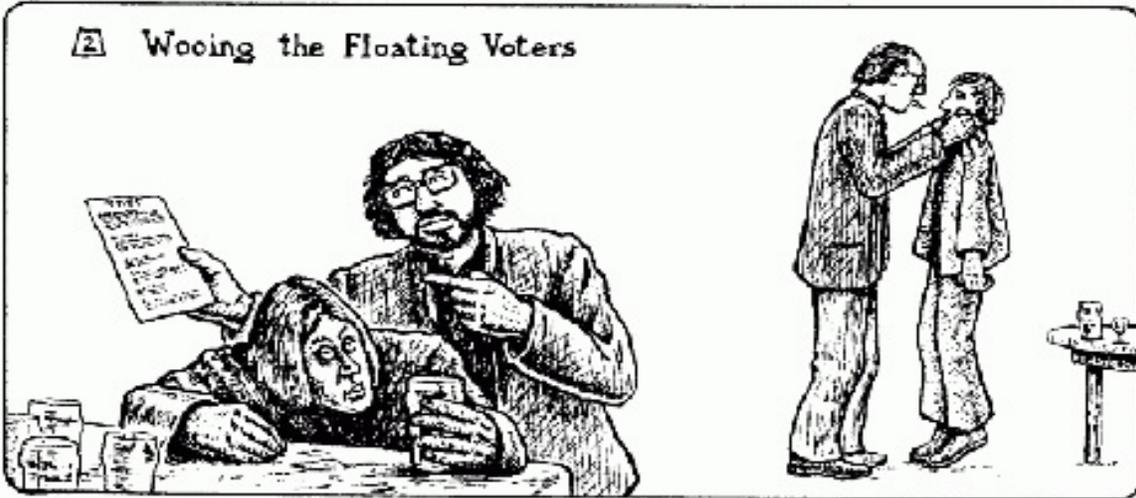
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The Horrors of TAFF

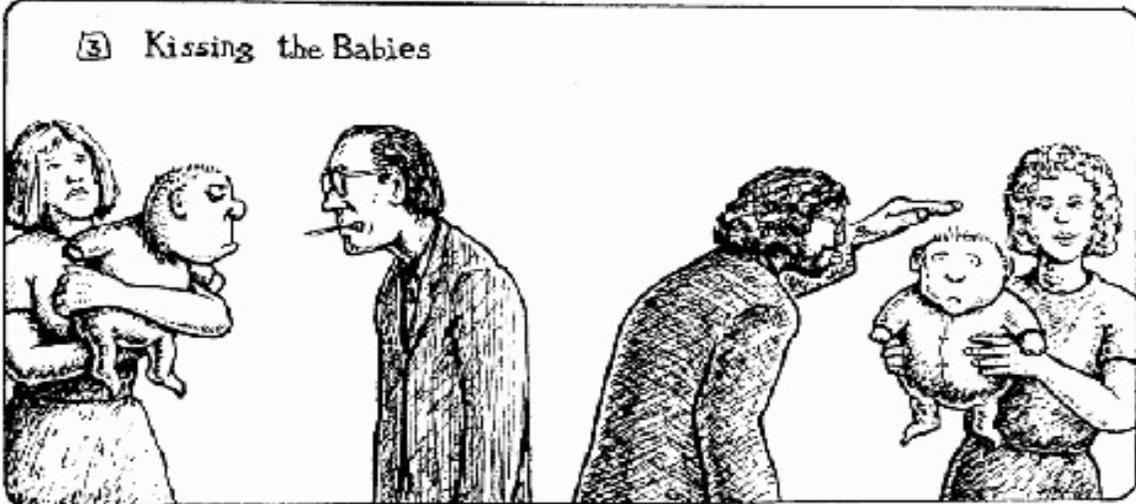
1 Writing the Platform



2 Wooing the Floating Voters



3 Kissing the Babies



Ghost of Honour Speech

Patrick Parrinder

Delivered at Beccon, the 1987 UK Eastercon, by a role-playing Ian Watson – whose aspect, manner and squeaks of indignation were held to be highly authentic.

Ladies and gentlemen ...

I want to make it quite plain that I am here under false pretences, and against my will. I have been given a few minutes to explain my presence here this morning, though I must tell you that it is as much of a surprise to me as it undoubtedly is to you. First of all, I am not the person that you may mistakenly think I am. I am not Mr Ian Watson, even though just at present I seem to be the inhabitant of his body. Mr Ian Watson is, I am told, a science-fiction writer, with a certain admiration for some rather trifling books I once wrote. Whether his admiration will survive this experiment in which he and I have become so curiously entangled, I cannot say. As I am the present inhabitant of Mr Watson's body, he, I can only suppose, is currently making free with mine. Mr Watson, I am told, bears a certain physical resemblance to me in my sprightlier and younger days. But I must assure you that the brain that is speaking to you from inside his body is not his. It is mine.

I am trying to outline these confusing matters to you as clearly as possible. When I left home this morning, I distinctly remember the date. It was April 19th, 1932. I was being driven in a hired limousine, and with me in my briefcase was the speech I intended to give at a weekend conference run by the younger members of the Fabian Society. These conferences are rather jolly affairs, as they tend to attract a number of intelligent young men and pretty and intelligent young women. On the whole I find that the young women make more attentive listeners than the young men. The subject of my paper was to be "The World of our Grandchildren" – though from my point of view, as I am 65, it would have been "The World of our Great-Grandchildren". I wonder what has happened to that paper. Perhaps at this very moment Mr Ian Watson is reading it to an audience somewhere – though if he should find himself at that Fabian conference, he would do better to tear it up and speak from his own experience. Mr Watson, I understand, is almost

young enough to be one of my great-grand-children.

Now when I am in my own body I am a notoriously incompetent speaker. I fiddle with my tie, lose my place, drop my notes, and my voice either dwindles into inaudibility or is mercilessly distorted by the public-address system. If I do not have a speech all written down beforehand I am left wordless, tongue-tied, squeaking and gibbering. Happily on this occasion I do not seem to be in so much of a funk as usual. Perhaps Mr Watson, like my friend Bernard Shaw, is a more gifted mountebank than I am. Certainly his body, unlike mine, feels relatively calm and collected on a public platform.

The fact is that I am a little nervous, but for a rather different reason. I understand that not only are you an audience of my great-grandchildren, so to speak, but you are an audience of “science-fiction fans”. “Science fiction” did not exist in my day unless you count some horribly cheap magazines published by a swindling American called Hugo Gernsback. I know about Mr Gernsback and his little ways, since he is in the habit of reprinting my stories without my permission and without paying any fees. But even Mr Gernsback in his wildest dreams could not have imagined this extraordinary Convention in which I find myself. I have learned to my horror that this gathering includes people who count themselves, in this year of 1987, among my most loyal and enthusiastic readers. I can only hope that what I have to say will bring them to their senses. I have to tell you that the fantastic tales of scientific inventions which I wrote in my youth were the merest apprentice-work, on which I cut my teeth as a writer before turning to more serious tasks. I have asked to be allowed to speak to you so that I can urge you to give up reading scientific romance and turn to the serious business facing the world. I want to ask you to turn from reading Science Fiction to building an Utopian World State.

Before I explain my ideas about the World State and the Open Conspiracy, let me try to say in a little more detail how I came to be here. I think I heard the person who introduced me suggesting that I might have travelled to this Convention in a time machine. I am afraid that he was guilty of a ridiculous error. The time machine of which I wrote in my youth was only a speculative device. Incidentally, I am told that Mr Ian Watson once published a story called “The Very Slow Time Machine”. If this was meant as a flattering allusion to my work it has sadly misfired. The whole point about time machines is that, if they existed, they would move very fast. In

any case, I did not travel here on a time machine. I came here by car.

When I arrived, another member of your Committee suggested that I might have come by the method described in a little story I once wrote, “The Stolen Body”. It is true that I seem to have stolen Mr Watson’s body. However, my story was written so long ago that I have not the slightest idea whether it is relevant or not. As I have said, I came here by limousine. I used to enjoy driving myself, in a jerky and approximate fashion, but nowadays when I have somewhere to get to I employ a chauffeur. The young man who turned up to drive me this morning seemed perfectly normal. As we drove along I was too busy making some last-minute amendments to my speech to notice the landscape. I may have nodded off for a minute or two. When I woke up I was puzzled to find that the chauffeur addressed me as “Mr Watson”.

Whether I have stolen Mr Watson’s body, or whether he has stolen mine, is I confess something of a mystery to me. His is a fairly agreeable sort of body, though when I caught sight of it in the driving mirror I did suffer a most unpleasant shock. Also, I begin to feel some anxiety as to what Mr Watson is up to in my body – assuming that is where he is, and that we are not caught up in some intricate game of physical musical chairs. I hope he takes good care of my body, while he is inside it. He will need to give it regular exercise, fresh air, and a carefully controlled diet – since I am, or was, a diabetic. He will find my body’s sexual urges a little troublesome, I dare say. He will need to seek out attractive and intelligent members of the opposite sex in order to give these urges some relief. I hope this necessity does not put Mr Watson under too much strain. He is probably accustomed to a very different and much duller sort of life.

Now let me come to the real reasons why I wanted to be allowed to speak to you. When my chauffeur addressed me as “Mr Watson”, I asked him what the date was and where we were. He said it was 1987 and that we were driving through the outskirts of Birmingham. I confess that I was not as elated by this as I might have hoped. In fact I was conscious of considerable dismay. Looking around me, I soon realized that the world of my grandchildren was a world in which people could not possibly have read any of my serious books. If they had read my serious books they would have planned and organized and cleared away the dirt and ugliness I glimpsed around me. You see, to me your world of 1987 is rather like my world of 1932. All my life I have dreamed of an ordered and spacious society, an

educated and disciplined world of the future. The alternative, I believed, was stark catastrophe. But I arrive in 1987 and I find that you are content to muddle along in the same wasteful and outdated fashion as my contemporaries did.

It is true that before I came on this platform I asked your Committee what mankind had achieved in the past 55 years. Their answers at first were difficult to understand, but finally I made out that they were speaking of space-rockets, atom bombs, and electronic brains. Perhaps they were disappointed by my response. I had expected that you would have built the new world order, and brought about world peace. All you have done is to develop various inventions which are anticipated either in my books, or in those of one or two of my forward-looking contemporaries. Moreover, your scientists have been content to leave control of the world in the hands of the politicians and military men. Scientific research as a result is largely misdirected. It is plain to me that your age is in as much need of my ideas of the World State and the Open Conspiracy as were my contemporaries.

I feel that I am coming to the end of my allotted time on this platform, but I have not even begun to address you on these urgent matters. I would like to speak of the World State, of World education, World history, the World Encyclopaedia and the Open Conspiracy. I would like to discuss how we are to stop *homo sapiens* from pursuing his present blind and suicidal path. I will not develop these matters further this morning. But this afternoon I intend to ask your chairman to suspend your regular proceedings so that we can debate them fully. If I am not here to do so, you will know that I have got my own body back and that I am busy expounding the same themes to the 1932 conference of the Young Fabians. You will, no doubt, wish to carry on this crucial debate in my absence.

Let me end, however, on a more personal note. Of all the many science-fiction writers who have claimed to be prophets, I am the first one to have actually visited the future. It is, I admit, a rather unnerving experience. But once I have got my own body back from Mr Watson it is plain what I shall do. I shall set to work on a novel describing this queer world of 1987, how it came into existence and where it is leading. Then I will travel round the world and unfold the results of my researches to Mr Roosevelt and Mr Stalin. No doubt they will see the necessity of amending their policies instantly. Now I realize that if I tell my readers *exactly* what I have seen in the year 1987 they will not believe me. I shall have to make some of it up. I shall

certainly not mention anything so undignified as my appearance at this Convention.

I think I shall call this new novel of mine *The Shape Of Things To Come*. Rather a good title, don't you think? I expect it to be published in 1933, and I shall then talk to Mr Alexander Korda about the film rights. Before I go I must confess that, after all, I am beginning to enjoy this world of 1987. There is something pleasantly informal about it. Some of your young ladies would, I suspect, make extremely congenial company. But I think I had better go back and write *The Shape Of Things To Come* before Mr Ian Watson steals my idea. I am sure he is an expert on 1987 but he would be bound to make a frightful mess of writing about it. Besides, I am beginning to find his body rather a tight and uncomfortable fit. In my mature years I have needed a good deal more room to bulge and sag and flop about in than Mr Watson's body seems to provide.

By the way, I see that I must be a little more modest than you may have thought, since I have still to tell you who I am. My name probably means as little to most of you as does Mr Watson's to whatever audience he is currently addressing himself. But, ladies and gentlemen, my name is – or was – H.G.Wells.

Three (And a Bit) Views of Milford

The Milford (UK) Writers' Conference was founded in the 1970s by James and Judy Blish, in homage to Damon Knight's and Kate Wilhelm's US original. A recurring theme is the evening "Call My Bluff" challenge, also known as the Dictionary Game, whose players creatively misdefine obscure words and score points for either spotting the correct definition amid the decoys, or fooling others with their false versions. Thus Richard Cowper gave us "tappen" – in fact "the mucous plug formed in the rectum of a polar bear during hibernation" – which lent its name not only to Malcolm Edwards's later fanzine but to little wads of paper nefariously used to bung up the pockets of the Milford hotel pool table. NOW READ ON ...

1981: The Yooping Pricket Ate A Rizzarded Snig And Passed A Collet From Its Hypural Geoff Ryman

Imagine something on your plate that you would not wish to step in if you saw it on the pavement, and which requires only diced carrot to look like a special effect for Ken Russell's *The Devils*: A Milford breakfast. Grey runny powdered egg on greasy bread. God, the food was terrible: too little, too early, breakfast at nine, supper at six. The feeling of debilitation was compounded by the bar arrangements – we just signed for drinks and served ourselves any time day or night, leaching out any remaining trace of vitamins with alternating doses of coffee and booze. The Milford sensation is hollow-eyed, jaded exhaustion from too many late nights, too many words read, too much talk, too much booze and not enough to eat.

There were 120,000 words to read this year – and they really did have to be read at least twice. The standard of criticism was dauntingly high. Flaws in logic, incorrect word usage, gaps in characterization, and mistakes in tone were pounced upon and thoroughly chewed over for the benefit of the

writers. My own 10,000 word chunk was admirably digested. But what I really found valuable about Milford was the reading and the criticizing. I found I was out of touch with my own reactions to what I read. I'd shrug off my own boredom during the boring bits, or ignore my own squinting confusion when the logic was faulty. The opportunity to criticize a story while there was still a chance for it to have a constructive effect focused the mind wonderfully. I had to notice I was bored and come up with a reason why. One thing: I'll never be quite so tolerant of my own stuff again. But enough of that.

George R.R. Martin, fresh from two Hugos in one year, spent about £50 on the video machine, topping Chris Priest's high score last year of £20. Malcolm Edwards and Chris Evans played something called Macho Pool, the main object of which seemed to be to bash hell out of the balls, preferably against the walls or floor. Edwards played with the cue between his legs, but Evans was clear winner, reducing the tip of his cue to a splintered pulp with one masterful shot. Fans of Milford pool will be distressed to learn that the Cowper Tappens were finally discovered by the Management – those little holes will have to be left unblocked from now on. Someone invented, or simply remembered, a cocktail called the Death Wish, which may or may not have included Guinness and Pernod among its ingredients. Lisa Tuttle, revealing the raunchy Texas Barfly aspect of her personality, did a truly staggering imitation of a large mouthed frog that should have dislocated her jaw. It was also Lisa who slid out of her chair and collapsed onto the floor in a kind of giggling pudding during Call My Bluff. Something about native drums being stitched together out of hymens, with only plastic replicas being now available. Call My Bluff is the perfect Milford game – all those writers digging up ludicrous words or making up even more ludicrous definitions for them. *Cambism* was defined as cannibalism with your mouth full. A *Caccagogue* is nothing to do with a synagogue or a demagogue, but is an ointment of alum and honey used to cure constipation. A *Pricket* was defined as a obnoxious guardsman ... and round and round. Gary Kilworth, however, expended his literary talents on this little piece:

There was a sex dev. on parole
Who went looking for a Black Hole
He'd been sucked before
By both ends of a whore
But he wanted to be swallowed whole.

In his youth, Rob Holdstock used to paste a little white dot on to the bonnet of his car in order, he told us, to seduce women. Unfortunately, he couldn't remember how on earth a little white dot on the bonnet of his car was any use whatever for that particular purpose. He did, however, in one story session, apprise Marianne Leconte of the obvious. In her story a woman backs away from a strange growth and bumps into a man; the bump is described as being soft. Robert informed Marianne that if she backed into him, "it wouldn't feel soft at all, I can tell you, it would be hard." Marianne, a woman of Gallic experience, agreed that it probably would. I contributed a blunder of my own while criticizing Pip Maddern's story about a crochety, wrinkled old woman. "Pip," I said, "I get the feeling that this is you a couple of years on." That wasn't quite what I meant to say. It wasn't as bad as Dave Garnett though, who started off on the same story with something like "The old bag doesn't half bang on." Explanations did not do much to muffle the blow. Dave Garnett, dead white of face, covered with lines like the glazing on old pottery, achieved distinction on several levels. First, he ate his appalling Milford apple pie with ketchup. Second, he was without doubt the most durable of the late-nighters, surviving the Edwards/Holdstock beer throwing and soda shooting match to be left drinking alone in the dark at 3am. Third, he was the most direct and honest of the critics: "I thought it was fucking awful," was one terse comment.

Things you wouldn't believe if you read them in a story department: Hazel Langford spent her time *knitting* a Klein bottle – a 3-dimensional object with only one surface. Pip and I tried to turn it inside out and it really did begin to get smaller and smaller in a rather unsettling way. Patrice Duvic presented everyone with brandy after the reading of his excellent, amusing story. Kev Smith and Andrew Stephenson drove me nuts with a stupid game in which I was supposed to decode a "digital" number code that used toothpicks. It turned out I should have counted the number of fingers on the table instead.

Very suddenly, it seemed, everything was over. We all hung around the bar the last day, paying our bills, feeling a bit let down. Lisa Tuttle came in bemused, having found a pair of green rabbit ears attached to what looked like ladies' knicker elastic in her room. Cambrian Chris Evans put them on and stuck out his teeth for a photo. "Is that what you call a Welsh Rabbit?" asked George Martin. And somehow that was that. Kisses on cheeks, shaking of hands, writing of addresses on little bits of paper that would soon be lost.

Groups of people began to stagger away. Chris Evans fell asleep on Marianne's maternal lap as Kev Smith drove us home.

Oh yes, there was this fellow named Dave Langford there as well, but most of you know about him.

1985: Sue Thomason's Milford Report

Scant weeks after my first public appearance as a neopro at Milfcon '85 (guests of honour John Clute, Richard Cowper, David Garnett, Neil Gaiman, Colin Greenland, Gwyneth Jones, Garry Kilworth, Paul Kincaid, Rachel Pollack, Alex Stewart and Lisa Tuttle) I received my First Commission, in the form of a grubby postcard from the Editor of This Esteemed Scientifictional Journal. They warned me things like this might happen after Milfcon.

"Okay, Dave," I riposted mentally, inserting a nice fresh piece of unsullied blank vagueness into my mental typewriter.

Richard Cowper instantly manifested in his avuncular Gravesian role of The Reader Over My Shoulder. "Well ..." he gestured expansively. "There are far too many adjectives here. And here's a split infinitive, and you haven't accurately imagined your typewriter which you earlier described as a word processor. Have a glass of wine," he smiled.

"Aren't you going to tell them about the swimming pool?" inquired Lisa Tuttle.

"Oh, you mean how I jumped in after John Clute's splendid attempt to decapitate someone with a frisbee? That man's a homicidal maniac manqué, *and* he gets up at 5:30 in the morning..." I quipped.

"No," she expostulated. "I was thinking of the time I went swimming, and discovered that the whole bottom of the pool was *crawling* with spiders. Also I think you should mention all those walks we had down on the beach..."

"Not *all* of us," Garry Kilworth intoned, laying aside his trombone and suspending himself horizontally from a lamp-post. "Garnett swears he never has been down to the sea at Milford, and he never will. It's a matter of principle."

John Clute wandered in, scowling like a bear, then wandered out again.

"What's he doing?" gasped Kilworth.

"Oh, I've mislaid something," Clute lipblatted, wandering in again.

“What?” Kilworth strained.

“Oh, just an entablature of salamanders performing a myoclonic can-can*,” Clute interlocuted, wandering out again. “I’m sure it’s round here somewhere....”

“What about the time I was telling them about a drug that you snort by sticking a five-foot-long blowpipe up your nostril, then inhaling as someone blows the drug down it from the other end? It’s supposed to make you feel as though you’ve been hit on the nose by a brick, then you drip green snot all over everything for about five minutes; then you have to do it all over again with the other nostril,” Gwyneth Jones reminisced, obviously contemplating the tasteful additions this effect would produce on her *This Was Seppuku* t-shirt.

“Yes, and Colin Greenland whipped out his notebook and pencil and asked if anybody knew the name of the stuff,” laughed Paul Kincaid.

“Bet you can’t make *that* into a limerick, Neil,” challenged Alex Stewart.

“Five minutes,” Neil Gaiman retorted. “I did it for *Lord of the Rings*, I can do it for *that*....”

“Do you want your Tarot reading now, Sue?” called Rachel Pollack from the garden.

“Oh, my *dear* girl, I don’t really think that this will do at all,” twinkled Richard Cowper. “You set yourself up as a fantasy writer, but *look*; this report hasn’t got a map, it hasn’t got a glossary, I admit it’s got some silly character-names, but *nobody sings*. Have a glass of wine.”

We also read and criticized a couple of stories.

Appendix A

words superlatively misdefined in a session of Call My Bluff

gleet

lontor

Appendix B

superlative definition of a forgotten word in Call My Bluff

“Tasmanian god, who instead of creating the world, went out to the corner shop for a packet of fags and was never heard of again.”

Appendix C

a word John Clute didn’t know at Scrabble

eft

* The starred phrase, from John Clute's story, became a byword. Alleged exchange: "Isn't that rather a far-fetched image?" "No, in chapter 2 I actually *introduce* an entablature of salamanders performing ..."

1986: 15 Characters in Search of a Volume Control for Neil Gaiman Paul Barnett (alias John Grant)

There is more room in heaven for a flannel nightcap than for a silver codpiece.

Arriving some three hours before anyone else, I discovered for myself what metropolitan Milford-on-Sea thought about this annual invasion of skiffy writers. I strolled idly down to the seafront and into a cafe for an ice-cream. There the fifteen-year-old server and her fifteen-year-old hangers-on fell about laughing throughout the entire transaction. After a quick check – yup, them flies *wuz* closed – I danced away in glee: there were soon going to be fifteen other buggers just as hilarious as me.

Of course I don't believe it – I simply embrace it fervently.

Various catchwords and phrases emerged at Milford, not all of which are easily comprehended by the amateur. Here is a brief glossary:

Crawling Testicles: Term introduced by Alex Stewart in a short story. Describes feelings of male participants when their story is being discussed.

Spung! Dignified Heinleinian term for the reaction of the female nipple to sexual stimulation. This word was used whenever there was a conversational silence.

Untenable: Term used by US cyberpunk (qv.) writer Bruce Sterling to describe stories either (a) not cyberpunk or (b) not written by Bruce Sterling.

Cyberpunk: Skiffy written by persons concerned with invasive technology – the gadgets that Definitely Will Invade Your Body. Dildoes deliberately excluded, even if coked up. Derivatives produced during the event included *scifyberpunk* and the much more digestible *lowfibrepunk*.

Mirror Shades: Adopted as the uniform of cyberpunks (qv.).

Mazola Party: Term describing orgies so unstimulating that the participants have to use Mazola cooking oil to lubricate the parts that Heineken can't reach. According to Bruce Sterling (qqv.) such parties are engaged in by famous golden-age skiffy writers at worldcons. Your

correspondent waved a block of cheapskate lard but got no takers.

Contabescent: A cold aerosol spray used in farming to wither the unwanted tumescences of billy-goats. (To think! – Call My Bluff used to be a clean game.)

Cutting Edge: Term used by Bruce Sterling (qqqv.) to describe cyberpunk (qv.). Cyberpunk is the cutting edge of skiffy. Us Brits are producing the frayed trailing edge. A stuffy rebuttal of this thesis by Neil Gaiman concluded: “We don’t give a fuck. And you can’t make us.”

Bar Pixies: The mystical elementals responsible for the fact that only 57 pints were recorded on the honour system of bar tabs during the sinking of an 80-pint barrel. The “missing” 23 pints were generally assumed to be those thrown away by toppers who, although eager, regarded a fistful of evil-smelling foam as undrinkable. (*This one will run and run....*)

You cannot kill a man with a poem. You cannot rule a nation with a sonnet. I will keep my guns, sir, and you may keep your verses.

All stories brought to Milford were generally peed upon, the only exception being Garry Kilworth’s “Blood Orange”, which was peed upon by a militant few because it was too perfect. Gwyneth Jones, using occasionally subtle trajectories, peed upon every story in sight on the basis that she hadn’t written it, and was then astonished when her own incomprehensible piece vanished under a flood of urine. Bruce Sterling, whose mission was to persuade the Brits to take up the True Quill (ie., cyberpunk) peed upon all stories until the moment his own was discussed; thereafter, having discovered what it was like, he mellowed. Diana Wynne Jones and Judy Blish, two very nice people, desperately tried to find something nice to say about *everything* – a difficult task, seeing as my story was one of those under consideration.

The battlefield is the place for blunders, not the cricket pitch.

Ah yes, my story. At 4,750 words it was widely regarded as too long. What will they say of the 90,000-word *Earthdoom!*, I wonder. Too introspective?

*Bear-baiting, sir? ’Tis not for me
Unless the beast a maiden be.*

Various putative projects raised their heads during Milford. *Now We Are Sick*, edited by Neil Gaiman and Steve Jones, is to be an anthology of revolting verse for kids; surprisingly, money is being talked. David Barrett is

soliciting contributions for a hypothetical series of short-shorts to appear in *Computer Weekly*; if this goes ahead the results will (or possibly will not) be collected to form a book. Neil Gaiman and your correspondent agreed to press famous Rupert Metcalf to allow us to try and flog a “Best of *Knave Fiction*” anthology: watch this space. It was generally agreed, too, that an anthology of sex skiffy* was needed, and everyone except Gwyneth Jones and Bruce Sterling agreed to contribute. Alex Stewart was elected editor but doesn’t fucking well want unsolicited submissions. “I’ll get piles,” he confessed in an unguarded moment, “of masturbatory fantasies from all those teenage wankers who read *Ansible*.” The title of this editorial masterpiece currently wavers between the elegant *Spung!* and the catchy *Saucy Science Wonder Stories*. Who knows? Maybe some sucker of a publisher will buy the damn’ thing.

Chief of men? He is a chief of murderers. But I will piss upon his grave – I and a thousand others.

Chairman Colin Greenland – Uncle Colin With His Merry Games for Boys and Girls – led the evening sessions. Fifteen of us had heady fun while Mary Gentle had a cold. Games included: (a) Call My Bluff (hence “contabescent”); (b) a variation on Consequences introduced by Diana Wynne Jones, which led to unparalleled filthiness (rhyming couplets: “Ships that pass in the night / Are particularly hard on ducks”; “While we’re all playing with silly rhymes / Dave and Mary are having a real good time [*spung*]”), and (c) a version of Call My Bluff in which the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* was used. In this last the “host” gave the name and dates of an epigrammatist and the flock had to supply possible quotes from same. Hence the pithy epigrams cited herein – and hence a competition! The first person correctly to identify the authors of the quotes listed here will get a *free* copy of John Grant’s exquisite *Sex Secrets of Ancient Atlantis*. The runner-up will get a signed one. You Too Can Be A Lucky Winner.

’Tis the good Lord’s will that a rabbit goes well in a crust with onions.

During the week, Rachel Pollack got the news that a new book of hers had been sold to Thorsons. Your correspondent heard that a new Langford/Grant collaboration had been taken by Grafton. Neil Gaiman sold a piece to *Today* on Fantasycon, which summed up a ten-minute interview with nubile pouting

authoress Lisa Tuttle in a single quote: “Fantasycon is just like a great big party.” Oh how pleased she was.

*Hast thou heard, my little boy
Of famous Humphrey Davy?
He put the sodium in our salt
And argon in our gravy.*

Your correspondent and Paul Kincaid together won five games in a row of doubles pool on the last night, baffling all challengers. It was then agreed that they should play a singles game – a Duel of the Giants. The following morning, Kincaid refused to remember who had won....

* The “sex skiffy” anthology did eventually appear as *Arrows of Eros* (1989), edited by Alex Stewart.

1986: Alternative View David Garnett

Having read the report in *Matrix*, which seems to be about different people at a different place, and re-read the one in *Ansible 47* which excludes two of the essential participants, I think you need **An Alternative Milford Report:**

It was observed that at Milford 1986, Scott Baker and 14 others wore glasses. The one exception was –
David Garnett.

These Milford reports from Ansible, cut for space reasons from the original 1998 print edition of Wrath of the Fanglord, are restored as a bonus extra for this 2015 ebook reissue.

The Suicidal Prime Ministers' Song Colin Fine

Sir Harold Macmillan spent a fortnight drillin'
Through his skull to let out "vapours".
The Earl of Bute took his brain right ute
And replaced it with newspapers.
The Duke of Portland had himself trepanned
With a couple of butchers' cleavers.
Lord Liverpool sawed round his skull
And prised it off with levers.

Sir Robert Walpole took a scalpel and set to with a will
Clement Attlee rather flatly used a Black and Decker drill –

Ted Heath, Ted Heath took the bit between his teeth
And drilled straight up with the brace underneath.
Sir Robert Peel with nerves of steel
Put a needle through his beadle with never a squeal.
Bonar Law, Bonar Law took a circular saw
And crept up on himself from behind
And Douglas-Home used a thing that went "Boom:"
And *really* blew his mind.

Viscount Palmerston's the calmest an' the coolest of them all:
He sat and smashed his skull in with a solid silver ball.

This should be sung to the tune of Monty Python's "Drunken Philosophers' Song". We take no responsibility for results.

The Flatulent SF Authors' Song

Nick Lowe

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.

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.

Meetings with Remarkable Men

Christopher Priest

Guest of Honour speech at Novacon 9, November 1979.

I have borrowed the title of my talk today from the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff, who wrote a semi-autobiographical account of his quest for knowledge and understanding. He sought out a number of philosophers and mystics, became their disciple, and absorbed their wisdom. I'm telling you this in the hope that it will set a high intellectual tone to this convention. In fact, it sets the intellectual tone of this talk exactly ... because I'm bluffing. Not only have I not read Gurdjieff, but I haven't even seen the film. However it's a good title, and it's somewhere to begin.

When I first started to go to science fiction conventions I did so for very simple motives. I was a fan of science fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, I was a fan of certain writers who had published science fiction. When I went to Peterborough in 1964 I did so in the hope of meeting John Wyndham, Ray Bradbury, J.G. Ballard, Robert Sheckley, Brian Aldiss ... even, if I was very lucky, H.G. Wells. I wanted to be a science fiction writer, and I hoped that by rubbing shoulders with people like this that some of their talent might rub off on me. I soon discovered that if you rub shoulders with science fiction writers the only thing that's likely to rub off on you is dandruff.

When I first thought about what I should say to you today I felt a slight sense of panic. It might come as something of a surprise to some of you, but this is the first time I have ever given a talk at a convention. I've often taken part in panels – usually the sort where we set out to talk about literature and end up arguing about money – but never before have I been given a whole hour of the convention's time.

I started to go to sf conventions because I was a fan, and to a large extent I continue to come to cons for fannish reasons. They are above all fannish events, and any writer who comes along has to do so more or less on fannish terms. I'm proud of the fact that I have maintained fannish links for more than fifteen years, and it was this that gave me a clue as to what I might be able to talk about today. I saw myself as a sort of latter-day Gurdjieff, passing through the sf world for fifteen years, in contact with the great minds.

Perhaps, I thought, I could give you a series of anecdotes about the remarkable men I have met over the years, passing on to you what grains of wisdom, or dandruff, I have picked up. So, with this in mind, I started making a list. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Brian Aldiss, John Wyndham, John W. Campbell, Frederick Pohl, Rob Holdstock ... all these I have met. And, because in these liberated times remarkable men should really be called remarkable people, Ursula Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Leigh Brackett, Anne McCaffrey, Judith Merril. The list extended indefinitely, easily filling an hour of your time.

But then I thought back to the very first science fiction writer I ever met, and my plans started to come adrift.

For many years I have sat in convention halls like this one, listening to Bob Shaw's serious and scientific talks. This weekend, as you know, he is my co-guest of honour at Novacon West. So while he's away I thought I'd take my revenge. I want to tell you the true story of how we met. Garbled versions of this historical meeting have appeared in fanzines over the years – Brian Aldiss even wrote about it in the *New Statesman* – but now I'm going to set the record straight.

In 1964, Bob Shaw was better known as a fan than he was as an author. Then, as now, Bob was in fact a BNF, or Big Name Fan. Any Big Name Fan was an awesome figure, but Bob was a legend, even in those days. Bob's mere presence in the same room was enough to strike me dumb. In fact, Bob then was probably very much like Bob now, always talking seriously about science, but I had no way of finding this out. Then, on the last evening of the convention, Bob introduced himself to me. It happened like this:

Somewhere around midnight I was taken with a bodily need, and retired to the nearest Gents. Nature started to take its course, and all was well. At that precise moment, Bob Shaw walked into the Gents and came and stood beside me. Now, as most of you will know, one of the more remarkable things about Bob is that he can be in a bar all evening, and stay in a bar all evening. When I came into fandom, there was much serious scientific speculation that Bob actually kept a collapsible bucket under his coat. So you can imagine my feelings when I saw Bob walk into this Gents. Not only was I alone with him, but I was there at a moment of fannish history! Perhaps I'd even see the bucket! But before I could say or do anything about any of this, something quite extraordinary happened. I felt something splashing against my shoe. I looked down, and sure enough a small puddle had appeared. I

looked up, slowly ... and for a moment our eyes met. It was, as they say in Bob Shaw novels, a moment fraught with tension. Then Bob gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles. "Sorry," he said. "Would you like a return shot?" Unfortunately, nature had run its course, and as often happens during a stimulating conversation, I dried up. In the words of the Sunday newspapers, I made my excuses and left ... with a slight hopping motion.

There's a postscript to this historical meeting. Three or four years ago I drove up from London to spend the weekend at Bob's mansion in the Lake District. About twenty-five seconds after I arrived, having given me time to rest and recuperate after my long drive on the motorway, Bob suggested that we go down to his local. Actually, he claimed he didn't go there very often, and pretended to lose his way, but I noticed as we went in that the landlord was sending a telegram order to the brewery. So we had a drink or seven, and eventually I asked Bob if he remembered how we had met, all those years before. Bob claimed he didn't, so I reminded him. He sat in silence as I told the story, but was obviously puzzled why I should be telling him. He suddenly gave one of his peculiar, chortling snuffles, and said, "Do you want to borrow a Kleenex?"

So I decided against telling you this anecdote, because it didn't really seem relevant to my quest for knowledge. And the more I thought about it, none of my other meetings with remarkable men were all that remarkable. I could have told you about how my father-figure, Harry Harrison, cuffed me about the ear and said, "Get out of the way, you fucking fan." Or how the very first words ever spoken to me by Arthur C. Clarke were, "What about the variable albedo?" ... something which to this day is worrying me. I could tell you how I stood next to Harlan Ellison and loomed over him. Come to that, I could tell you how Douglas Adams stood next to me, and loomed over us both.

But none of these memories are really helpful. All I've really learnt is that if you give a science fiction writer a chance he will piss on your shoe.

A reader's experience of science fiction is, in a sense, a meeting with remarkable minds. It was this that first surprised me when I encountered sf. Through their work, I met, for the first time, writers who could show me a different way of seeing things, who were way above the mundane things in life and were getting on with a kind of fiction that made me think for myself. Years later, I came across a passage in an essay by George Orwell, which describes this feeling exactly. Orwell was describing the effect on him of

reading H.G. Wells as a boy:

It was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H.G. Wells. There you were, in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to “get on or get out”, your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who *knew* that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined.

Orwell always has the ability to pinpoint a feeling exactly, and this describes the effect science fiction as a whole can have on people who come to it with open minds. I myself came to it with the open mind of adolescence, as many of us do. The ideas of science fiction work on two levels. Firstly, there is the element of surprise or novelty, and secondly there is the less specific quality of making us think for ourselves, of applying a freshness of approach to our own lives.

I don't want to emphasize the importance of the ideas too much, because there is much more to science fiction than just novelty. I think ideas are misunderstood in some quarters, and given the wrong sort of importance. Science fiction is undoubtedly the literature of ideas, or speculative notions, but an idea in a story cannot exist outside the words that contain it. It therefore seems obvious to me that we should be at least as interested in the words as we are in the ideas.

This amounts to taking a more literary approach to sf, but I have found to my cost over the years that the very mention of the word “literary” seems to indicate some kind of mischief on my behalf. There is an anti-literature mood in science fiction, one that is shared by many readers, critics and even some of the writers. Literature is a dirty word: it is taken to mean “arty” or “boring” or “pretentious”. Science fiction is fresh and exciting; literature would only muck it up. Literature is posh, literature is for the academics and poseurs. Science fiction is fun, and literature isn't. This perverse attitude is especially ironic, because it seems to me that the best science fiction has the twin merits of being popular and widely read, and yet also deeply serious. Some of the most popular sf books in recent years have been serious novels, capable of being judged by the highest literary standards. You have only to look as far as the novels of, say, Ursula Le Guin to see this.

So in recent years I've become a bit of a literature bore, or so it seems. I have said, until even I am bored with hearing me say it, that a science fiction novel should be a novel first and science fiction second. That it should be recognized as an art and not a craft. That it should make demands on a reader and not pander to laziness. That it should not seek to compete with television or comics or films, but that it should be first and foremost a literary experience. That it should be peopled with characters who not only live for the plot but are living. That there should be a celebration of language and metaphor and style. In short, that a novel, whether it is science fiction or anything else, is literature above all else.

Yet in the science fiction world this kind of sentiment is seen as heresy. You have probably heard Heinlein's remark, that writers are competing for the readers' beer-money. When this was quoted in an SFWA publication by Poul Anderson, underlining the entertainment-value of science fiction, Stanisław Lem was moved to reply. Writing in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, he said:

If in the past all authors had accepted the suggestion of the two Americans [*Heinlein and Anderson*] we would have no literature worth mentioning. We would have none of the literary heritage of which we are so proud if every author worried about publishers, critics, censors, readers, public opinion, sales potential, and the like. My rebuttal to Anderson's thesis, then, is that marketing prospects or official approval or similar concerns have no business intruding in that narrow gap between the author's eye and the blank piece of paper. That the muse cannot be pursued over a bottle of beer goes without saying. In short, honest literature can never conform to external pressures or exigencies. To do so would be its death.

You would think that this was a civilized and reasonable reply, yet for these very words Stanisław Lem was booted through the door. SFWA, the organization that represents the world's leading science fiction writers, chucked him out. You would think that a writer in the Eastern bloc would have troubles enough with the writers' union, and yet here was a writers' organization in a free and democratic country acting in exactly the same way. Of course, it's not fair to tar every member of SFWA with the same brush, but out of a membership of nearly four hundred, less than ten registered a

protest.

Nor is this attitude just a collective phenomenon. It crops up all over the place, in articles in fanzines, in interviews with writers, in criticism, in those infamous rejection slips from *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*. Boiled down to its essence, it says: "We are but entertainers, and entertainment is a humble trade. Therefore our sights are set low." I believe that entertainment is a high art, and should be treated as such. Everyone at the convention today is here because we believe that science fiction is a stimulating, radical and entertaining form of literature, yet by their very words the Poul Andersons and Robert A. Heinleins are asking you to settle for less.

If you have the misfortune to read *Analog* you will have been exposed to the so-called wisdom of certain reviewers, whom I am tempted to call Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe. These men, both of whom are said to have written science fiction, are leading spokesmen for the anti-literature school. Month after month they have stated their theory of sf. That it is first and foremost entertainment, that it should be well crafted, that it should have a comprehensible plot, that it should not make undue demands on the reader ... and, as an afterthought, that it should have what they call "characterization" and "good writing", as if these can be added later. In short, that sf should be lowbrow entertainment, pitched at the same sort of level as television films.

Perhaps it doesn't sound so very different from my own statement just now, with the elements coming in a different order. Well, that is the difference. It's a question of priorities. Ray-Gun and Crusoe appeal to the lowest common denominator of readership. I happen to believe that the readership of science fiction is intelligent and diverse.

As I move about the sf world, both as a sort of fan who comes to these conventions, and as a writer working in the field, I see more and more evidence that these insulting attitudes are taking over. I believe, for instance, that my views on the literary nature of science fiction are actually rather moderate, well-meaning and conventional. It doesn't seem to me that to say a form of literature should be treated as literature is at all revolutionary or extreme. You would think that it speaks for itself. Yet such is the consensus these days that the very act of stating the obvious is one that is treated as dangerous extremism. Because the consensus is an extremist viewpoint, anyone who opposes it looks like a different sort of extremist.

Nor is it just a theoretical debate. Such attitudes are filtering down and

taking different forms. The present commercial success of science fiction is bringing with it a set of attitudes which are close cousins to the entertainment-or-literature argument. Some of you might have been present at Skycon last year, when Rob Holdstock and I got involved in a public argument with James Baen of Ace Books. A lady in the audience asked the panel how she should go about getting her work published. Rob and I said something soggy and organic, such as “write for yourself”, whereas Baen said didactically that the only way was to “write for market”. In conversation with him afterwards it became clear that the very fact that a writer is being paid means he must put market considerations first ... and later we were told that there was no market for what he called “British misery”. This presumably would include miserable British books like *Frankenstein*, *The War of the Worlds* and *The Day of the Triffids*. This points up the commercial silliness of such an attitude, because any publisher could probably retire on the sales of those three books alone.

Then there are the critics, who divide into camps of such extremism that neither side knows where the other lot are.

Doctor Johnson once said: “Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense.” So it is ... but whether we like it or not, sf needs responsible criticism.

Writing is an art, and criticism is the natural companion to art. It defines and shapes it, it interprets it, it sets standards, it provides an overview of what individual writers are doing, it provides a context of intelligent debate. Original work can survive without it, and can of course be appreciated without it, but responsible criticism enhances art.

Science fiction critics are usually one of two sorts. There are those who have discovered that sf is literature, and have promptly gone barmy. These are the academics, who come to science fiction from the comfortable security of a chair at a university. There are a few good academic critics, but most of the criticism I have seen from academics has been pompous and narcissistic, apparently written with no love of literature, just a desire to impress.

The other lot are the crowd-pleasers, the likes of Loser del Ray-Gun and Creepy-Crawly Crusoe, who shy away from criticism and call themselves “reviewers”. They claim to know what the common reader enjoys, and from this position of arrogance and ignorance parade their subjective opinions with all the certainty of the closed mind.

Neither kind of critic is worth a damn. They say nothing to the writer or

the reader, and neither is able to join a larger debate.

Of course, there are a few exceptions. There are some perceptive critics in fandom, who are not showing off, who are not trying to agree with anybody and who write with honesty and insight. And the British magazine *Foundation* has a well-earned reputation for clear, unpretentious criticism. But this simply isn't enough to form a body of critical work. There should be a sufficient amount of sf criticism that there is disagreement amongst informed critics, that there is a continuity of debate.

At this point I was intending to turn away from the critics and have something to say about the responsibility of the writers. However, on the principle that dog shouldn't eat dog (except in private, when you can have fun) I won't say too much.

It is the writers whom one would think remain blameless, whatever venality there might be elsewhere in the science fiction industry. The trouble is, and I'll say more on this in a moment, with the increasing success of sf in the market-place the temptations laid before writers are the greater. At one time the hidden strength of sf as a genre was that although it was sold in the same way as the other categories, like Westerns, etc., it actually consisted of a large number of autonomous novels ... just like general literature. An autonomous novel is one that stands alone. It explains itself, it does not require the reader to know something about it in advance, it contains its own self-explanatory universe.

Today, it seems that more and more so-called sf novels are going the way of the down-market bestseller, and are parts of a larger whole. We see an increasing dependence on sf jargon. We get film-scripts turned into a bastard form called a novelization. (I once saw an Ace book which was a "novelization" of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, as if H.G. Wells's novel had died of old age or something.) We get sequels and series and trilogies and future histories. We're getting novelettes published in book form and padded out with cartoon illustrations. We're getting comic-book versions of stories and novels. We even got a comic-book version of *Battlestar Galactica*, as if something you can't watch has to be turned into something you can't read. The trend is towards pre-digested pabulum, baby-food for the mind. The Dark Ages are almost upon us.

All the ills of science fiction are caused by two distinct things, of which by far the more disagreeable is the pulp-tradition, an article of faith held high and holy by virtually every science fiction writer or commentator you come

across.

The fallacies of the pulp-tradition are so obvious that I'm genuinely surprised that they survive. The tradition goes like this: Science fiction was invented in 1926 with the inception of *Amazing Stories*, and after a few ropy years' it started getting better, and then we had the Golden Age, and since then everything's been just mind-bogglingly good. Thus we progress from Bob Shaw's favourite writer, Captain S.P. Meek, to my favourite writer, Larry Niven.

Important figures in the pulp-tradition are Hugo Gernsback, who started it all, and John W. Campbell, who improved sf standards no end. In my view, Hugo Gernsback was a menace, and John W. Campbell is utterly irrelevant.

The advocates of the pulp-tradition simply cannot see beyond the ends of their noses. Science fiction has existed in British and European literature for about a hundred years. It existed as a natural part of all literature. Writers outside the science fiction category, both major and minor, have turned to the speculative themes of sf as a means of saying something. They did this before Gernsback came along, they did it all through Campbell's so-called Golden Age, and they continue to do it now. After fifty years, pulp science fiction has improved itself to the point where the half-dozen or so best sf writers can compete with writers outside. This is my principal indictment of the pulp-tradition: it put the clock back and created something worse. Gernsback and his imitators siphoned off speculative literature into crass, commercial magazines, and made it into trash. After fifty years, we're just recovering. The ignorance of pundits like Loser del Ray-Gun is the ignorance of the pulp-tradition itself. Ray-Gun would say that Larry Niven is a better writer than Captain S.P. Meek, but I would counter that by saying: "Is Captain S.P. Meek therefore better than H.G. Wells?" ... or indeed, "Is Larry Niven better than H.G. Wells?"

You could argue that all of us here today, including myself, are indirect products of the pulp-tradition. This I do not and cannot deny. All this is made possible by Hugo Gernsback, etc etc. But think of it this way. The science fiction world today is like a colony. It is as if a number of people from, say, Britain were transported fifty years ago to a penal colony on Corsica. After half a century, the population has increased immeasurably, they have a few traditions and folk-heroes, and they think of themselves as Corsicans. The regime that put them there has long gone. What I'm saying is: "Hey, we're British really. Let's go home to Birmingham."

Obviously, a few people will choose to remain in Corsica, but perhaps the rest will leave. You can take it, therefore, that I'm all in favour of so-called science fiction rejoining the so-called mainstream. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner it happens the better.

The other besetting ill of science fiction is, paradoxically, its present success. If you doubt this success, all you have to do is walk around the book-room here and see the truly staggering amount of stuff that is being published. Or you could go to the movies and see one of the two or three biggest box-office successes in the history of the cinema. You could read *Locus*, and see the sort of money that some sf writers make these days (but not all). Science fiction imagery is being used to sell everything from hi-fi equipment to instant mashed potato. To quote at least two hundred of the pulp-tradition believers: "We must be doing something right."

I often wonder if we are. As far as I can see, the present boom in science fiction is an artificial one. It is principally a publishing boom. Although there undoubtedly more people reading sf these days, and there are certainly more people writing it, the bulge is in the middle, where the publishers are. Too much stuff is coming out, and it's coming out faster than it could conceivably be written, or even read. Just take Britain, for example, where the activity is considerably lower than it is in the States, or even in France or Japan. Here we have twelve paperback publishers with science fiction lists. If each publisher brings out only one book per month (and in fact they bring out rather more), then in any one year we would have 144 new titles on the shelves. How many people can or want to read nearly three novels a week? And can you remember any year when there were more than about half a dozen new sf titles worth reading?

In practice, of course, most of the new books that come out aren't new at all. A very large proportion of all apparently new books are reprints or reissues. Much of the remainder is taken up with the stuff I talked about earlier: the film tie-ins, the series, the sequels. Only a very small proportion, about ten per cent, is new work, autonomously conceived, available for the first time. So the excess fat in the publishing boom does not necessarily reflect an equivalent boom in creative work.

You could say that a large market makes room for everyone, for a variety of tastes. Readers can select from a wide range of material. A lot of stuff is coming back into print, and some of it deservedly. And even if a hundred bad novels are published in a year, surely all of them are vindicated

by the hundred-and-first, which might be the new *Left Hand of Darkness*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Dune*?

I don't argue against this. What I see is the danger of over-extension, of science fiction growing so fat that it collapses in a heap of blubber. We can take a lesson, in miniature, from the recent past.

A few years ago I read a letter published in the *SFWA Bulletin* that contained the following sentence: "I am now the largest market in the world for sf short stories." The writer of the letter was Roger Elwood, announcing the fact that he was signing up more than thirty new anthologies with publishers, and that he was looking for short stories to fill them. It was not long before this first batch of anthologies had grown to a number that some estimates put at more than eighty. What Mr Elwood did was to boldly go where no sf had gone before ... in other words, to many publishers who had never done any sf. A majority of sf writers proclaimed that this was nothing but for the good, because it meant a larger market. Then many writers, possibly the same ones, rushed in to fill these new markets. The consequences of all this are well known. It was an artificially expanded market. Any publisher who brought out an Elwood anthology was competing with 79 or more similar books, and each Elwood anthology had the distinct disadvantage of being distinctively mediocre. Many of them sold as well as bacon sandwiches in Tel Aviv. Not only did the Elwood anthologies put themselves out of the market, but in the process practically annihilated what existing market there was for anyone else's anthology. Nowadays, it is a publishing truism that science fiction anthologies do not sell. The market for short stories is now somewhat smaller than it was a few years ago, because people were greedy.

I got a tell-tale warning pain in my elbow when I heard about Mr Elwood's anthologies, and I feel it throbbing again whenever I hear complacent noises about the present boom. The lesson from Roger Elwood is that an expansion of the commercial market will be short-lived, and that it doesn't create a parallel boom in creativity. Indeed, the signs are that the market is full of padding these days. On the other hand, good writing and honest, ambitious work *will* create its own market, *will* bring about a natural expansion of the market.

Anyway, having had my grumbles, I should like to finish on a positive note. It is a great pleasure to be made the guest of honour at a convention, if only because it gives me the unique opportunity to speak candidly and

subjectively about my own outlook. This is what you have been hearing, and I'm not speaking for anyone except myself. You should always remember that criticism is a form of autobiography ... I'm not trying to separate myself from the things I have been describing. I am in, and of, the science fiction world.

I'd like to close, therefore, with what I suppose will be seen as a personal statement. Much of what I have said will sound as if I am intending to turn my back on sf in the future, and I'd like to correct this view. I see absolutely nothing wrong with science fiction as literature. The novel I'm writing at the moment is what we would all recognize as sf ... the two or three ideas I have for the novels that will follow are all sf. I'd go so far as to say that the science fiction type of novel, the speculative novel has more life in it, more potential, than most of the other forms of novel I have read in the last few years.

The only thing wrong with science fiction is the "science fiction" label, and all the misbegotten attitudes that have arisen around it. We are all aware of the close-minded attitudes from people outside the sf world who have not read the stuff ... we know that their dislike of science fiction is based on ignorance and prejudice. My point is that there are similar attitudes within the field, just as ignorant, just as prejudiced, yet they are mostly invisible to us because they appear to be on our side. These internal ignorant attitudes will eventually destroy the freedoms of creative writers, unless they are exposed for what they are.

Science fiction writers are blessed with many valuable things. They have an active, intelligent and open-minded readership. They have a successful commercial framework within which to work. The "science fiction" label conceals a multitude of sins, but it also provides a liberal framework within which to write. New writers are still being actively encouraged. There is room for the experimental story, for the avant-garde, for the work you can't easily pin a label on. All this is valuable, and, as far as I know, unique in modern publishing. I say to the remarkable men and women who are my colleagues: write up to the level of your audience. Make life difficult for them. Give them autonomous, demanding novels. Stimulate them and entertain them. Don't listen to the Loser del Ray-Guns of the world, don't settle for the imaginatively second-hand, for the easy sequel to your first success. You're not writing for beer-money, you're writing for minds. Put your language first; language is the test of reality, the medium of ideas.

Thank you.



The Well-Tempered Plot Device

Nick Lowe

Perhaps once in a generation, the science of criticism is shaken by a conceptual breakthrough so revolutionary that the literary establishment can only dismiss it as deluded quackery. Such a breakthrough is described in these pages. If I draw comparisons with Darwin, Einstein, Lysenko, the sceptical reader may smile. Yet they laughed at Leavis; they creased themselves pink at Edmund Wilson; they barfed up gobs of lung tissue at Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. To all such shallow-minded so-called "scientists" I say: go ahead and hoot! The High Speed Train of progress makes no unscheduled stops to pick up late travellers, nor can it be tilted in its tracks.

The failure of the old paradigm is simple. There's a curious bias in the vernacular of critical discussion towards the qualities that make a book *good*. Most of the language traditionally used to describe a book's achievement has to do with its positive qualities: the plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. Moreover, it's a bias that carries over into all those gruesome handbooks on How To Write Totally Brilliant Novels and Win Big Cash Literary Prizes. The reason nobody's yet become a big time novelist by reading up on Diane Doubtfire is just that all the advice in such booklets is directed towards getting you to write a book full of plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. In short, a *good* book.

Now, it strikes me that this is completely misconceived. You've only got to look around you to realize that most books that get published are NOT good. This simple point makes a nonsense of conventional criticism, which lacks any sort of vocabulary to discuss badness in any meaningful way. And yet badness is the dominant quality of contemporary literature, and certainly of SF. All orthodox criticism can say of a truly awful book is that the characterization is terrible, or the use of the English language makes your bowels move of themselves. It fails completely to grasp that bad writing is governed by subtle rules and conventions of its own, every bit as difficult to learn and taxing to apply as those that shape good writing. But do you ever find workshops offering instruction in how to write the sort of really

atrocious garbage that leers at you from every railway bookstall?

Already you can begin to understand why my theories are scoffed at by the neanderthal proponents of orthodox so-called “criticism”. History will judge who has the final chuckle. In the following pages I will reveal:

- a whole new language of criticism
- the secret of success in science fiction writing
- and a revolutionary new technique of interpretation that will grant you instant and total understanding of *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, and many far less reputable works.

And while I’m about it I’ll propose a new definition of magic, account for the existence of Lionel Fanthorpe, and show you a way to derive pleasure from Stephen Donaldson books. (Needless to say, it doesn’t involve reading them. *But* neither does it involve burying them under six foot of badger manure and napalming the lot, which you might think the obvious answer.)

In principle, these secrets can be exploited by anyone; but you may be interested before we start in testing your native aptitude through a couple of simple and deceptively irrelevant exercises.

1. *Complete the Poem*. Leonard Nimoy, currently* directing his own resurrection in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, is the author of two books of poems rightly considered too hot for bookshops to handle. They’re distributed solely through Athena poster shops, in the same series of icky little volumes with tinted pages and silhouettes of weeds that has given the world the if anything even more deathless works of the legendary Susan Polis Schutz, the Colorado Sappho. (You must know the stuff: “Our relationship / is beautiful / because / it is ours / because / it relates / to us.”)

All you have to do is read through the following (genuine) sample poem, and then use your skill and judgement to supply the missing lines from the ones that follow. (These include about 80% of the text of Nimoy’s second book of poems, which by a novel inspiration consists almost entirely of excerpts from the first.) Then turn to [the end of the article](#) to find out how you scored. First, the specimen:

“Rocket ships / Are exciting / But so are roses / On a birthday

”Computers are exciting / But so is a sunset

“And logic / Will never replace / Love

“Sometimes I wonder / Where I belong / In the future / Or / In the

past

“I guess I’m just / An old-fashioned / Space-man.”

And now it’s over to you:

(i) I love you not for what I want you to be ... (2 points for the missing line.)

(ii) I loved you then for what you were ... (3 points.)

(iii) I miss you / And not only you ... (3 points.)

(iv) My love for you is not a gift to you ... (1 point.)

– and the hardest one: here you have two lines to guess of a three-line poem.

(v) I am me ... (2+4 points.)

2. *Clench Racing*. This is a social and competitive sport, that can be played over and over with renewed pleasure. Playing equipment currently on the market restricts the number of players to six, but the manufacturers may yet issue the series of proposed supplements to raise the maximum eventually to nine.

The rules are simple. Each player takes a different volume of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and at the word “go” all open their books at random and start leafing through, scanning the pages. The winner is the first player to find the word “clench”. It’s a fast, exciting game – sixty seconds is unusually drawn-out – and can be varied, if players get too good, with other favourite Donaldson words like wince, flinch, gag, rasp, exigency, mendacity, articulate, macerate, mien, limn, vertigo, cynosure.... It’s a great way to get thrown out of bookshops. Good racing!

Let me explain the tenuous relevance of these modest exercises to my main subject. Here we have two of the most accomplished of contemporary bad writers inadvertently showing off one of the most valued qualities in their art. I refer, of course, to *predictability*. Donaldson’s use of language is so repetitive and his characterization so limited to a few clumsy responses that he finds himself coming back again and again to the same beloved words, to the extent that you can predict their occurrence reliably enough to be able to leaf through and be sure of finding one almost immediately. Nimoy is even more adept in this esoteric art: his banal thought falls so naturally into clichés that you can predict whole lines at a time.

You think I'm jesting when I speak of an Art of the Predictable, but if you think about it it IS an art. The grammar of cliché is a language all of its own that's never had the study it deserves. How is it that we learn to spot the ending in advance? how do we *know* when a particular creaky old line is about to get trotted out? how do we come to anticipate the obvious platitudinous moral the story's setting up? In the same way as we learn a language, by exposure to so many examples of usage that our brains construct, unknown to our conscious minds, an internal grammar of how they're used in practice. After you've seen enough 50s SF films on the box, you come to *expect* the professor's Faustian dabblings to destroy him in the end, while the young journalist hero clasps the daughter as they gaze on the smouldering wreckage of the laboratory. ("Oh Rick, it's – horrible...." – "It's all right, Jean, it's over now. The nightmare is over forever.")

And this is what I mean when I say there are rules governing bad writing that you simply have to learn if you're to become a successful manufacturer of exploitation fiction. Perhaps I ought to clarify what I mean by that last category as applied to SF: I'm thinking principally of escapist adventure stories with no particular pretensions to engage the higher cortical functions and consisting chiefly of well-worn ideas and storytelling techniques recycled more or less formulaically. But in a way that's the least interesting quarter of the field under survey, because you'll find in practice that the techniques of shoddy fiction have permeated SF to such an extent that you can observe these same rules in operation even in some jolly good books, and many more with pretensions to being jolly good. I'll be drawing illustrations from all these categories, but obviously it's the last one that intrigues me most. Predictability, you see, even though we use the term disparagingly, has become in recent years a very bankable commodity in SF and fantasy publishing. The publishers know the public knows what it wants: it wants more of the same. Safe books. No surprises. Familiar surroundings from page one. And this means that even writers with considerable literary pretensions have had to learn the Art of the Predictable as part of the basic equipment of their trade. In Gene Wolfe, who is rather a subtle writer, this only results in the occasional irritating embarrassment; in Stephen Donaldson, who is about as subtle as a lead brick, it results in contemptible gaseous claptrap. Examples follow in due course.

Well, by this stage, you're probably bouncing up and down in your seat with barely-continent excitement, thinking, "Wow, am I really going to learn

to write like *Stephen Donaldson*?” I have to let you down as gently as I can and say no, it’s not quite as easy as that. You have to remember that Mr Donaldson’s spent years learning to produce a book so flatulent you have to be careful not to squeeze it in a public place. All I can do in the time available is to offer instruction on the first and most important element of crummy writing, which is (as my title suggests) bad plotting. I can’t promise that by the time you’ve read these pages you’ll have learned to write significantly more stereotyped characters, or that your style will have become significantly more leaden and cliched. But I do promise that you’ll be fully conversant with the many varieties of plot device, their use and function, and you’ll be able to recognize and admire their handling in the works of the masters: Lionel Fanthorpe, A.E. van Vogt, and the early sword-and-sorcery novels of Michael Moorcock, to name only some of the virtuosi of the plot device I haven’t space to mention in what follows.

I choose plotting as the focus of my discussion for two compelling reasons. One is that it’s been a persistently underrated art in all kinds of narrative all down the ages, and has rarely come in for any kind of analysis. I think the last person to say anything respectable about the art of plotting was Aristotle, who besides some famous remarks about beginning-middle-and-end laid down a few elementary precepts like events in the story having to follow in a relationship of internal logic, and having to appear to arise out of the interactions between characters rather than being obviously imposed from above by an author. Otherwise, nobody’s ever tried to explain how to plot tightly or elegantly, and the whole skill of it’s tended to be treated as a rather low form of creative activity, more appropriate to Feydeau farces and TV sitcoms than to high narrative art.

There’s a reason for this, I think. Up until very recently, really elaborate plotting has only been possible in comedy, where you don’t mind being reminded of the existence of an author by the absurd artificiality of the structure of events. Real life isn’t, on the whole, especially well plotted, and as soon as the good plotting in a story begins to get obtrusive we lose that essential impression of a purely internal logic governing the progress of events within the story. It’s only in the last few decades that serious fiction has begun to make serious reference to its own fictitiousness, which is how novels like *The Affirmation*, *Little Big*, or *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller* can come into being. Even so, you’ll find that most of the highly plotted, highly self-conscious novels within and without the genre tend to be funny –

as the various works of John Barth, William Gaddis, and John Sladek. It's significant that Sladek finds himself so attracted to the detective genre, about the only non-comic non-artsy-fartsy fictional tradition that still makes play with the reader's awareness of the plot as something basically artificial.

The other reason I've chosen plotting to talk about is that it's the ideal topic to illustrate my point about rules of bad writing; because, while it's comparatively difficult to formulate any very definite procedure for constructing a good plot, I hope to be able to show that there are all sorts of little rules you can follow to give you an easy, step-by-step recipe for a really creaky one.

This is the point to introduce you to the manual. In my experience, the book that has most to teach about the mistakes to avoid in good fantasy writing, and by that token the one that can tell you most about the rules of hacking, is itself a work of fiction. It's not one that's likely to be familiar to all, and I'd like to take this chance to bring it to notice; because while there may be other books I don't know about that could serve equally well, this is the one I've found to stand head and shoulders above all comparable handbooks of instruction.

It's Lin Carter's novel *The Black Star*. For all I know, every other Lin Carter book may be exactly the same. I don't know; this is the only one I've ever finished. But I've read it more times than I can say, because practically any point you could wish to make about techniques of hackwork can be illustrated from the pages of this remarkable novel, to which I'll be making quite a lot of reference in what follows. It's hard to give any idea of the flavour of this astonishing text from just a few short citations, but here by way of introduction are four passages about the same character from different parts of the book.

Niane fled down the jungle path on frantic, stumbling feet. Her gown was torn. Her slim white legs were scratched and bleeding. She panted for breath, young breasts heaving and straining against the fabric of her gown....

He hastened to untie the girl. She was in a sorry state; most of her clothing had been torn from her, although she did not seem to have suffered any injury save the insulting touch of cold, sly hands....

"Tush, girl!" the old fellow said, blushing a little at the warmth of her words and averting his keen old eyes reluctantly from the

generous glimpses of her maiden flesh rendered visible by the sorry condition of her gown....

In the crude intimacy of the cell they had shared, the temptation to touch her, to allow a comforting, soothing hand to venture an overt caress, to permit his eyes to taste the soft slenderness of her body so artlessly revealed through the sorry condition of her garments, had often been well nigh irresistible. Where another man would have yielded, perhaps reluctantly, to his need – which she as well felt – he but stiffened and grew colder, wrenching his thoughts aside from this insidious channel with distaste....

Unfortunately, I'm limited to discussing the plot. The storyline of *The Black Star* is simple enough – one might say, puerile. In the last age of fabled Atlantis, before the gods pulled the plug and sank beneath the waves that prehistoric continent that had linked Britain and the Falklands while the dagoes were still struggling with their Linguaphone courses in proto-Indo-European, Diodric the Warrior, Niane the Nymphet, and Nephog Thoon the Wizard with the Silliest Name in All Prehistory struggle against troglodytes, sorcerers, and militant anarchists to save the fabled jewel The Black Star from falling into the wrong hands, since the Gods seem to have a bit of a thing about it and will destroy civilization if it's lost. What relieves this at best "routine" (in the technical sense coined by the *SF Encyclopaedia*) story from total tedium is the fascinating use that Carter makes of plot devices in order to get the whole preposterous rattletrap of a story moving along its dried-up watercourse of a road.

Here I'd better pause and clarify what I mean by a plot device. In normal usage, when people talk of a plot device they mean something in the story that's just a little bit too obviously functional to be taken seriously. The most famous plot device in recent SF is the Babel fish, the joke about which is that it's such an obvious plot device that it implies the existence of an author. But the term is a flexible one, and I'm going to use a number of more specialized terms for some of the more specialized varieties of device. The Babel fish is an instance of the plot device at its simplest: a little bit of technology or whatever introduced into the story's world for the sole point of overcoming a little technical difficulty like the fact the characters can't speak to one another. All these FTL drives, instant translators, oxygen pills, and so forth: contrivances so basic to getting interplanetary stories off the ground that we

no longer really worry about their implausibility.

This is a fairly innocuous kind of plot device, often quite institutionalized, and nothing you could fairly call a sophisticated hacking technique. For that, you have to move a level up....

“No time for words now, girl. I am sped, but ere I go down to the Kingdom of Darkness I must pass a terrible burden into your hands: alas, that it be so, but thus it must be, for I am near the end of my strength and there is none other here to take up That which I may no longer shield,” he panted, and she wondered at his strange, portentous words....

(And this goes on for a page or so, then:)

He plucked Something from the bosom of his robes and thrust it under her eyes. At the sight of the Thing which he held she voiced a small cry and would have recoiled in holy awe, save that his other hand grasped her wrist again, and dragged her near. “Girl! You know the meaning of this Thing? I read it within thine eyes.... Then take It, child.”

Well, of course, the Thing in question is the legendary Black Star, as we learn a hundred pages later: “While this Thing rested in the possession of the Divine Dynasty” (ie. the good guys) “the favour of the Gods shone upon Atlantis. No Emperor could hold the throne unless he also held the Black Star....” which means that the wicked Trotskyite rebels that have temporarily overrun the kingdom will be overcome so long as the goodies retain the Black Star. Notice that the only causal connection between possession of the Black Star and victory is that enforced by “the Gods”, for whom of course read “the author”, and you perhaps begin to see why I like to term this kind of thing *Collect-the-Coupons* plotting. It would be much too complicated to have three goodies overcome the whole usurping army, or at any rate it would be far beyond the plotting powers of a Lin Carter. So what you do instead is write into the scenario one or more *Plot Coupons* which happen to be “supernaturally” linked to the outcome of the larger action; and then all your characters have to do is save up the tokens till it’s time to cash them in.

Obviously, this is an artifice which lends itself particularly well to fantasy writing, and is capable of widely varying subtlety of application. I think *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Lord of the Plot Coupons*, is the chief villain

here, unless you want to trace it back to Wagner and his traditional sources. Tolkien, on the whole, gets away with the trick by minimizing the arbitrariness of the ring's plot-power and putting more stress than his imitators on the way the ring's power moulds the character of its wielder and vice-versa. But even so it's a pretty creaky apparatus, and one whose influence has been wholly disastrous. It's so *easy*, they all cry; you save so much energy by just smuggling a few choice plot coupons up and down the map.

Probably the most distinguished practitioner of collect-the-coupons plotting is Susan Cooper in those awful *The Dark Is Rising* books, in the course of which the hapless goodies have to run down no fewer than nine different plot tokens before they can send off to the author for the ending. I quote from the end of volume two: "Each of the Things of Power was made at a different point in Time by a different craftsman of the Light" (odd how these discussions of the plot always seem to be signalled by bursts of capitalization), "to await the day when it would be needed. There is a golden chalice, called a grail; there is the Circle of Signs" (of which there are six separate components – very busy book, that one); "there is a sword of crystal, and a harp of gold. The grail, like the Signs, is safely found. The other two we must yet achieve, other quests for other times." (Read: two more sequels.) "But once we have added to these, then when the Dark comes rising for its final and most dreadful onslaught, we shall have hope and assurance that we can overcome."

We'll come back to Susan Cooper later on. A collect-the-coupons plotter who runs her close, though, is the inimitable Stephen Donaldson. He tends to pad more than Ms Cooper, so it takes rather more pages to collect each token; but I should think by volume nine of the trilogy he may well outstrip her for sheer multitude of the wretched things. Here's the crucial passage of insight and revelation from *The Wounded Land*, in which Thomas Covenant in a flash of wisdom perceives the whole point of volumes four to six. I've changed just one word throughout; see if you can spot what it is.

Covenant saw. The Staff of Plot. Destroyed. For the Staff of Plot had been formed by Berek Halfhand as a tool to serve and uphold the Plot. He had fashioned the Staff from a limb of the One Tree as a way to wield Earthpower in defence of the health of the Land, in support of the natural order of life. And because Earthpower was the strength of mystery and spirit, the Staff became the thing it

served. It was the Plot; the Plot was incarnate in the Staff. The tool and its purpose were one. And the Staff had been destroyed. That loss had weakened the very fibre of the Plot. A crucial support was withdrawn, and the Plot faltered.

Of course, the word “Plot” in all this replaces Donaldson’s “Law” (with one of those significant initial capitals), and of course all Covenant has to do now, in a Lensmanesque escalation of the same basic routine he went through in previous volumes, is go chugging off to cut himself a new Staff of Plot from the jolly old One Tree. I don’t know how he does; four volumes was quite enough, though I hear there’s an amazingly silly bit with limpet mines in the fifth. Another fantasy first.

At any rate, there’s another variety of ingenious plot device that’s closely related to collecting the coupons, and that’s *Saving the Vouchers*. As the name suggests, it’s an activity that can amount to the same thing if your plot tokens happen to have an effective power of their own. A Plot Voucher is one of those useful items that is presented to the hero at the start of his adventure with a purpose totally unspecified, that turns out at an arbitrary point later in the story to be exactly what’s needed to get him out of a sticky and otherwise unresolvable situation. (“This voucher valid for one [1] awkward scrape. Not transferable.” Young Dirk stared at the object in bewilderment. “But what does it *do*?”, he asked, putting it reluctantly away in his pouch. “Ah,” said the old sage, “I am not at liberty to tell you that. But when the time comes, you will know its purpose.”) There’s a glorious chapter in *The Wounded Land* again where Thomas Covenant is visited by a rapid succession of ghostly characters from previous volumes “to give you gifts, as the law permits”. Some of the gifts are a bit of a cheat, as they consist only in explaining bits of the story that don’t make an awful lot of sense. But there are two authentic plot vouchers thrown in. “When the time comes,” says one character, “you will find the means to unlock my gift.” “He may be commanded once,” says another of the handy sidekick with whom he saddles the hapless Covenant. “Once only, but I pray it may suffice. When your need is upon you, and there is no other help.” Ho-hum. In the event, of course, the ink is scarcely dry on the page before Donaldson decides Covenant’s need is upon him and there is no other help. He also turns out to take a decidedly flexible interpretation of this once-and-once-only clause.

I do recommend the use of plot vouchers to your attention if you’re at all interested in writing multi-volume epics of quest and adventure, because

they're terrifically easy to use and the readers never complain. You can issue your hero with a handy talisman of unspecified powers at the beginning of volume one, and have him conveniently remember it at various points over the succeeding volumes when he finds himself surrounded by slavering troglodytes or whatever, with no obligation to explain it until the series proves unsuccessful enough to require winding up and the loose ends tying. Lest anyone begin to suspect a veiled allusion to certain 1982 Nebula-winning novels, I'd better rip away the veil and confirm their suspicions; because if the Claw of the Conciliator is anything more than a general-purpose plot voucher I'm bugged if I can see what. I confess I haven't got on to the *Citadel* yet*, but can it really explain this kind of thing?

My lungs were bursting; I lifted my face to the surface, and they were upon me. No doubt there comes a time for every man when by rights he should die. This, I have always felt, was mine. I have counted all the life I have held since as pure profit, an undeserved gift. I had no weapon, and my right arm was numbed and torn. The man-apes were bold now. That boldness gave me a moment more of life, for so many crowded forward to kill me that they obstructed one another. I kicked one in the face. A second grasped my boot; there was a flash of light, and I (moved by what instinct of inspiration I do not know) snatched at it. I held the Claw.

And then the Claw bathes the scene in its wondrous radiance and Severian slips away while the beasties are held rapt. What a let-down, eh?

Even so, there are looser and lazier plot devices even than the voucher system. Don't forget that if you're absolutely stuck for anything for your characters to do, you can always issue them with little plot algorithms prescribing a sequence of more or less pointless tasks that they have to fulfil in order to achieve their end. Again, this is particularly easy to do in fantasy: an ancient prophecy, more often than not couched in mock-archaic verse, is quite sufficient. Susan Cooper is good at this; she's got a little rhyme to summarize the whole series in twelve lines, a shopping-list of plot tokens that encapsulates in a mnemonic nutshell the entire plot of the story, such as it is.

But perhaps the supreme manifestation of the plot deviser's art, and the point where hackwork shades over into genius by virtue of the sheer inspired brilliance with which the unwritten rules of short-cut plot creation are exploited, is what I call the *Universal Plot Generator*. A Plot Generator is a

device written into your scenario that will create further stories as often as required, while laying no restrictions whatever on the kind of story produced.

What I think have to be the two most brilliantly conceived specimens of this rarest and most sophisticated of all plot devices came up in the DC comics of my childhood. I don't think this is any accident. The comics have always been a kind of elephant's graveyard of antiquated plot devices, because they've always existed under the three ideal conditions for the genesis of bad plotlines: serial format with regular publishing schedules, an audience of adolescent Americans (arguably the lowest form of intelligence in the galaxy), and truly terrible writers. DC Comics in the middle sixties were a particularly golden age in this respect, because while other comics publishers like Marvel and Warren were making tentative sallies into character drama and the adult market, DC were still resolutely plumbing away in search of the lowest common denominator of all narrative art, under such marvellous hacks as the legendary Gardner F. Fox (whose novel *Kothar – Barbarian Swordsman* ranks among the classics of contemporary prose sculpture).

Anyway, the first of DC's great plot generators is almost too famous to warrant discussion, except that the sheer artistry of the concept is rarely appreciated in full. I'd like you to think for a moment about *red kryptonite*. There was a time when the hues and varieties of kryptonite were being boosted daily by new kryptonological discoveries, but I think green and red were the only ones that really lasted the course. The effects of red kryptonite, you remember, were as follows. Each individual chunk would affect Superman, but no-one else, with a completely unpredictable effect that would last exactly forty-eight hours. He would then revert to normal and that particular chunk of red K could never affect him again. The brilliance of this only becomes fully apparent when you translate it all into plot terms; because forty-eight hours happens to be the average timespan of a story in a DC comic. What red kryptonite amounts to is a random element in your scenario that can be brought on at any time and introduce any daft plot idea the writer happens to have kicking about; and at the end of the story it will disappear from the continuity as if it had never been. It's hardly any wonder that the series, at its peak, got through chunks of red kryptonite so frequently that someone calculated that, for that amount of planetary debris to arrive on Earth by chance alone, the original planet Krypton must have been about the size of a galactic supercluster.

There was only ever one plot generator among the many in DC's repertoire that ran red K close for sheer elegance (though others like *Dial H for Hero* proved more durable), and that's the little-remembered Idol-Head of Diabolu. The Idol-Head appeared for a couple of years as the continuity in the Martian Manhunter stories, and the way it worked was this. The Idol-Head of Diabolu was an ancient bust created by an evil sorcerer way back in the mists of flashback, and I think it got unearthed by an unfortunate archaeologist or something. Thereafter, it would drift around from owner to owner or float around in the ocean and get washed up from time to time (which was odd, since the Head was carved from stone); and every full moon the top of the head would flip open like a Terry Gilliam cartoon and a new evil would be loosed on the world. Invariably these magical banes would find themselves being tackled by the Martian Manhunter, till eventually he managed to run the Idol-Head to ground and destroy it. What I so admire about this invention is that "every full moon" corresponds almost exactly to *the publishing schedule of a monthly comic book*; so that you had, written into the set-up, a device that would generate a guaranteed new villain or disaster every issue while leaving the scripter total freedom to fill in the details.

Sometimes, however, even the Universal Plot Generator breaks down. You may find, in the course of hacking forth your masterpiece from the living pulp, that none of the plot devices hitherto catalogued, none of these little enemas to the Muse, will keep the story flowing; that you can think of no earthly reason why the characters should have to go through with this absurd sequence of actions save that you want them to, and no earthly reason why they should succeed save that it's in the plot. Despair not. If you follow the handbook, you'll find there's a plot device even for this – when the author has no choice but to intervene in person.

Obviously, this requires a disguise, unless you're terribly postmodernist. The disguise favoured by most writers, not unnaturally, tends to be God, since you get the omnipotence while reserving the right to move in mysterious ways and to remain invisible to mortal eyes. There aren't all that many *deus ex machina* scenes where the Deity actually rolls up in person to explain the plot to the bewildered characters, though Stephen Donaldson permits an extended interview at the end of *The Power That Preserves*. What tends to happen instead is the kind of coy allusiveness coupled with total transparency of motive you meet, for example, in *The Black Star*, where our

heroes most improbably find a light aircraft in which to escape the overrun city:

It was by the most incredible stroke of fortune that Diodric and the Lady Niane should have stumbled upon so rare and priceless a memento of the eons. Or perhaps it was not Blind Fortune, but the inscrutable Will of the Gods.

One thinks irresistibly of Gandalf's famous words to Frodo when explaining the logic of *The Lord of the Plot Devices*: "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker." Frodo, unfortunately, fails to respond with the obvious question, to which the answer is "by the author".

But actually, it's not always necessary for the author to put in an appearance himself, if only he can smuggle the Plot itself into the story disguised as one of the characters. Naturally, it tends not to look like most of the other characters, chiefly on account of its omnipresence and lack of physical body. It'll call itself something like the Visualization of the Cosmic All, or Seldon's Plan, or *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, or the Law, or the Light, or the Will of the Gods; or, in perhaps its most famous avatar, the Force. Credit for this justly celebrated interpretation of *Star Wars* belongs to Phil Palmer; I'd only like to point out the way it makes sudden and perfect sense of everything that happens in the film. "The time has come, young man, for you to learn about the Plot." "Darth Vader is a servant of the dark side of the Plot." When Ben Kenobi gets written out, he becomes one with the Plot and can speak inside the hero's head. When a whole planet of good guys gets blown up, Ben senses "a great disturbance in the Plot."

If this is beginning to sound like a silly little verbal game, think again. The reason you can play this sort of game in the first place is that the Force is one of those arbitrary, general-purpose, all-powerful plot devices that can be invoked whenever convenient to effect whatever happens to be necessary at the time. The only ends it serves within the logic of the story are those of the storyteller. And the reason you can decode so much of SF in this kind of way is that SF is absolutely addicted to crappiness; and while science fiction may not offer any more opportunities than any other kind of fiction for crappy character-drawing or crappy prose, the scope for crappy plotting is virtually limitless.

For instance, Lionel Fanthorpe could never have existed in any genre

but SF. Everyone knows, I imagine, the story of the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray, perhaps the most outrageous *deus ex machina* ending in all literature. There the heroes were, stranded deep in an enemy sector of space, surrounded by an entire enemy fleet with the guns trained on them, when the maestro realized all of a sudden he had only one page left to finish the book. Quick as a flash, the captain barks out: “It’s no use, men. We’ll have to use the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray.” “Not – not the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray!” So they open up this cupboard, and there’s this weapon that just blasts the entire fleet into interstellar dust. One almighty *zap* and the thousand remaining loose ends are quietly incinerated. Where, but in SF, could you do that?

So this is your challenge. I hope that in revealing to you, for the first time in cosmic history, these precious secrets of how to tune and play your very own plot devices, I’ve given you some idea of the opportunities that exist for the talentless hack to abuse, short-change and exploit the mindless masses who put up with this garbage. Armed with this knowledge, you are now equipped to go out into the world and create science fiction stories worse than any that have gone before them. The earth will tremble; railway bookstalls will burst with the fruits of your typewriters; small-time hacks like the vermin who write for *Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine* will be swept away by the new torrent of drivel! From this moment on, the universe is yours. The only thing that could possibly stand in your way would be a united resistance from those contemptible snot-gobbed arthropods the readers themselves, crying out against cheapskate exploitation fiction and demanding stories that can hold the road without the author stepping in every five pages to crank the bloody things up. Small chance of that, eh?

I leave the future of SF in your hands. May the Plot be with you.

Answers to *Complete the Poem* quiz:

- (i) ... but for what you are.
- (ii) ... I love you now for what you have become.
- (iii) ... I miss what I am when you are here.
- (iv) ... it is a gift to me.
- (v) ... You are you. / Our love is us.

Rate Your Score ... 13-15 Excellent. The nation’s greetings cards

manufacturers need you. 9-12 Not bad, but damaging traces of poetic sensibility probably bar you from the big time. Try ghosting for Patience Strong. 5-8 Could do well in vanity publishing. Don't despair. 1-4 Alas! better stay dead.

* **All-Purpose Editorial Footnote:** This piece started as a talk (Fencon, 1982) in rather different format – eg. Clench-Racing was demonstrated in real time. Aeons later, Nick recast it as above for *Drilkjis*, and galactic cycles after that it became apparent that *Drilkjis 7* would not appear. My asterisks are to remind you of time's winged chariot, and that, for example, *Asimov's* is very much improved under Gardner Dozois. [DRL: 1986]

The Timeless Letter Column

Selected from twenty years of unlikely correspondence.

Harry Harrison provided an appreciation of a fellow-author:

What can one possibly say about Robert Sheckley? A lot if one believes the mewling cries of 17 ex-wives and the groans of investors who lost their all in AAA Ace Interstellar Investments. But investors – financial or marital – take their chances in the marketplace of life, so who is to blame this handsome, cold-eyed, scathingly witty genius of the pen? Not I, for who can blame a writer who still uses a pen in these days – not to mention a high stool, plastic shirtcuffs and a green eyeshade. If Sheckley seems a bit old-fashioned for an sf writer he is not to blame, for he has one of the finest minds of the thirteenth century. Yes, that is his secret. Longevity. Born in 1427, he has been writing ever since. It is not his fault that he could not sell until the middle of the twentieth century. Blame the foolish editors. But now the world and the future are his! Watch the words spluttering from his facile pen, as many as one or two a minute. Watch the books roll out – often one a century! Oh what joys the readers of 2178 have in store! As one who is old enough to be his father (I have my secrets too) I ask all at the Eastercon to hail this genius of a writer ...

(Skycon Programme Book, 1978)

Margaret Hall envied my scanty qualifications ...

You physicists have a tremendous advantage in writing sf. Geology is the only science I've studied to any depth (sorry), but it doesn't really lend itself ... Take plate tectonics:

“Mr President, sir, I have some terrible news.” The general could not hide the trembling of his hands. “Our allies are withdrawing from us. Europe is retreating.” “What!?” The President leapt to his feet, reaching for The Button. “Leaving us to stand alone against the commie menace! Nuke the treacherous bastards!” “– And there's worse, Mr President. The Russians are approaching – we're on a collision course. It's plate tectonics, sir.” “Why wasn't I told of this new secret weapon before? How long has this been going on?” “Millions of years, Mr President...”

(Twll-Ddu 20, 1980)

The Reverend P.H. Francis wouldn't let me buy his book about another challenging scientific idea ...

I do not have a copy of *The Temperate Sun*, having given all copies away. I have printed several books on the subject; but they are all in mathematical language. I can confidently state, as a result of my studies, that the sun does not send quantities of heat to the earth, after the manner of a bonfire. In fact no heat or energy leaves the sun or is received by the earth, from the sun. The sun, of course, *causes* heat to be generated on the earth. The earth's own supplies of heat or energy are used over and over again, and no loss of the earth's heat or energy occurs. This is much the same as with the earth's supplies of water. They change forms but their amount never varies ... I regret not having a copy of *The Temperate Sun*.

(Ansible 14, December 1980)

Another of the Rev. Francis's pioneering works was reverently shown me by Chris Priest: a book that expounds a new geometrical figure, unknown to small-minded Plato and Pythagoras. It is called the Balbis. It has astonishing uses, surprising powers, cosmic implications. It consists of a rectangle with one of the short sides removed ...

Deborah Hickenlooper Rohan couldn't resist sharing a story she'd just come across ...

I may have found a vocation for my old age: "Early in the 19th C, ... the ghost was first seen by a discharged soldier on tramp, a wild man who had broken every commandment and whose conscience was overloaded with crimes.... One night, unable to find a sleeping place in the workhouse, he made up a bed for himself in a corner of one of the wards. He was discovered in the morning a changed man. He ... described the apparition in tones of terror. A thing had descended the stairs at night on three hoofish legs and with a voice like that of a roaring jackass bellowed through a grating where he was sleeping. It was a dreadful nightmare which came night after night. Watch was kept, and one night an old woman who walked with a stick was caught roaring and braying through the grating. Asked to explain herself, she said that this was her way of converting the tramp to a Christian way of life." (E. Maple: *The Realm of Ghosts*)

(Drilkjis 5, 1980)

Bob Shaw came to the rescue when suggestions for a hoax revenge on evil Charles Platt were requested by Chris Priest:

Dear Mr Langford: I have been writing to fan editors for many years, but this is the first time I have ever read a fanzine....

To aid Chris Priest in his search for the perfect practical joke, I'd like to describe one I invented many years ago while living in Canada. There was an unpopular character in our office who had this habit of logging his car mileage each time he bought petrol, and of working out to three decimal places how many miles he was getting to the gallon. Apparently he used the information to diagnose all kinds of things about the car, and it was vitally important to him – so I decided to balls up his system. A common, uninspired practical joker might have siphoned off some petrol from his tank, but I got a better idea. I brought three or four others in on the thing, and every other day we had a whip-round and bought a gallon of petrol (it was ridiculously cheap out there at the time) and surreptitiously poured it into his tank. There is no way to describe the confusion, bafflement and doubting of reality that this bloke went through as it gradually dawned on him that his car was using *no petrol at all!* I can still see him repeatedly going over the entries in his log-book, and struggling to comprehend what was going on, and never coming near the truth because – after all – no practical joker is going to do his victim a good turn by providing him with free petrol.

I submit that this is close to the perfect practical joke because it was so funny for the perpetrators to watch and yet it did not harm the victim in any material way.

(*Ansible* 6, February 1980)

Terry Carr was suspicious about British fan hospitality to the 1983 TAFF delegate, Avedon Carol ...

I wonder if Avedon proved to be as wonderful as you expected. So far I have only her report-in-part on her trip, which seems to make it clear that *she* at least had a fine time; but I know you Brits, your politeness and all, especially to TAFF delegates, and I have to wonder: Sure, I know you threw up on her shoes and called her “chick”, friendly as you are, but what else? Did you show her the Tower of London where uppity females were incarcerated before you cut off their heads? Did you induce her to eat fish-and-fries, that Brit dish that makes McDonalds burgers taste like manna? Did you introduce her to a modern incarnation of Richard III without having Josephine Tey to stand by and explain that everything he did to her served a greater purpose? I bet you didn't; and I further bet that Avedon will be too polite to mention it in her TAFF report....

(*Ansible* 33, June 1983)

Greg Benford explained that mere Brits would miss all the subtleties of his new book *Against Infinity* ...

I suspect that the entire subtext (as we intellectuals say) of reference to US lit traditions, the whole theme of southern concerns etc – all will be lost on UK audience. In latest *Locus* I noticed Chinese rug dealer reviewer was totally “bewildered” by last third of book, even after Charlie the B relayed word to him that reading some Faulkner might be helpful. On the other hand we must remember that sf is a northern intell-lecsul imperialism phenomenon anyway.

(*Ansible* 33, June 1983)

Malcolm Edwards of *Gollancz* was swift to reply:

Speaking as the editor who bought *Against Infinity* over here I confess myself wholly baffled by Greg Benford’s letter. Influence of Faulkner? Must go back and read *Moonfleet* again....

(*Ansible* 34, July 1983)

Neil Gaiman was still doing mere journalism in 1985....

Frank Herbert turned up for a brief press conference on the *Dune* debacle – er, film – a few weeks ago. There were only two people there who had actually read anything he’d written – myself, and a bald journalist in a shabby mac (yes, I know that describes most of them) who tended to ask magnificent questions like “I read *Dune* the first time it came out and the thing that struck me then as indeed it seems to have struck most of the reading populace is that it’s a great story, a wonderful story, I thought the way it unfolded, the way it was sustained, there was so much imagination involved in it. Later on as the years went on, I suppose people have read things into it, I suppose the same thing happened with *Lord of the Rings* and lots of other things. The whole SF genre in general ... I’m sorry I shall get to the question ... is entertainment still your first priority, Mr Herbert?”

Herbert: I’d feel a helluva lot more comfortable if you’d call me Frank, guys.

Bald Journalist In Mac who Woffled: Er, thank you, er, Frank ...

Herbert: Yes it is. Next question?

... etc, etc. Mainly he said what a nice, good, great, magnificent, marvellous, fab, cool, groovy, hip, zowie-gosh film *Dune* was. He also answered questions like, “As a science fiction writer, people will of course

assume you are a weirdo who believes in UFOs?”

Herbert: Well, I do believe in UFOs – unidentified flying objects. Please don't hear that as anything else.

Reporter: No, no, of course, understood, yes. Do you get a lot of people giggling at you because of your beliefs, being seen as a crank etc? [Visions of I HAVE SEEN THE SAUCER PEOPLE SAYS DUNE MAN headlines leaping about him.]

Herbert: I don't think you entirely understood me ...

It might have been a livelier time if *Anybody* there had seen the film ...

(*Ansible* 41, December 1984)

Teresa Nielsen Hayden offered more publishing gossip:

A splendidly wretched story is going the rounds regarding doings at Pocket Books. They recently brought out yet another Star Trek novel, called *Killing Time* (seems to be an unlucky title), by Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath. The original MS had K/S overtones: you know, amateur-written ST universe spinoff stories, some book-length, ranging from suggestive-but-mushy romances (that run heavily to Liebestod endings) to hardcore porn, all featuring a homosexual relationship between Kirk & Spock. Bizarre stuff, but it has a fair-sized, intensely loyal, rather secretive, and overwhelmingly female following. Anyway – Paramount Studios *loathes* K/S, and when the MS was sent for approval someone there marked all those passages for deletion. Time passes; Pocket prints 250K copies and ships out some 100-150K of them. *Killing Time's* been on the stands for a while now, and even though Pocket is pulling every copy it can lay hands on, and shredding the copies in their warehouse, it's much too late to get them all back. Apparently, somewhere in the period circa Mimi Panich's departure from Pocket and Karen Haas's arrival, an unidentified and gremlinish hand went through the MS and carefully marked "STET" next to all the passages Paramount had asked to have deleted. The friend who told me about this snafu read one of the objected-to scenes to me over the phone, and while it isn't the really raunchy "He'd wondered if *it* were green, too" stuff, the tone is unmistakable. Cognoscenti are snapping up all the still-available copies; it's bound to become a collector's item, and as everyone observes, it couldn't happen to a more deserving publisher.

(*Ansible* 44, September 1985)

William Gibson was once not above stooping to a spot of shameless fannish self-promotion:

Dear Fellow Hugo-Winner ... I would like to point out, for the benefit of my massive and utterly devoted British following, that the version of my second novel, *Count Zero*, which will run in serial lumps (three) in *Asimov's SF*, is a special Lite version with reduced *motherfucker*-count and no graphic but intensely poetic and moving descriptions of oral sex. "At IASFM," I was told, "you can't come in anybody's mouth." I should also point out that these changes were made under my supervision and with my express approval. I agreed to go along with them, after due soul-searching, when it was pointed out to me how urgently young people in small towns in the US *need* fiction of this sort, and how much my new car is going to cost.

But with Gollancz, friends, you get it *all!*

(*Ansible* 45, February 1986)

T. Kevin Atherton spoke frankly about the subscription status reminders that used to appear on my newsletter's mailing labels:

I write to thank you for happy little *Ansible* and to reaffirm my unwillingness to give you so much as a penny of my hard-earned money even if you were to claim you were going to use it to ship grain to Ethiopia. Rather than give in to such "sub overdue" taunts as you might fling in my direction, I have decided to respond in kind. Please note that your subscription for the enclosed *Cri de Loon* is so fucking overdue that when your name passes through our computer an enormous brass gong is walloped on every floor of the *Loon* building and the beepers implanted in the flesh of our roving employees wail like air-raid sirens and heat 'til they glow like fresh-poured ingots of lead. Please send your check (cheque) or money order (munny ordur) with blinding speed or prepare your soul to receive a whole matched series of puling "sub overdue" notices written in coloured inks that pass with each new letter through the entire spectrum beginning with violet. So there and take *that!*

(*Ansible* 46, July 1986)

Ian Watson is noted for succouring his fellow men:

We entertained a tramp to tea, though he would only come in out of the sub-zero after we papered the carpet with copies of *Tribune*. Perhaps he was reluctant to yield to our genteel persuasions since he was aware that warmth brought out The Smell (back to horror fiction). This smell was interesting because it migrated around the house for untold hours in the form of discrete mobile pockets, like solid invisible balloons, which you as a physicist will

recognize as quanta of smell. Discretion stopped us from asking the obvious question: “Were you once a science fiction writer?”

(*Ansible* 46, July 1986)

This provides another opportunity for Terry Pratchett’s fans to detect “influence” in Discworld books, since it was much later (in Men at Arms, 1993) that Terry introduced street person Foul Ole Ron and his independently mobile Smell.

An anonymous letter from Glasgow made clear the perils of being insufficiently respectful to the great Bruce Sterling ...

LANGFORD! We, the 10th of October Scottish Committee for the Furtherance of Cyberpunk (OctoberAlbaCyberpunk), are shocked and disgusted at the scum-baggish treatment meted out to Bruce Sterling within the pages of your pustulant, despicable, libellous, nose-dredging excuse for a fanzine! Sterling is an artistic writer of considerable – nay, consummate skill, and to mention his name or any of his works in your purulent, grotty, shoddy, meretricious feuilleton indicates a staggering presumption on your part! Let it be known that our OctoberAlbaCyberpunk minions are everywhere, monitoring your every move and recording your every utterance and typed letter by the use of ultra-sophisticated hardware totally alien to the feeble mind-sets of limp flaccid Home-Counties-SF writers such as yourself! Our intent is to compile a dossier of your terrifying and nauseating pastimes and release it to Fandom worldwide. Never again will you be able to hold your head high in convention bars – indeed, your only solace will be that found in the snore-hung darkness of post-midnight film programmes. We dare you to print this letter and thus avoid the even more horrifying retributions we have in store!

WIDGIE ROTUND BOLIVAR (ON BEHALF OF COMMITTEE).

(*Ansible* 48, February 1987)

Isaac Asimov, alas, must have been having a bad day when I tried to enlist him in a Worthy Cause – nothing to do with sf fandom, but a nasty attempt to suppress free speech (UFO nuts were suing a British sceptic for pointing out that they were, well, nuts):

One of the things I’ve learned in my half-century as an s.f. writer is that what happens among s.f. fans is of no interest to anyone in the world. I would suggest that you ignore fannish squabbles and go about your serious business. In fact, if you really want to write books and do real s.f. don’t waste your

time publishing a fan magazine.

(Sglodion 3, 1991)

Diana Wynne Jones sang the praises of *Alternative Medicine*:

I don't think I've ever been so ill so long and so bizarrely. I mean, I know ridiculous things are always happening to me, but who else in your acquaintance gets themselves *poisoned* by a homeopath? My agent kept ringing me up and protesting, "But they mix it with water so many times that they don't give you *enough* to poison you!" Yes, they did. Did you know that in the back-to-front world of homeopathy, the *more* times you dilute a given poison, the more *potent* it is said to be? The one I went to kept bleating that she knew I was likely to react strongly, so she only gave me a very low potency – in other words, she gave me quite a hefty dose of some obscure poison, and my body, being unacquainted with Looking Glass World medicine, promptly went on the blink for three months. I feel quite sorry for it.

(Sglodion 3, 1991)

After the BBC's uncritical homeopathy programme, Bob Shaw dropped a wide-eyed letter to the Radio Times asking if, by the theory of Dilution Is Strength, you should give your kids twice as many pills as you would take yourself. He was severely dealt with. Any dilution made by a layman would not be a true homeopathic dilution and would not count. (And the kids should get a half pill just as in real life.) I suppose it's necessary on commercial grounds to rubbish the approach of buying one (1) dose and dissolving this in a jug of distilled water to form a lifetime supply. Each time you took a swig and topped it up, the remaining fluid would become even more terrifyingly potent! It doesn't seem to work on gin, by the way.

Arnie Katz provided fascinating insights into Whitley Strieber:

I knew Whitley quite well during the years just before he blossomed as a writer of horror, fantasy and science fiction novels. We (Joyce and I) used to get together with them at least once a week for dinner. Whitley and I shared an interest in simulation boardgames, and we played regularly. We never had a fight, but Whitley's penchant for really infantile practical jokes eventually convinced Joyce and I to see the Striebers a lot less often.

I remember one conversation with Whitley that is, in retrospect, quite interesting. We got on the subject of hoaxes as a way to make money. I expressed the opinion that a bogus evangelical religion would be a good way

to separate the gullible from their cash, and Whitley said that he thought he'd rather try a flying saucer hoax. I told him about the Shaver Mystery.

I saw him on television last night, on one of those tabloid-style news shows that are so popular in the US. He retains the ability to tell an absolute untruth in a very convincing manner. His deadpan delivery was always superb, and he's getting really slick now. I think one of his secrets is that he never tries to disguise the obvious weaknesses of his story or his own credibility. He rushes to point them out and then, by minimizing them, conveys the impression that the objections aren't valid.

(*Sglodion 3*, 1991)

Terry Pratchett also had a word or two about *UFOlogy*:

I remember, as a journalist, patiently investigating the claims of some apparently perfectly normal people who had, once you worked out the details of the glowing hemisphere that they had seen, watched the sun set.

(*Sglodion 3*, 1991)

Yvonne Rousseau contributed a *Gourmet Anecdote* ...

As soon as one steps into the airport at Kuala Lumpur, one's aware not only of the heat but of a mingled odour: like sizzling hot iron, and like durian (as I've smelt it through tightly bound layers of thick plastic in Australia). It was not durian, however – not even durian season. So we contented ourselves with durian ice-cream. (Since high-school geography lessons, I've been fascinated by this paradox of the abominable smell and the swooningly ravishing taste.) The ice-cream – which was yellow – tasted at first as if it were based on siphonings from an old-fashioned lavatory can: one wondered how one could possibly be eating it on purpose. But somewhere there was a change-over point, where one wasn't sure what one was tasting, but wished one could go on tasting it forever. John, however, says the ice-cream is nothing like real durian – which Janeen Webb, on the other hand, says is like eating raspberry ice-cream in an uncleaned public lavatory, and not worth it.

(*Ansible 57*, April 1992)

Chris Priest played *TV critic* and saluted a fellow-author ...

Bad sight of the month was Jerry Pournelle making an appearance on the BBC's otherwise excellent science series *Pandora's Box*. Pournelle, apparently drunk, ranted loudly on about how he and Larry Niven had been called in by Reagan and had all by themselves not only dreamed up S.D.I. but written Reagan's speech too. He made it sound as if Reagan's cabinet, the

State Department, the whole of RAND and the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory staff had all spent the evening in Niven's living room, being set straight by these fast-lane thinkers. Mad with power fantasies, Pournelle bibulously went on to claim that he and Niven had thus caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. The camera cut to him breathing boozily over a spittle-flecked computer game, where he zapped what might have been incoming communist missiles. "We licked the evil empire," he belched, cackling and clutching his joystick with renewed vigour. Larry, sitting at the great man's feet, stared mistily into the distance.

(*Ansible* 60, July 1992)

Strangely, Larry Niven neither moved nor spoke throughout this entire performance, leading some to conjecture that he was a life-size photograph.

David Garnett, self-confessed famous editor, was fascinated by this enquiry from a potential new contributor of "sci-fiction":

"I have wrote to three or four publishers and your relaunched *New Worlds* was mentioned by the last one, unfortunately it seems that none of the so called publishers want to handle any material that hasn't been handled by a solicitor, or that is what I assume when I read that they are not accepting unsolicited material ... I really wouldn't know where to begin dealing with a solicitor on a matter such as this."

(*Ansible* 63, October 1992)

Stephen Baxter found Life imitating Art in Cambridge ...

I have a story in *Weerde II* whose first line is "We want you to assassinate Stephen Hawking". Last weekend I was in Cambridge signing books at Heffer's bookshop. Afterwards I was driving out of town and approaching lights when suddenly, out of nowhere – you've guessed it – a motorized wheelchair came plummeting across the road in front of me. I did an emergency stop, no harm done ... the chap in the wheelchair grinned hugely and a worried-looking lady came running to pull him back on to the kerb. I've heard the great man is prone to this sort of antic. So I almost lived through my own story. Spooky....

(*Ansible* 64, November 1992)

Don Herron reported from Fritz Leiber's funeral:

If Jay Sheckley had limited herself to her opening remarks about reclaiming Fritz for horror and then just gone over and kissed the corpse in the open casket, throwing back her black veil and leaning over Dracula-like

... fuck, maybe it would have been in questionable taste, but at least it would have been *short*. She had to be ordered off stage after the *first* story she wanted to read. And she can't read for shit. As my and Fritz's pal John Law said to me somewhere during the almost-two-hour affair, "Hey, Don, could you get me a spot on the programme? I'd like to read *A Spectre is Haunting Texas*." So Sheckley did the corpse kiss after it was all over and almost no one was watching, Werewolf Mike put a cigarette in Fritz's hand and someone else a champagne glass for his last party (I don't think *he* would have objected for a second – though I hear Charlie Brown had big trouble with the open coffin). Poul & Karen Anderson, Judith Merrill and Diana Paxson spoke. John de Cles gave a *brilliant* (and short) valediction. And Justin Leiber's reading of Fritz's "The Big Trek" from the mezzanine of the *fin de siècle* columbarium where the services took place was nothing short of magisterial (and the story selection could not have been better, if you knew Fritz). Maybe you had to be there, maybe you're glad you were not. The whole deal, while totally Fritzean, might have been a bit much for most folk I met in England – it was too much for many who were there. As I said to myself when the speeches, readings and songs were finally at an end, "Jesus, I need a drink!"

(*Ansible* 64, November 1992)

John Clute, in an access of euphoria when the SF Encyclopedia had at long last been delivered, tried to drive the other editors mad with a post-last-minute fax ...

I'm worried about the use within ascription brackets of the term *chap* [*chapbook*], and would like to substitute the term PYG ... so as to refer to the rewritten SUPERMAN entry I will send later today, which will now be called PYGMALION, and will address the true nature of the DEFINITION OF SF, which will need rewriting. Where PYG is not appropriate within ascription brackets, i.e. for short sf novels with detective or policier elements, I would prefer you to substitute the term *pig*, for all MAGICAL REALIST tales I would prefer the term *puig*, for all FEMINIST works (I think I can modify that entry pretty quickly) the term *peg*, and in the MUSIC entry it will have to be *pag*....

(*Ansible* 65, December 1992)

Dave Clark warned of a new convention peril: *Vampire Cats in Arizona!*

At Westercon, there was a woman going around with a black cat. The cat wore a black cape with a red lining. This was Vladimir, a "vampire". His

fangs *were* rather long, though I'm told this isn't uncommon in cats. He was being wheeled around in a little coffin, being made available for photographs. His mistress – his “human slave”, as she puts it – is working to build Vladimir a career as a photogenic cat for commercials, TV and such. (He was so relaxed about dealing with people that we were debating which tranquillizer had been used.) At the Vladimir Party it was revealed unto us that we could purchase Vladimir mounted photographs, and Vladimir key-chains, and Vladimir photo buttons. *And* the Vladimir fanzine. We were able to tear ourselves away from this bounty....

(*Ansible* 72, July 1993)

“John Grant” [Paul Barnett] *celebrated the end of his fantasy gamebook tie-in series:*

Red Fox have seen sense and decided that 12 **Lone Wolf** novels is probably enough. The temptation is considerable to make #12 end with the most stupendous cliffhanger – as Our Hero dangles by a single blade of grass over the cauldron of bubbling lava, a crossbow-bolt is already hissing towards his groin, but if the caterpillar chews through the grass in time he'll drop just far enough that the bolt merely parts his hair rather than getting him in the chest, so that as he falls he can unsheathe the Sommerswerd, strap it across his shoulders and thereby gain just enough airlift that he can glide past the rim of the cauldron and into the relative safety of a pitched battle between mutant necromancers and giant carnivorous slugs left over from millennia ago when the legions of Agarash the Damned stalked the world; on the other hand, if the caterpillar chews just a mite too slowly ... *could this be The End?* It's going to be hard for me to get out of the habit, you know.

(*Ansible* 72, July 1993)

Gene Wolfe *tried his very hardest to spread sweetness and light:*

I ought to explain why Charlesen Brown is mad at me, since I'm the only one who cares. It all began (and ended) at the World Fantasy Convention banquet. Harlan Ellison got the Grand Master award, and I complained, mentioning that I was older and a better writer. (Both true.) He reciprocated by awarding me his trophy, saying (and I quote), “You want it? Here, take it!”

Naturally I joined the winners who were posing for pictures. Out of deference to the sensibilities of history, I held my thumb over Harlan's name. At no time did I claim to be Harlan Ellison no matter what Charlesen may

print. Naturally, I appear in all the news photos of the event. That, as I think you will agree, is only right and just. Harlan's trophy – I gave it back, having been reminded that it is properly presented at the end of the recipient's career – appears in the pictures too, and it should be easy to take out my face and substitute his. We look very much alike, except that Harlan is handsome.

This is the truth. I have done nothing wrong....

(*Ansible* 81, April 1994)

Patrick Nielsen Hayden had a tiny problem with the US AvoNova pb of Nancy Kress's *Beggars* in Spain.

The ornate cover type reads like it says *Beggars In Spam*. Of course, I speak as an employee of the company which, through the magic of Excessively Decorative Title Type, once managed to publish Greg Bear's blockbuster novel *The Forge Of Goo*.

(*Ansible* 84, July 1994)

Jane Yolen, celebrated tool of Satan, continued to wallow in her manifold villainies.

I received a phone call from a friend, a professor of education who runs a children's literature conference every year. "Do you remember what you were wearing at the conference when you spoke two years ago?" "Jesus, I don't remember what I was wearing yesterday." "Well, do you ever wear black?" "I have a black pants suit. Oh yes, and a long black skirt and overblouse with white decorations of sun, moon, stars, astrolabes, scientific formulae etc...." "That's it." "That's what?" "We were urging our students to come to this year's conference. One raised her hand and said she'd never attend another of our conferences [*because*] two years ago one of the speakers had been a witch. I told her we only had children's authors and illustrators speak. She insisted one was a witch because she wore a witch outfit and occult jewellery." "Flunk her," I said. "You don't want her teaching children ... oh, never mind. I will turn her into a newt."

(*Ansible* 86, September 1994)

John Sladek smacked his lips over a certain loyal vigil:

I heard from Charles Platt the other evening. He is doing well, and on his way to sit by the bedside of the dying Timothy Leary. Charles belongs to the Cryonics Society, who are going to freeze the good doctor's head. I suggested that it would be so saturated in high-powered drugs that it would not freeze. I can certainly imagine the freezer being plundered by tattooed

kids in search of acid. Can you picture them taking a communion of Leary's brain?

(*Ansible* 105, April 1996)

The death-watch was in vain, though: after complaining on the net about the tiresomeness of Leary's "insane will to live", Charles learned with horror that "he suddenly decided he didn't want to be frozen after all. Life is full of disappointments." Instead, some while after his death in May 1996, Leary's ashes were fired into space.

Brian Aldiss brought culture to my unwashed readership:

In a bold and Bass-riddled moment, I promised you a public condemnation of sf in Latin. The occasion was an auspicious one. The Chancellor of Oxford University bestowed an honorary degree upon Mrs Doris Lessing, author of *Shikasta* and other space fictions.

While praising Lessing's talents highly, the public orator took the opportunity to say, if I heard him rightly, "*mehercule immensum totius mundi fingendi onus suscepit, genus scribendi in qui plerumque nihil grave, nihil expectamus quod ad vitae cotidianae veritatem accedat ...*" You'll hardly need telling that this means something like, "She even took on the immense task of inventing a whole world, a genre of writing in which we expect to find nothing serious, which hardly accedes to the truths of ordinary life ..." I hope this is about right. My Lewis and Short is still in store.

Bloody university!

(*Ansible* 109, August 1996)

Neil Gaiman suffered the Curse of the Fantasy Encyclopedia pages 380-381, where authors whose dates were OK in proof arcanely appear as e.g. (1960-FRANKENSTEIN MOVIES):

I hope it's not a prediction of things to come: "Mr Gaiman did not die, exactly, but many bits of him have attained a virtual immortality starring in Frankenstein Movies. Mr Gaiman's right hand is on the shelf in the castle in *Frankenstein Has Risen Up Again* and his stomach is attached to the monster in *Scary Terror of Frankenstein*. His arms and kidneys were in the 'organ donor' scene of *Frankenstein Goes Disco Mama*, but wound up on the cutting room floor...."

(*Ansible* 119, June 1997)

Glossary

Ansible. Ursula Le Guin’s name for the instant-communicator device in her “Hainish” sf stories (1960s-current). Stolen by evil Langford as the title of an sf newsletter (1979-1987, 1991-current), and independently by Orson Scott Card for his “Ender” series.

Astral Leauge. So spelt. A covert fannish organization of immense alleged power and influence, launched at the 1976 **Eastercon** and promising true enlightenment (or at least a potato-printed badge) to anyone giving 50 pence to chief hierophant D. West. Do we have room to sneak in his Astral League Hymn, recorded by me at **Novacon** 6 and published in *Twll-Ddu*? To be sung in low and mournful tones, in no particular key:

O Astral Leauge, o Astral Leauge,
O Leauge it is of thee
We sing this song of Astral Praise
And Cosmic Harmoneeee.

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

When dinosaurs did rule the Earth,
The Leauge was yet to be;
But now we stretch from pole to pole
In Cosmic Harmoneeee.

From star to star the Astral Leauge
Is there for all to see:
Galactic Empires live in peace
And Cosmic Harmoneeee.

* The Leauge’s teachings include a false prophet who will be known as the Bearer Of All Knowledge – something to do with a 1975-1976 feud involving now long-departed UK fan Graham Boak.

Brown, Sandy. Not directly mentioned anywhere in this collection, the late

Sandy Brown was a Scots fan and occasional practical joker. As Ian Watson did *not* know and I discovered only years after, Sandy was the real author of Ian's fan letter from an "American soldier" – the one beginning, "Hey Ian! I been reading your books, man. Far out!"

Clute, John. See **Wild Canadian Boy, The.**

Conspiracy '87. The 1987 British Worldcon held in Brighton, England.

Crusoe, Creepy-Crawly. Believed to be a deeply unfair reference to Spider Robinson.

Dare, Dan. *Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future* was long the best-loved of all British sf comic series and ran in the *Eagle*, 1950-59. Space pilot Dare's main foes were the shinily green-skinned Treens – decent if austere Venusians who later became allies but were all too easily led astray by their evilly charismatic leader, the stunted and big-brained Mekon. Now you know the literary origin of my brother Jon's country-punk group The Mekons.

del Ray-Gun, Loser. Believed to be a deeply unfair reference to some sf writer, editor and erstwhile reviewer whose name escapes me.

Drilkjis. Fanzine co-edited from 1976 to 1982 by the significantly initialled David R. Langford and Kevin J. Smith. "The I's were inserted to indicate the size of the editors' egos."

Eastercon. British national SF convention, held each year on a particular weekend which historians are still struggling to ascertain.

Edwards, Malcolm. Empire-building sf fan, **Seacon '79** committee member and, invisibly, chairman of **Conspiracy '87**. Also supreme master of life and death at successive British publishers: **Gollancz**, HarperCollins UK, Orion.

Excess Card. One of the first widely used credit cards in Britain was called Access (affiliated to and eventually replaced by Mastercard).

Fabian Society. UK left-wing pressure group of which H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw were once prominent members and rivals for power. Fabian policy (infuriating to Wells) was summed up in the apocryphal rallying cries whereby meetings were lashed into a frenzy of moderation: "What do we want?" "GRADUAL CHANGE!" "When do we want it?" "IN DUE COURSE!"

Golden Caterpillar Awards. Satirical fannish awards once handed out at Australian conventions (originally as part of the **Paul Stevens Show**): recipients were chosen for having allegedly done the most *to sf* or fandom.

Gollancz. Victor Gollancz Ltd was once *the* British sf publisher, publishing good hardback sf in the 50s and inaugurating an official sf list in the early 60s. The name still continues as an imprint of Cassell. [2015 note: Now of Orion, owned by the mighty multinational Hachette.]

Green Cross Code Man. Tacky superhero figure from a bygone UK TV ad campaign that preached road-crossing safety to kids.

Lady Who Had Both Actors at Seacon, The. Terribly wicked and unjust euphemism for British author Josephine Saxton. Better make that J*s*ph*n S*xt*n.

Lem, Stanisław. A footnote to Chris Priest's speech: I am aware that SFWA prefers rather different phraseology about Lem's booting-out, or (if you will) the withdrawal of his honorary membership. It is not my business to rewrite the way things looked to Chris nearly twenty years ago.

Magic Pudding Club. Once legendary fannish household (slan shack) in Carlton, Victoria, Australia – named for Norman Lindsay's immortal fantasy masterpiece *The Magic Pudding: Being the Adventures of Bunyip Bluegum* (1918).

Novacon. Britain's second convention, held every year since 1971 by the Birmingham (UK) SF Group, in or near – or occasionally not so near – Birmingham. [2015 note: Currently Nottingham.]

Novacon West. Anglophile US convention organized in New York State to coincide with Novacon 9 (November 1979). As Chris Priest mentions in his talk, Bob Shaw was spirited away from Britain to Novacon West.

One Tun. Venue from 1974 to 1987 of London's open sf meetings (first Thursday evening each month), which date back to 1946 and are currently held in the Jubilee, York Road, next to Waterloo station. [2015 note: *The meetings have since moved several more times. See news.ansible.uk/london.html.*]

Paul Stevens Show. Hour-long (“sometimes tediously so,” says our Aussie spy) and variously funny presentation of skits fronted by Paul Stevens at

1970s conventions Down Under.

Pommies, or Poms. Vaguely derogatory Australian term for the British.

Saturn 3. Lousy 1980 sf movie featuring a murderous and lascivious robot; as the *SF Encyclopedia* tactfully put it, “With a good director like [Stanley] Donen and a screenplay by Martin Amis, it is difficult to see how so obscene and silly an exploitation movie could come to be.”

Seacon '79. The 1979 British Worldcon held in Brighton, England. Not to be confused with Seacon '75 and Seacon '84, which were **Eastercons**.

Skycon. The 1978 British **Eastercon**, burdened not only with a Heathrow Airport venue (the hotel kept it a deadly secret, until Skycon actually began, that Airport Security were empowered to stalk the corridors and close down parties) but also with some chap called Langford in charge of publications.

Treens. See **Dan Dare**.

Twll-Ddu. Langfordian personal fanzine of autobiography and lies, 1976-1983.

Walsh, Simone. Well-known London fan of the 1970s, who has since drifted happily away from fandom.

Wild Canadian Boy, The. Based on the song *The Wild Colonial Boy*. A Canadian-born critic, devotee of literary terms like *apotropaic* and *haecceity*, and co-editor of both the 1993 *Encyclopedia of SF* (with Peter Nicholls) and the 1997 *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (with John Grant): yes, it has to be John Clute.

Acknowledgements

The pieces collected in *Wrath of the Fanglord* were published in various fanzines edited by David Langford, as listed below. The exception is “The Flatulent SF Authors’ Song”, which was merely quoted in full in a Langford piece written for another editor’s fanzine. All issues of *Drilkjis* were co-edited with Kevin Smith.

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The End

Britain is Heaven in '87

Margaret Welbank

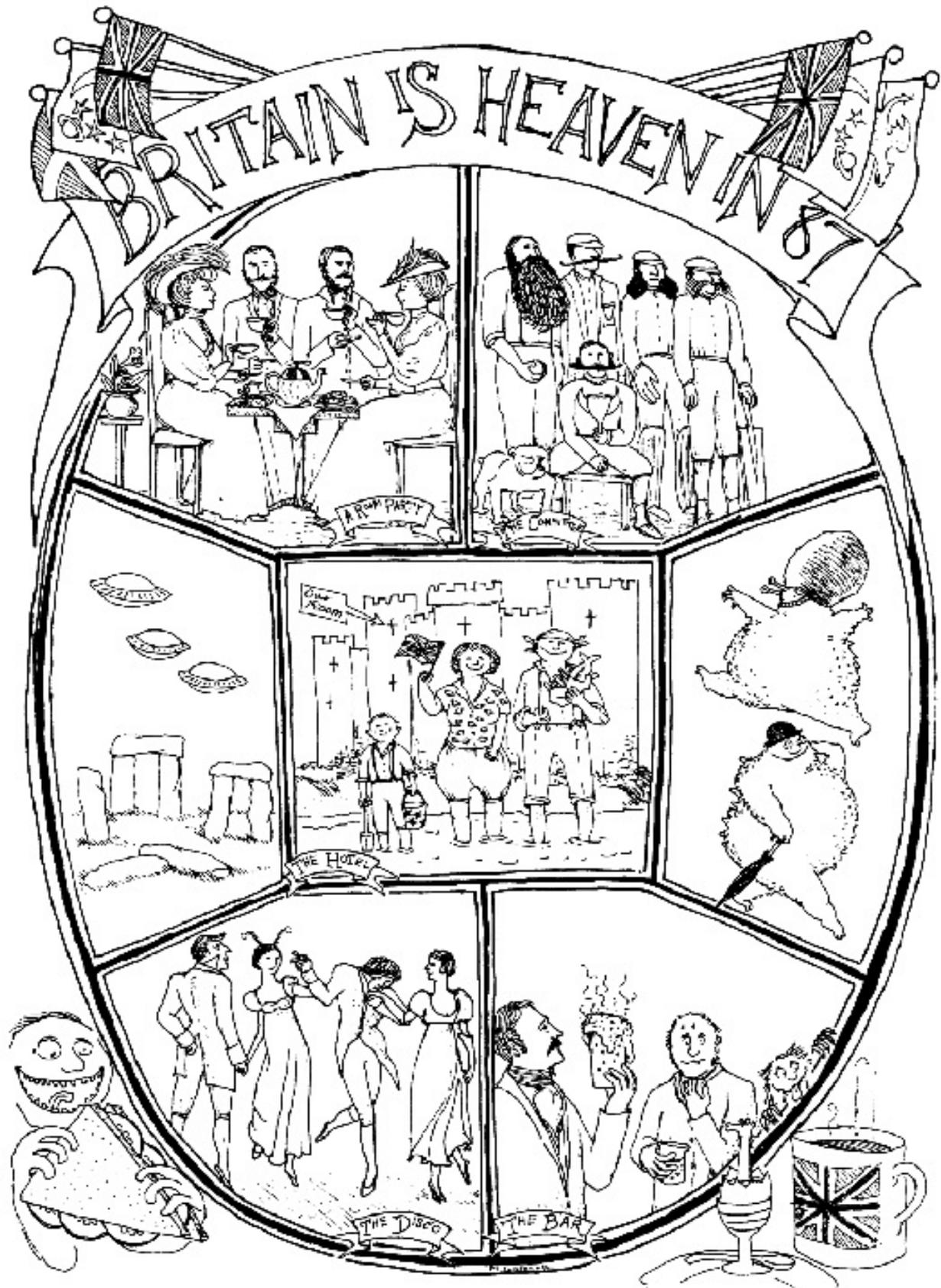


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