

EMERALD CITY

Issue 1

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An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at 100610.3413@compuserve.com

Editorial (apologia)

Oh dear, this looks depressingly like a fanzine. What, you might ask, has brought her to these desperate straits once more? Depression? Illness? Unemployment? Or simply a further attack of the unquenchable need to foist her opinions and literary pretensions on her long-suffering friends?

Well, the latter, obviously. I like to write. I haven't done it (creatively) for ages. OK, so working as a consultant means that I spend large amounts of my time writing reports; but what my dearly beloved boss describes as my "colourful metaphors" have no place in the austere style of a professionally written report. For a long time I didn't realise what I was missing. And then, (it is always convenient to be able to blame Langford for something) I read the Intersection special issue of Ansible - the one with all of the TAFF report extracts in it - and it hit me just how much I missed stringing words together in a (hopefully) pleasing manner.

Besides, I've already got into the "letter home" lark, keeping all of you poor unfortunates stuck in the gloom and damp of Britain up to date with my new life in paradise (er, Australia). It seemed to me that I was already getting into the regular writing mode and that I was liable to have things I wanted to talk about that would grow out of all proportion to the length of a modest and sensible letter. Why not branch out into something bigger?

So here it is. Issue 1. Emerald City. The name, as you might have guessed, has something to do with my being recently domiciled in the land of Oz. What you might not know is that Melbourne, priding itself on being the prettiest city on the continent (and capital of "Victoria, the Garden State", as it says on all the car number plates), has sometimes borrowed this epithet for itself. Personally I suspect that it is an excuse to pose as the capital city and thus cock a snook at scummy Sydney-siders. Whatever, I like the name, I've always loved the concept (green-tinted glasses and all), so I borrowed it.

Well, go on, tell me: someone else has used it before and they are threatening to sue. It has happened to me before. It's OK.

And before I go any further I had better let you know to what you are going to be subjected.

Manifesto

Which being a grandiose title for a list of things I intend to witter on about whether you like it or not. This 'zine will contain:

My impressions of Australia - With most of my readers currently being in the UK, this is actually something in which you might actually be interested. Hopefully my Aussie friends will also find the views of a visiting Pom stimulating and informative. I'll try not to be too abusive, honest.

Book reviews - I read a lot, and having a brother in the trade I tend to get the best new SF and fantasy earlier than most. Besides, I really enjoy doing them. (Those who can do, those who can't become critics.)

Convention reports - Hey, what's a 'zine without a bit of salacious gossip, and where better to find some than at a Con. Besides, it might encourage a few of you to go along. (WorldCon: Melbourne: 1999 - sign up now - plug, plug).

Role-playing games - Well it is perhaps what I know best, but I don't get much time to play these days so I'm unlikely to have much to write about. But you never know. If I want to write anything serious about the subject it will probably end up in **I*F** (Interactive*Fantasy, a magazine devoted to discussion of role-playing as art, as education, as therapy and anything else that might make it sound remotely respectable - ask me for details if you are interested).

Travelogue - My current job keeps threatening to send me to far and exotic locations. So far I have only managed Australia and Scotland, but I am pushing hard for San Francisco and South Africa, and the threat of Minsk and Delhi hang over me as potential penance. If I actually get to any of these places I will report accordingly.

Music - I am well out of touch with the current UK scene, but from what gets into the charts I suspect that I am not missing much. I am, however, intending to investigate native Aussie bands and, if I find something good, will give them a bit of international publicity. I can probably arrange sample tapes for anyone interested.

Historical re-enactment - Revels being almost as good a source of salacious gossip as cons, their only drawback being that they are a lot shorter so there is less time for interesting events to unfold. For the benefit of those who don't know, I am a member of the UK-based Far Isles group and will be seeking out something similar in Melbourne as soon as I get the time.

Paganism - Only if the Goddess moves me to proselytise.

Computers - Only if I find something really neat and worth sharing.

Fiction - No, never, I promise.

And doubtless a load of other stuff as well.

The 'zine will normally be available only in electronic form: I have had enough of printing, collating and envelope stuffing to last me a lifetime. A plain ASCII copy can be emailed to anyone. Those of you with the ability to receive binary files and have a copy of Word 6 can have it in all its formatted glory. I will try to find a suitable place to upload it, but I don't want to spend too much money on this. Any suggestions would be gratefully appreciated.

And now, without further ado, some actual content.

Reasons to hate Glasgow (part 3)

Which has nothing much to do with Ian Dury, but everything to do with my impressions of my first ever WorldCon: Intersection, Glasgow, 1995.

There is a plethora of scales on which a convention can be rated: the programme, the location, the major events, the dealers, the social life; I can't possibly cover them all. So I'll gloss over the boring bits I was happy with and get controversial.

Look, don't get me wrong, I really enjoyed the convention. Also I love Scotland (some of my best friends...). Glasgow, however, is somewhere I do not want to visit again. I guess that the con would have been in Edinburgh if the restrictions on WorldCon dates hadn't meant it would clash with the Festival. So it goes. But first (feeling guilty already), some complimentary bits.

The social life - It was wonderful. I'm not saying any more than that.

The programme - Oh, I was supposed to go to some programme items? I guess I was too busy with the social life. There were a lot of them, I think. About ten rooms, running most of the day, with stuff on just about everything.

The major events - Langford won two Hugos. Jeff Noon was best new author. Teddy, Tom, Mikki et al covered themselves with glory in the Masquerade. Far Isles Rule OK. So where was the American competition?

The dealers - Anywhere Sue Mason has a stall is a guaranteed spend site for me. This time it was a gorgeous dragon plaque cunningly disguised as a no smoking sign. I told myself it was furniture for the new flat. Fortunately, I was prevented from buying too many books by the thought of luggage allowances on the trip home. Given the vast range of books on sale, why did no one have a copy of *Icarus Descending* by Elizabeth Hand? Lots of gorgeous t-shirts too, although the one I was most taken by bore the legend "Magic free zone". Wizards of the Coast, one of the main sponsors, showed an uncommonly good sense of humour in not asking for it to be banned.

The location - OK, claws out: ready, aim, fire....

I hate Glasgow because:

Because it has one of the worst one way systems it has ever been my misfortune to drive through. It twists and turns with every block. If you make a mistake you are quite likely to end up on a major road leading out of town with nowhere to turn for half a mile. And someone told me that one of the exits off the M8 involves a right-hand turn!

Because the region around Strathclyde University, where I was staying, looked like the sort of place where, if you go out late at night in a group of less than five, the police tell you you were asking to be mugged; and where your car is broken into, not for the radio which you sensibly removed, but for the can of anti-freeze which has significant value on the local drugs market.

Because one of the local cafes was called Rab C's Kitchen (I didn't dare sample the food).

Because even in the city centre I was afraid to walk the 200 yards from the Central to the Crest without an escort.

Because one girl who was foolish enough to try it got mugged.

Because the locals stare at you with undisguised malice and loathing.

Because as soon as they open their mouths you know that they hate you.

Because you know that they don't really, it is just the Glasgow accent.

Because they speak more understandable English in Paris or Berlin.

Because the only bank in the exhibition centre charged seven quid to cash a cheque from any better known rival.

Because the man in the newsagent at the exhibition centre tried to kid me that to send a postcard to Australia required a special type of stamp that you could only buy at a Post Office.

Because the exhibition centre food was so bad they even managed to make a hot dog inedible.

Because the railway station at the exhibition centre was closed for the duration of the convention.

Because the lovely stone buildings are so caked in grime that they loom darkly and ominously over you like some dire, oppressive, leaden descriptive passage in one of Lovecraft's less good stories.

Because it isn't Edinburgh.

Because they have tried so hard to improve the city's image that you feel you really ought to like the place.

You will notice that I haven't said anything about the convention sites being so far apart. With a UK location that is almost inevitable, and the buses seemed quite good if you were in a city centre hotel. If I wanted to criticise the organisers for anything it would be for letting a tabloid reporter off the leash within the convention centre. In all else they did not too bad given the circumstances.

It occurs to me that those of you who haven't been to a convention before will be thinking "when is the silly old bat going to tell us what goes on". Hmm, a bit difficult really, but I suppose I ought to try.

WorldCons are "serious" SF conventions, not media-fests. The lady with the Trek-mad kids who complained it was a rip-off had a point, but she was in the wrong place. There was no media guest of honour (though perhaps there ought to be - there is a media Hugo after all), very few people in star fleet uniforms or latex masks, and not a vulcan in sight. (Although there were at least two men there who were undeniably Klingon, without any make-up.) The dealer room was about 50% books, very little merchandising.

Programme items are so varied I am bound to miss something. There was serious science; authors read extracts from their books; Dave Langford read extracts from books authors might prefer to be forgotten; sessions on Celtic mythology and Scottish history for fantasy fans; vampires (very popular these days); lectures on the history of fandom and how to run your own convention; Marcus Rowland on how to write role-playing games for money (don't); and of course the "how to be an author" sessions.

There was an art show (delighted to see SMS is famous at last), a film room, a creche and bouncy castles, and loads of stalls for various fan clubs and interest groups. There was Microsoft (well, it was Windows '95 launch time). There was a disco and a ceilidh. There was a games room and the by-now-usual Magic-playing hordes. There was voting for the

1998 WorldCon site (sorry Boston, I tried) and, of course, the Hugos. Too much, really. So I spent most of my time making friends and gossiping. (Yes, I did spend a whole afternoon in the bar with Langford. I had my car with me, I stuck to diet coke. The Guinnesses were for Dave and the whisky & colas for Jackie McRobert.)

And there are loads of parties. Everyone hoping to host a WorldCon has a bid party (even if you are not being voted on for years - Moscow is already gearing up for 2017). Of course, the best one was Melbourne's. Be warned, however, the truly vast quantities of free booze are only to be found at publishers' parties which, at least in this case, were being held well off site to prevent the scummy fans from getting to them.

Best of all, perhaps, there were loads of friendly, like-minded people, most of whom turned out to be very interesting to talk to. It being a WorldCon, loads means a very large number indeed. One of my overriding impressions of the Con is that, although there were many people there I knew, almost everywhere I went there were hundreds of people whom I did not know. Whether this means there is hope for the world or that it is drowning in wierdos is left for you, gentle reader, to discuss.

John Brunner

My report on Intersection cannot go past without mention of John Brunner who died of an heart attack during the convention.

I met John only once, at an EasterCon many years ago when I was posing as a cub reporter for *Imagine* magazine. I spoke to many authors that weekend. Some of them were downright abusive about role-players. John was just interested, and unfailingly polite.

Later, having been commissioned to co-write a cyberpunk role-playing game (thankfully aborted before Games Workshop had a chance to ruin it), I found particular inspiration in John's work. *Stand on Zanzibar* is, of course, the famous work, but in many ways I was more struck by *The Sheep Look Up*. I got the impression at the time that here was a man who cared so deeply about what was happening to the world and was so profoundly upset by it that he was in danger of losing his audience, and thence his publishers. Sadly it seems that I was not far from the mark.

Many people who read this will have known John, both as an author and as a person, far better than I did. They will doubtless have much more to say about him than me. All I can add is that, from my limited contact, I wish I had known him better, and that, thanks to the wonder of books, I still have the opportunity to do so.

The Diamond Age - Neal Stephenson

Snow Crash, in my humble opinion, was always going to be a pretty hard act to follow. Stephenson, I am happy to say, does so with tremendous aplomb. Given the somewhat sorry tale of *Neuromancer* sequels, it is good to see a promising new author follow up a great book with something better.

The breathtaking thing about *Diamond Age* is the number of topics it covers. It was a while ago that I read it (told you I have a wonderful brother) so I have probably forgotten some, but here are a few of the main themes.

It is hard-ish, though very speculative SF, about nanotechnology - machines so small that they are invisible to the naked eye and can invade your bloodstream. They are so powerful they can make diamonds cheap enough to use them as building materials. They are so dangerous that you need to have regular injections of anti-body nanotechs to protect your body from the latest virulent mechanical virus.

It is a charming story about a precocious but loveable little girl that had me in tears in several places.

It is social theory - global communications and information technology have destroyed nation states, but people still feel the need to band together with like-minded folk. They do so by forming communities ('claves') with rules and cultures they cannibalise from the past or make up to suit their predilections. Foremost amongst them are the New Victorians for whom the work ethic and social propriety are the major planks of their creed.

It is an adventure story - a nanotech book is stolen from a member of the Victorian community in Shanghai. Attempts to recover it take place against a background of rising violence from the local ethnic-Chineseclave which seeks to drive all foreigners from the Celestial Kingdom.

It has elements of shameless Fu Manchu pastiche.

It considers the nature and purpose of education.

It is a treatise on the future of the theatre in a world where interactive media, improvised drama and murder mystery parties meet.

There are doubtless people who will read *Diamond Age* and find all sorts of technical flaws in the world Stephenson has created. So what? Such people should go away and read Robert L. Forward. My idea of a good SF book is one in which the created world is sufficiently believable to sustain disbelief, sufficiently interesting to set you thinking about it, and crafted in such a way as to enable to author to spin a good yarn and ask interesting questions about our own world. In all this, Stephenson succeeds brilliantly. Recommended.

Sword of Flame - Maggie Furey

This is slushy female fantasy, right? This is Anne McCaffrey territory. This is ten-volume trilogy stuff. This is soap opera.

Well, yes it is. But the sainted Anne is splendidly good at light reading. She has many imitators, but few equals. If you enjoy her stuff (which, in the right mood and for the right reasons, I do) then Maggie Furey is worth a try.

Sword of Flame is the third volume in a four-part trilogy about Aurian, a young-but-powerful, stubborn-but-vulnerable, seriously-and-tragically-fated, beautiful, flame-haired lady mage with a giant, telepathic cat for a sidekick (you can see why this appeals to me, can't you). There are plucky teenage girls; handsome, sensitive, smugglers; greedy, evil sorcerers and wicked foreign princes. It is formulaic stuff, but with just enough imagination to keep it different, just enough plot to make it not totally predictable and just enough characterisation to get you caring about the cast.

There are things that Maggie Furey could do a lot better. She is certainly no Tad Williams, but neither does she leave me thinking that even I could improve on her handiwork. Nor does it reek of ignorant, bigoted, mid-west USA philosophy like David Eddings' books. Given the amount of rubbish publishers are foisting on their undiscerning audience, this is a welcome change.

As is the way of these things, it would be ridiculous to try to read Sword of Flame without first completing the previous volumes, Aurian and Harp of Winds. And, as is becoming depressingly commonplace, the cliff-hanger ending will ensure that if you got the remotest enjoyment from this book you will have to buy the sequel. As I remember from listening to Maggie at her Intersection signing session, there are only four (although there will be a prequel series eventually).

Some people read books to appreciate their literary quality, others read them for escapism. I happen to do both. Maggie Furey is in the latter camp, and is darn good at it.

Footnote

I think that's about enough for a first issue, mainly because I want it done in time for dropping in on London next week. Apologies if the quality control is a little less than perfect. Next issue, entirely at my whim. Comments welcome.

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl