

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

There are times when, regardless of all I said about content over form last issue, that you feel the need for a bit of layout. Having a Jeff Noon review in the 'zine impels you to get experimental. And I have discovered that Microsoft now produce a Word viewer as freeware. I'll be getting a copy if anyone is interested. But, of course, you still need Windows to run it. Not much help, really. So I shall be dull and boring and stick to the same layout. I hope the text makes up for it.

Jeff Noon - What's all the fuss about?

A lot of pop songs have been written about American cities: San Francisco, Memphis, New York, even Chicago. They seem to have a romantic ring about them. The same cannot be said of their UK equivalents, London excepted. I mean, who would want to sing about Wolverhampton, or Sheffield? The concept seems utterly ridiculous. So if I were to tell you that two of the hottest new SF novels in recent memory were set, not in Los Angeles, Seattle or Chiba, but in Manchester, you would be forgiven for taking a lot of convincing. But convince you I will: to paraphrase the Game Cat, Jeff Noon is good, very, very good.

Noon, of course, is unrepentant about the unfashionable nature of his locations. He says he prefers to write about places he knows. And it works. His novels have a tangible sense of geography, especially *Pollen* which is (amongst other things) about taxi drivers. Street names trip off the page with the authority of an atlas. The characters go to real places, by real routes, and Noon clearly knows the territory well.

"Bridget used to say that the rain around there was special, that something had gone wrong with the city's climate. That you always thought it was about to start raining, but it always was, anyway." - Vurt

It is also true that Noon knows his social scenery well. The characters are, of course, fictitious, but they are recognisable as people you would expect to live in the murky underbelly of urban Manchester. Not for Noon the world of high tech corporations and designer drugs. His cast come from a world of crumbling tenements and dingy bedsits, of car theft and crooked coppers, of live bands in crowded clubs and backstreet theatres showing cheap pornovurts. Once again, it works. There is an air of reality, even when it is virtual.

"It is as hip and breathless as William Gibson, but spiced with dark humour and the horrible realisation that Noon - unlike Gibson - knows of which he writes." - The Times

But what, you are asking, is this Vurt stuff? Is she going to explain?

"I never explain anything" - Mary Poppins

Vurt is a drug, or a video game. It is dreams, it is real, it is all part of Hobart's dream. It is cyberspace designed by film producers, it is mindspace designed by Jung. It is the real world seen through a looking glass, darkly.

And that mis-quote was no accident. Noon is obsessed with Alice, and those people who praise him compare him, not to Asimov, Clarke or Niven, but to Phil Dick. Tim Powers might wear the mantle, Keith Jetter might pretend he does, but Noon has the style, and the ability to warp perceptions with a word. As I've just said, there is a fine line between the real and the virtual.

So there we have it (you have followed me so far, haven't you). Two novels set in a mixture of Manchester and a strange, alternative reality that might be dream, might be film, might be a game, or might be actual. But who is this young man whose name is on the lips of SF congnoscenti, who has won the 1994 Arthur C. Clarke award and the 1995 John W. Campbell, and yet who wandered round Intersection in jeans, jacket and grandad shirt looking like an art show contributor that no one had heard of and no one was likely to.

Jeff Noon is not new to writing, just to novels. He has been around the Manchester art scene for years and has worked with pop bands and theatre groups. He has recently been asked to co-script (with Grant Morrisson) an SF series for the BBC which, it is rumoured, will also involve the consummately crazy Icelandic pixie, Bjork. Noon has been a talent waiting to happen. Now he has: SF has given him his opening but, like Ian Banks, I do not expect it to confine him.

In the meantime, there is the Vurt concept to work out. Despite two novels, we still know very little about it. We know how to get there, how not to get back, and that it is more real than most people think.

Getting there is easy. It is a commercial product, after all. Would you care to guess? A data jack in the head? An inter-dimensional gateway? An energising ray? Don't be stupid, this is Jeff Noon we are talking about. You get into Vurt by sticking a feather down your throat.

Special feathers: blue for pleasure, pink for porn, black for violence and yellow, oh so golden yellow, yellow for death. It is all very logical, really.

It started out as entertainment. The ultimate interactive movie: In Bed with the Interactive Madonna. But it is not that simple. You can get lost. People fail to return from the Vurt, and when they do, Vurt creatures take their place. Thus *Vurt*, the novel, in which Scribble loses his sister in a yellow and gains The Thing from Outer Space in her place.

"Yellows have no jerkout facilities. Be careful. Be very, very careful. If you die in a yellow dream you die in real life. The only way out is to finish the game." - The Game Cat

Nor are such exchanges always accidental. They are, of course, governed by Hobart's Law, which states that the "worths" of the exchanged parties are proportional. Whether it is spiritual worth or moral worth is never quite explained, but monetary worth it most certainly is not. You can choose to stay in the Vurt, but sometimes the Vurt chooses to exchange you. Thus *Pollen*, in which a powerful Vurt being sends his flower-queen into our reality and Manchester almost dies of hay fever.

And so, look out for *The Looking Glass Wars*, in which, I am lead to believe, the Vurt takes the idea of conquest one stage further.

There is a lot I haven't told you. In particular the various types of people that populate Noon's world: the shadows, the dog-people, the robo-people, the half-Vurt. Pure human, it seems, is neither common nor desirable. But I have to leave something for you to find out for yourself. Vurt is available in paperback from Pan. Pollen will doubtless follow shortly, or is obtainable in hardback from Ringpull, a small, independent UK publisher. Try them. But, as the Game Cat says, be careful, be very, very careful.

"This is not an easy book; it is certainly not a pretty book. It is passionate, distinctive, demanding and enthralling." - The Times on Vurt.

Melbourne - Art, Architecture and Morality

It is an undeniable fact that cities have character. Some, like Edinburgh, have it accumulate over the years of noble history making. Others, like Milton Keynes, have it thrust upon them by enthusiastic, but misguided, planners and social engineers. Yet others, such as Newcastle, acquire it from the distinctive nature of the citizens. Melbourne, I would venture to suggest, has acquired its character in the latter two ways, and that the decisions of its planners have, in turn, been influenced by their Victorianness.

One of the easiest ways to understand the difference between Sydney and Melbourne is to note the fact that Sir Les Patterson is a Sydney man, but Dame Edna could only have come from Melbourne. Victorian by name and Victorian by nature, as one of my Sydney-loving friends describes the people he is currently living among.

To tar all Melbournians by this brush is grossly unfair. The city does, I am told, have a much better independent music scene than Sydney. But there is an air of properness about it, and also an air of having been built by the same people who created such doyens of architectural madness as St. Pancras Station in London. Pomp and Circumstance, in stone and wrought iron.

This is weird, because Melbourne has also embraced Thatcherism, not so much for the Victorian Values, but with a zeal for private enterprise that sees the city having legalised brothels and building what will be, when it is finished, the biggest casino in the world. Personally I much prefer having brothels where they can be safe and clean and the girls get a decent wage than hidden in back streets and black markets, but it is still a shock to the travelling English business-woman to see how hotels and furnished apartments advertise to her male colleagues when they are free to do so.

But I digress (I know, so what's new): art and architecture are the signals by which Melbourne is recognised. In art they have tried to move with the times. We are currently in the midst of the annual Melbourne Festival. Much of the official program is given over to opera, ballet and serious people reading boring poems. But there is also a thriving fringe. On the south bank of an evening a dance troupe performs on scaffolding that stretches forth over the Yarra from one of the bridges. People on stilts hide inside giant robot puppets made of wire, silver-painted cardboard and aluminium foil. And men in fish suits sing silly songs about emerging from the primaeval ooze. Local bands have a field day,

and Ray Davies is dropping in soon to promote his autobiography. For once in Melbourne things are actually happening.

In architecture, on the other hand, almost everything is retro. There is so much fake and fussy finery that it is difficult to see if the city has any character of its own other than as a cheap impressionist: Mike Yarwood doing Christopher Wren. This, remember, is a city whose oldest hotel (The Duke of Wellington, now a mere dingy pub on Flinders Street) proudly boasts the epithet "since 1850". And yet there are two fabulously fluted Gothic cathedrals and sufficient Georgian pomposity to make Glasgow quail in shame. Melbourne wanted to be London, and somewhere in the past set out to make it so.

As a result we have the mediaeval splendour of the ANZ bank, with its heraldry, stained glass windows and gargoyles. We have the elegant copper domes and ornamental brickwork of Flinders Street station. And we have the grand Windsor Hotel, overlooking the park near Parliament, where stands a statue of that icon of Victorian Imperialism, Gordon of Khartoum.

There are a few seemingly misplaced surprises. The Forum theatre, for instance, which seems to have leapt, fully formed, from a St.Petersburg square. And there is the fascination with wrought iron which makes many of the older suburbs look like refugees from the southern USA. But overall Melbourne looks like a city with both feet firmly in a romanticised version of Victorian England. Finding pubs called *The Dickens Tavern* and the *Sherlock Holmes* is no great surprise.

There are times when I find in Melbourne a city which exemplifies the contradictions of Thatcher's Britain. On the one hand there is the looking back to a time of grandeur, glory and the lower classes knowing their places; on the other there is the headlong rush for profit which would have horrified many genuine Victorian grandees. Victorian values were hypocritical, but often for a purpose. With Thatcherism hypocrisy was raised to an aim in itself. Hopefully Melbourne will see the trap before rushing headlong into it.

BasiCon - A convention on a shoestring

Long ago, but not so very far away, there was a bid to run the 1995 Australian Media NatCon. As is sometimes the way with these things, those responsible found that the effort involved far outweighed the imagined glory or the task, and so it folded: a dead convention. Enter, stage left, Ian Gunn and Karen Pender-Gunn, riding to the rescue with video recorder and photocopier and the ready. They had a few months to produce a miracle, and by chance in the middle of that contrived to win a holiday to the UK, courtesy of GUFF. You might think that the omens were not good. You might think that a dead convention would be preferable. You would be dead wrong.

Seeing an impossible task before them, Ian and Karen decided to run a convention on the simplest possible lines. There would be no hotel, so no one to have hassles with: they used Melbourne University instead. There would be no guests of honour, so they could guarantee no one would cancel at the last minute. The price would be low, the entertainment largely self-made. And it would be fun. We promised ourselves, it would be fun. And lo, our prayers were answered, and it was so.

BasiCon had a full panel program. Panels don't take much organising. There were a few themes with basic puns, but basically we all got together and talked. Discussion was

mainly about fandom, but the panel on the 10 best and worst SF films of all time was a roaring success, in more than one meaning of the word. Yours truly was rather duff and is inordinately grateful to Sharon Tapler for rescuing her with a stunning performance on the Basic Plots panel.

BasiCon had a full video program, brilliantly put together by Ian Gunn from his enormous collection of animation films and other audio-visual trivia. We had *Wallace and Grommet*, *Tin Toy*, some ancient US cartoons and some very strange Asian animation that was marked “parental guidance”. A magnificent mixture, and not a Star Trek episode in sight.

We had a business meeting. It was short, sweet, largely uncontroversial and lasted 20 minutes. It did, however, provide a moment of high excitement as Ian and Karen’s bid to run the 1997 convention beat off a New Zealand challenger by 2 votes, much to the annoyance of the con’s only two Kiwi members whose plane had been delayed, causing them to miss the meeting.

Of course there was an art show. But, it being BasiCon, artists were obliged to create their entries on the spot. A certain amount of ingenuity was called for, and the call was answered. We were in the middle of the Festival, after all. Star of the show was Jocko, who brought in two large railway sleepers, several kilos of bananas and some nails, which he and Terry Frost proceeded to assemble into, well, whatever it was. And we could watch them doing it, so it was performance art as well. Sadly, the university art gallery refused to take the resulting masterpiece, presumably on the grounds that it had limited shelf life.

There was a masquerade too. The Costumers Guild was in a splendid fit of pique as prizes were available only for costumes costing under \$10 or \$20. Karen had an interesting outfit in mind, but sadly it would not fit in the car along with all the food, props and other necessities of con running. So she paraded without it under the title of Zen Costume. The judges could hardly avoid giving her a prize.

And last, but not least, there was a banquet. A pizza banquet. Twenty-three (count them) family size pizzas. I have never seen so much pizza in my life. There is, of course, no such thing as too much pizza. Unfortunately, there is such a thing as not enough stomach in which to put it.

All in all the convention was a great success. Everyone claimed to have enjoyed it, with the exception of the sulky costumers, and Terry Frost who said he was dissenting on principal in case no one else did. It made a profit too. Several hundred dollars were donated to a local charity for the homeless. Not bad for a convention on a shoestring, hm?

Footnote

This has been issue 3 of Emerald City, in which Cheryl does her best to alienate everyone she knows in Manchester and Melbourne.

It is also the first issue to be produced entirely using Windows 95. I bored people for quite long enough about computers last issue, and I’m sure that those of you who are interested are already suffering from information overload on this topic. So all I will say is that the cougar wallpaper is very pretty, the pinball game is phenomenal (even if I am awful at it) and tuning the mouse cursor into a wasp or a jellyfish instead of an hourglass is just unbearably cute. Computers are fun, honest.