

# EMERALD CITY

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

## Introduction

Early this time, and with good reason because life is becoming very, very hectic. If it was November it must have been South Africa; December, California; January, Britain. You think this sounds glamorous? You should try doing it. More travelogue stuff later. Meanwhile, what can one do when stuck on aircraft except watch films.

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## Judge Dredd - the Movie Mockery

Thus far I've seen two reviews of this film. Terry Frost took it apart in his column in *Thyme*, but only on the basis that the original comic strip was juvenile crap so the film must follow. Laura Dunning sent effusive praise in reply, but largely on the grounds that the film *looked* like the comics. Of course these Aussies haven't grown up with *2000 AD*, nor waded through mountains of Dredd stories working on stuff for the Judge Dredd role-playing game. Time to put the record straight.

First, Stallone is not Dredd. Clint Eastwood is Dredd. Always has been, always will be. Putting Stallone in the title role turns Dredd from someone who is smart and ruthless into someone who is a stupid thug. Doesn't wash.

Second, Dredd is not an hero. Stallone, of course, would not have settled for less, but the truth is that Dredd was conceived and written as a heartless, Fascist bastard. It was a source of some distress to his creators that many of their readers came to idolise him.

Finally, Dredd is neither action story nor valiant myth of struggle against oppression, it is black comedy and social satire. To try to portray Dredd as a pure-hearted champion of Justice is like trying to turn Blackadder into James Bond, nonsense. Dredd serves the Law in the same way that Ayatollah Kohmeni served the Koran - with a literal fanaticism that makes a mockery of the original text. And he is made to do so in order to poke fun at the "law-n-order" loonies that populate right wing political parties and police forces the world over.

Look folks, the Judge Dredd strip had OAP pressure groups before even the Americans had thought of the idea, it lampooned political correctness before the concept had a name, it was merciless in its treatment of TV game shows and cosmetic fads. At its best, it was incisive, funny, thought-provoking. The film is none of these things. OK, it has great special effects, and who wouldn't love to have one of those LawMasters, but it doesn't hold a candle to the original. I hope there isn't a sequel.

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## **Apollo 13, lucky for some**

Like Dredd, this was a film with a challenge. It is a story that most people know well, in which nothing much actually happens. What is more, it is hard to see how anyone can say anything about it that hasn't already been said by David Bowie in a simple little song. Tom Hanks is Major Tom, and he has his work cut out. How does he manage?

Pretty well, I thought. There must have been a temptation on the part of the film makers to turn this into a sentimental celebration of all that is clean-cut, heroic and apple pie about American Scientific Endeavour. They avoided this (just) and gave us a simple story of ordinary folks caught up in a deeply personal drama that the whole world was watching but few people really understood.

Two things, in particular, stood out for me: the special effects, and the plot devices. This sound bizarre? Well, just think what the film would have been like if it had been scripted as an SF adventure rather than from real life.

The special effects were just stunning, because there weren't any. It was (nearly) all real. The launches, the insides of the spaceship, mission control in Huston, all real footage of real rockets, and places. There were a few exterior shots of the command module and lunar lander in space that could not have been actual footage, but even they must have been done using highly detailed models. It gave the whole thing a look of reality that no special effects wizard has ever come close to duplicating.

As for the moments of high drama, they were brilliant because no script writer would ever have thought of such a thing or, if he had, would never have got is past the Hollywood moguls. I mean, can you imagine deliberately writing in a scene where the heroes nearly die because they need to replace the carbon dioxide filters in the command module and those in the lunar lander don't fit because they are a different shape? Nor is it likely that you would write a whole section about trying to figure out a viable sequence for powering up the systems on the command module (which they shut down to save energy) such that they never draw more than the 4 amps current you have available and cause a short.

Whether we admit it or not, even supposedly realistic films are actually full of fantasy: purported fact packaged in a way that will gain the approval of the media masters. Against such a background, Apollo 13 was a breath of fresh air.

There were a few bits of the film that didn't quite work. For example, when Lovell's wife dropped her lucky necklace down the plug hole in the shower, or when his daughter won't come out of her room because she is upset about the Beatles break-up. I'm sure these things happened - they wouldn't have got into the film otherwise - but they were not filmed in a way that added anything to the story, and thus came across as spurious detail. But these are minor quibbles. I'd certainly recommend the film to anyone but the most cynical Tarantino fan.

It also scored high on the Cheryl Sob Index, so thanks to QANTAS for showing it in the middle of the night so that I didn't make quite such a fool of myself.

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## Why isn't Sherri Tepper more famous?

A few years ago there was a book called *Grass*. It was famous, it got nominated for things, it was very good. Since then its author has produced a stream of excellent, thoughtful novels. None of them have become famous, none of them have been nominated for anything, most of them are just as good.

There are two things that Tepper does very well. The first is to construct different environments and societies which work, which are interesting, and which have some sort of central mystery to them which teases and tantalises you through the story. She has a good imagination, and works the ideas through.

The other is to pose moral issues as part of the plot. She thinks about things, she cares. She is interested in questions such as the future role of mankind in the cosmos, and our relationship to other species. Will we evolve? If so, how? And how will our interaction with others affect this?

There has been a larger plot as well. Most of the novels since *Grass* have been following the same sort of theme. But even so I was surprised to see the whole thing come full circle at the end of *Sideshow*. There was some long term planning in there somewhere.

Of course in the middle of that lot came the excellent *Gate to Women's Country*, which is a most wry and elegant commentary on the sex war. Believe me girls, it is a classic. Read this book, and from then on, every time some macho twit gets up your nose, just say "reindeer" to yourself and you will collapse into giggles. Recommended.

This particular article, however, was prompted by the arrival of Tepper's latest offering, *Shadow's End*. It bears all of the trappings of a traditional Tepper novel. There is a mystery planet with a strange social ecology that involves a mysterious alien species. There is an arrogant, intolerant religion - male-dominated, of course. In fact there are two, although one masquerades as social philosophy. There is a change on the way, and seemingly ordinary but fated people caught up in it. So far so good.

Unfortunately Tepper's imagination seems to have failed her this time, and although the mystery unfolds with its customary elegance, the plot draws to a grinding halt in a discordant squeal of heavy Deus-ex-machina. And that capital D was deliberate. It is a shame, because she has some good points to make. This time, I'm sorry to say, she lost it.

Which is a shame, because the rest of the canon since *Grass* has been darned good. Some may find it offensive. After all, she is a feminist, and she does have a particular downer on intolerant, patriarchal religions. But personally I think they need all of the taking down a peg that they can get. "Blood, Iron and Voorstod" - it is a caricature, but a valid one rooted firmly in the nasty reality of groups like the Nazis, the Afrikaners and the Ulster Orangemen.

Which brings us neatly back to South Africa.

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## South Africa, Land of the Rising Expectations

I must start by saying that two days is by no means long enough to gain a decent impression, especially when you are working at full tilt throughout. All I can tell you for certain about Johannesburg is that is an airport, an hotel, a large office block appropriate to a monolithic state utility company, and lots of traffic jams masquerading as roads running between them. Everything else is impression and conjecture, or based on what (white) people told me. Bear this in mind when reading what follows.

To begin with I have to say that there were no outward signs of Apartheid. The whites I was with were always polite to blacks we encountered. There were no offensive signs. Having said that, however, the legacy was still there. In the hotel, most of the staff were black, even the restaurant managers and wine waiters. Only the receptionists and senior management were white. But tourism is an easy job for someone with no education to work their way into. Whilst there I had to lecture to an audience of some 80 or so power station managers. One of them was part-Asian, the rest were white. It goes without saying that they were all men.

The divide was also noticeable from the road. All of the posh cars were driven by whites. Some coloureds and blacks had cars, but they were older and more decrepit. Where blacks did drive, it was often in large numbers in the back of pick-ups - a scene familiar from many a TV report of Soweto. By the side of every road was a dirt track on which were blacks, either walking, or waiting for some form of public transport.

Actually there is very little in the way of public transport in Jo'burg. There are no trains, and very few buses. Those black people were actually waiting for taxis, which in South Africa means mini-vans with about 12 or so seats. These operations are run entirely by blacks, and they are the subject of serious rivalry. English readers may remember the odd news report of wars between Pakistani taxi operators in places like Wolverhampton. Occasionally there is violence. The same thing happens in Jo'burg, but with a level of bloodshed that you normally only find in the cinema.

Why? Because these wars are carried out using automatic rifles, which makes it kind of hard not to kill indiscriminately. You see, with the war in Angola and Mozambique just about over, and the people of those countries reduced to a stone age economy, weapons come cheap. If you have the right contacts you can pick up a second hand Kalashnikov for around 50 Rand, that's about \$A17 (\$US 13, £8). Frightening.

Also very worrying is the prominence of state advertising about the dangers of Aids. I bet you wouldn't expect to walk into the offices of a major Australian, European or American power company and see such material posted in every public place. In Africa, Aids is not a "gay plague", it affects everyone, it is killing the continent. As with so much else that happens in Africa, the West turns a blind eye.

The one thing that does make South Africa different is the language. There are two white cultures, not too well mixed. The Boer Wars still weigh heavy on their national consciousness, and they delight in their non-Englishness in a way that Americans or the more republican Aussies do not. Being used to this may be to their advantage, because cultural diversity will be the name of the game over the next few decades. Currently all of the street signs are in two languages: English and Afrikaans. In total, the country has thirteen, count them, thirteen major languages. They are going to need some very big road signs.

But the biggest problem facing the country is bringing the black population up to a decent standard of living. There are 1.7 million whites in Jo'burg, most of whom live in reasonable comfort. Food and housing is cheap, and the steaks have to be eaten to be believed. There are 3 million blacks in Soweto, few of whom have plumbing or electricity.

There is certainly action. Everywhere I went there was building. Roads, shopping centres, housing. Where there had been one colonial ranch with paddocks and a practice show jumping ring, now there is a Wimpy-style housing estate. Both, however, have walls, security gates and barbed wire.

Tourism, of course, is an easy card to play. Africa has wildlife in a way that few other parts of the world can boast, and animal parks are proliferating. They are also trying to make money from their animals in other ways - anything to increase their economic value above that what it is when poached for skins. I saw pictures of ostrich farms, and hotels and restaurants offer such delights as springbok pate and impala steaks. Not having time to slip into my were-leopard form and go hunting, I was seriously tempted by these, but never got to the right eaterie. Next time, perhaps.

In many ways, of course, the problem is one of government. For a few million Rand you could add plumbing, electricity and TV to every shack in Soweto, but such a project is not glamorous. The white elephant gas-into-petrol plant down by the cape costs as much to keep going, but gets much higher priority. And poor Mandela is set about by tribal rivalries that make trying to govern Northern Ireland seem like child's play. Not a pleasant prospect - there must be times when he wishes he was back in jail.

And of course there is no point in giving people home comforts if they have no jobs and can't afford to pay for them. They can't have good jobs without education, and that costs a lot of money. So the economy has to grow, and fast. Can it make it?

Certainly there is a will. The whites have seen that there is a world out there, and they want to be part of it, but turning South Africa into a modern economy will not be without heartache. They need to create jobs, but from what I have seen of their industry, it is full of middle-class people doing nothing very much. There is a lot of fat to be trimmed. In the UK, privatising the electricity industry resulted in 25% job cuts. South Africa could be a lot worse. They have a way to go before they will be competitive in world markets.

But I want to end on a bright note. In the West we often have a picture of South African whites as selfish, reactionary, racist lunatics prone to fascist politics and shooting anyone who gets in their way. This is not so, or at least not from the little experience I have had of them. They know they have a difficult task ahead, but know also that they have to make it work. I want to leave the final word to the guy who took me to the airport on my way home.

"It always gets me coming here", he said. "Look at all those names of foreign cities on the departures board. Two years ago there wouldn't have been one."

South Africa has come a long way. Let's hope it has the stamina to complete the course.

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## Isle of View, Pretenders unplugged

Those of you who have known me for a while will know that one of my biggest heroines is Chrissie Hynde, and it will come as no surprise that being unable to get a ticket for the exclusive unplugged gig that The Pretenders played in London earlier this year was a source of great distress to me. Fortunately some bright spark recorded the whole thing, and it is now available on CD for us all to enjoy.

But hey, the whole Pretenders thing is about that crashing guitar sound, yes? It is unique, it is glorious, it is unmistakably electric. And they are trying to do this unplugged? Surely some mistake here. Well, maybe.

It is indeed an unplugged event. Just acoustic guitars, drums, piano, Chrissie's unmistakable vocals and, when a bit of depth of sound is required, a string quartet. Does it work? Stay with me, dear reader.

The album opens with a stunningly good version of *Sense of Purpose*, which is a bit of a shame, because it is one of the best tracks, and what follows can seem a bit of a let down in comparison. This is different, this is experimental, this is patchy.

Sometimes it works. *Brass in Pocket* adapts superbly, *Chain Gang* less so. Which is weird. I mean, the Pretenders have such a distinctive sound, you can tell their stuff a mile off. How come some songs work acoustically and others don't? Guess I just don't know enough about music to work it out.

But it is the times when they go for something quite different that really stand out. *Kid*, done with just Chrissie's voice, her guitar, and strings, is wonderfully moving. *I go to sleep* with only vocals and piano works just as well. *Hymn to Her*, on the other hand, has a plain, slow harmonium backing. It is meant to sound like a church organ, and it doesn't work. Chrissie should know better than to try to transplant paganism into a church. A flute or harp would have been much more appropriate.

Overall, however, the one thing that stands out is the voice. In the midst of all those crashing guitars it is sometimes easy to miss just how good a singer Hynde is. And, of course, the softer backing gives you a much better chance of hearing those wonderfully barbed lyrics.

The album ends with the clarion call of *Revolution*. "I want to die for something", sings Chrissie, "I don't want to die for nothing". She needn't worry. She has given us some of the best rock songs ever written, the only pagan hymn ever to make the charts, and in songs like *A thin line between love and hate* (sadly not on this album) and *Chill factor*, enough condensed emotion to make even the most hardened misogynist think twice. I think she has made a worthwhile difference to the world. And I'm happy to buy any album she produces, even if parts of it are slightly less than perfect.

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## Multiverse - Cheryl goes video junkie

Multiverse, unlike BasiCon, was a real media convention run by real media fan clubs, in this case a joint effort from Trek, Babylon 5 and Red Dwarf groups. It was also surprisingly like BasiCon. There was slightly less manic silliness (no art show), but it was held in the same place on the same kind of shoestring and was similarly successful. Some of the programming was not really up my street: a debate on whether B5 is better than Trek (no contest), a trivia quiz for people who are obsessive about the shows. But people participated and enjoyed them, which is strange because I keep getting told that media fans are mindless morons who are incapable of doing anything except sitting, zombie-like, in the video room. Well, I thought, when in Rome....

And I stayed there, because I found something almost on a par with Plan 9 for riveting awfulness. Strange, because it was alien to the idea of a media con. "Golden age" SF had landed, and was proceeding to turn my mind to jelly.

It is all the fault of Mystery Science Theatre 3000, a totally weird Canadian TV program in which a guy who behaves like a refugee from a Saturday morning kids show and a bunch of moronic robots watch the worst SF films they can find in the archives and take the piss out of them. The offering I saw was called something like "The Space Station". Plot synopsis follows:

The US has built a space station and the Forces of Evil (never actually named as commies, but you know who they mean) want to destroy it. They hope to do this by replacing the scientist scheduled to fly on the first circumlunar mission with a double, who will then take control of the ship and crash it into the station.

The rest of the crew for said mission comprises Our Hero (Bill), a clean-cut American boy (co-pilot), and The Bitch, a petulant, ignorant but stunningly gorgeous girl (pilot) who goes all pathetic and wimpy whenever there is trouble. She keeps getting the plum jobs ahead of him because she is more photogenic, as a consequence of which she got promoted above him, despite being thoroughly incompetent. He hates her because of this. She hates everyone.

(This is making it sound almost good - the script is nowhere near so lucid).

Anyway, Our Hero susses out the bad guy. The commies have made the fatal mistake of forgetting to brief him on US culture, and the poor fellow, despite supposedly being a New Yorker, has never heard of the Brooklyn Dodgers. They fight, (Bill and the bad guy, not the Dodgers) and in the ensuing action the engines are accidentally fired, sending the ship off course and necessitating an emergency landing on the dark side of the Moon.

The commie villain later dies on an expedition to place a radio relay station on the bright side to enable a call for help, thus redeeming himself in the eyes of the plot: misguided, but heroic-ish in the end. Bill just about makes it back alive, having foolishly forgotten to remove the air tanks from his dead companion and nearly running out himself.

But the ship does not have enough fuel to take off again, so they must await rescue. Back on Earth, the President is concerned about the public reaction to Our Hero and Beautiful Girl stranded on Moon together, so they are ordered to get married! Bill doesn't mind, because she is gorgeous, and she goes all soppy because he is, of course, an Hero. So that he won't get bossed about by his wife, Bill is given a big promotion.

Bleaaarrggghh!!!!

Interestingly, this unendearing nonsense was penned by one Robert Heinlein.

But the weirdest part of the whole thing was that, although the Earth-space rockets were in the classical phallic style (Hugo-shaped), the Moon vehicle looked almost exactly like an Apollo lunar lander.

I think I'm losing it.

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## Reflections on Australia - fanzines

I haven't seen a huge number of fanzines whilst I've been here. There seem to be a lot of them, but most are on a highly intermittent production schedule. So, bearing in mind that they are gleaned from a highly restricted selection, here are a couple of recommendations.

I've already mentioned *Thyme*, Alan Stewart's weighty news-and-reviews offering. It is an excellent introduction to the Australian fan scene, but much of the content is from contributors, making it stylistically jumbled and of patchy quality. The best elements, by far, are Terry Frost's column and Ian Gunn's cartoons. Both also have fanzines of their own, although only Terry has managed to coax an issue into life since I have been here.

Ian is an engaging lunatic. He collects animation videos and airline spoons, he has a passion for weird magazines such as *Fortean Times*, and a wicked sense of humour that is for the most part enjoyable but occasionally, inadvertently crosses the threshold between teasing and causing distress. His cartoons are most fascinating for the detail, the things hidden in corners.

For example, the cover of the latest *Thyme* shows a group of bizarre aliens passing around a futuristic museum full of exhibits of Earth culture. In every detail there is a joke. The Statue of Liberty is juxtaposed with an Abu Simnel pharaoh. A case full of religious icons includes figures of Mickey Mouse and Mr. Spock. An exhibit of kitchenware features an empty McDonalds carton. There is an entire case full of toy stegosaurus (an obscure reference to one of his partner, Karen's obsessions and their museum-visiting activities whilst in London). A lot of thought goes into something like this.

Ian is possibly best known for his Fanimals series, in which various well known fans in animal caricature comment on recent events. The latest one is a "review" of Intersection, the Glasgow Worldcon. Again it is dripping with detail. There are running jokes about the invisibility of Gerry Anderson and the Australia in 99 bid, and one or two pointed comments on particular personalities, but by far the best bit is the where he weighs into the SECC acoustics. At the very top of the page is a dark roof section full of pipes and girders. In it are echoes of many of the comments being made below, and spread through them, word-bubble by word-bubble, so you really have to look hard to notice it, is the phrase, "little sir echo, how do you do". Lovely.

I don't know if Terry Frost can draw, although he does have a way with clip art and paste-ups. It is his incisive, acerbic writing style that I took notice of. "If this zine offends you", it says on the cover of *Mimezine Flashback*, "give it to a friend". For Terry is the Great Beast, the merciless destroyer, the critic to end all critics, and everyone else as well. Or so he would have us believe.

In particular, Terry is an unrepentant, unreconstructed, neanderthal ape-man; a seething pot of raging libido, frothing at the mouth at the sight of a naked shoulder or thigh, and

bad and dangerous to any girl foolish enough to cross his path. He appears in *Fanimals* as a randy tom cat. Normally I would find this sort of thing beneath contempt, and play Pretenders songs loudly at him until he went away. But Terry does it all so seriously. He thinks about it, he considers his feelings, he intellectualises them, and then does it anyway, with style.

You see, anyone can be rude, anyone can be abusive, anyone can be offensive. There is another fanzine editor here of whom I have heard it said that what he lacks in brain he makes up for in opinions. Terry is not like that. Everything he says is well thought out and well argued, even if, on close inspection, the argument turns out to be complete nonsense. Mostly he is bang on target, and very amusing. In many ways his writing reminds me of Pete Birks, and ageing UK editors will know that there can be no higher praise.

*Thyme*, Alan Stewart, PO Box 222, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Vic 3005;  
*Mimezine Flashback*, Terry Frost, 26 Head Street, Balwyn, Vic 3103.

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## Footnote

Talk of fanzines reminds me that next year's Hugo nominations will soon be upon us (you have all signed up for LACon, haven't you). With the Worldcon being in California rather than England, it is possible that Langford will not walk off with both fanzine awards. We should consider who might be a suitable alternative.

No, this is not a plug for EmCit. I'm actually thinking of Art Widner and *YHOS*. Art is an old time fan who was actually publishing in 1945 and is thus eligible for a retro-Hugo. Since then he vanished for an awful long time. Until this year, in fact, when he reappeared out of the blue with a new issue. Now admittedly he hasn't been publishing all that time, but the 'zine is over 50 years old. I think that deserves some kind of award.

Thanks to Kevin Standlee for pointing out this interesting opportunity.

Next issue, on the road in Scotland, though not Glasgow if I can possibly avoid it. Probably something on Tim Powers, Christmas in Australia, and my trip to San Francisco.

This issue's playlist:

*Too-tye-ay*, Dexy's Midnight Runners;  
*Pretzel Logic*, Steely Dan;  
*Greatest Hits*, The Eurythmics;  
*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Byrne & Eno;  
*Into the Music and Moondance*, Van Morrison;  
*Isle of View*, The Pretenders;  
*Banba*, Clannad.

Ciao,

and a very happy Solstice,

Cheryl