

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Well, the election has come and gone, Jeff Kennett's Liberal government has been returned with the expected large majority, the privatisation program continues, my job is safe for another four years, and Victoria breathes a collective sigh of relief that it is over at last. There were local council elections in between the Federal and State ballots. Having to vote three times in the space of a month can put you off democracy for a long time.

Of course there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth amongst Labor supporters, not to mention dire warning of massive job cuts, hospital and school closures and so on. We shall see. This time Kennett can start with balanced books rather than the appalling disaster he took over before. But I suspect he will be unable to resist continuing his tough guy image even if he has money to play with. Not that it is really that awful. It is a measure of how cushioned Australia is from the realities of brutal politics that Bruce Gillespie in *Metaphysical Review* can describe Kennett's regime as fascist with apparent seriousness (as if a true fascist would have anything to do with privatisation anyway). The trouble with Australians is that they don't know how well off they are.

Easter in Perth

Whilst the rest of the world is busy commemorating the birth and resurrection of Jesus, or sacrificing hares to Eoster, science fiction fans traditionally gather in hotels and perform their own rituals, primarily involving lots of talk, alcohol and sex. Australia is no exception to this custom, and this year the honour of hosting the festivities fell to one of my favourite cities, Perth. Having cunningly arranged a business trip to the UK in April, I was able to stop off along the way and take in the atmosphere. Officially the convention was known as the Festival of the Imagination, but most fans are an unpretentious lot, and it was more commonly known as SwanCon 21.

The first thing I noticed on arrival (other than the heat) was a facet of jet lag of which I was hitherto unaware. Normally when I travel overseas, I do so in big jumps and find that the adjustment to the new time zone is aided by the fact that it gets dark at all the wrong hours. Perth is either two or three hours behind Melbourne (yes, Australia is that big), depending on whether or not the Eastern states are in daylight saving mode. We had just gone from three to two and I hadn't really had a chance to assimilate the new arrangement before flying out. With only a three hour difference, it is nearly light at five-o'clock in the morning when your body thinks it is eight and that you are late for work. Getting back to sleep in such a situation is not easy, so I ended up feeling wrecked before the con had even

started. Eat your heart out, Terry Frost. Who needs recreational drugs and late night orgies? I just use QANTAS.

Neil on urban myths: "People can explain all they like about airflow, wing shape and lift. I still can't understand how something as big, heavy and metallic as a plane ever gets off the ground. If, on the other hand, you were to tell me that the bad food on aircraft was part of some sort of karmic burden necessary to get us into the air, I would probably believe you."

The Kings Hotel, where the convention was held, is ideally situated. It is almost in the centre of the city, a mere block or two from the main shops, and surrounded by restaurants and fast food joints. It also had some rather nice function rooms. Unfortunately I have now run out of nice things to say about the venue. Relations between the ConCom and hotel were clearly strained, holding parties anywhere except in the guests suites was near impossible, and they would not accept cheques in payment for room bills. The latter point was a source of considerable distress to several con members, but my personal distress came mainly from the bar. Having to pay \$2 for a diet coke in a glass so small and so full of ice that you could make at least three of them from one can seemed just a little exorbitant. Add this to the fact that they had no Guinness and no malt whisky and you end up with a remarkably healthy, but distinctly un-merry, Cheryl.

Dave Cake on Sandman: "Sandman is rather like a God, only more important".

The primary guest for the convention, as you might have guessed by now, was Neil Gaiman, and an ideal guest he is too. Neil is charming, witty, erudite, screamingly famous, massively talented and a really nice guy to boot. He is the sort of person that anyone would be proud to call a friend. Swancon was even more blessed because Neil was in the middle of shooting a fantasy series for the BBC and we were treated, not only to three minutes and eighteen seconds of trailer, a world premiere, but also to extensive readings from the novelisation. There will be more on *Neverwhere* in a separate section. Meanwhile, on with the guest list.

Unlike Neil, whom I first encountered in 1984, I had never met Storm Constantine before. I had only seen her from afar, wrapped in a cloud of Gothic acolytes (there should be a collective noun for Goths; a Gloom, perhaps). Much to my surprise, she turned out to be nothing like the dark, brooding image she affects. Instead she was warm, friendly, and treating the whole thing with the air of a schoolgirl on a Big Adventure. It is the first time I have ever been asked by an author if she could have a picture taken with me as a souvenir of the trip. (Please note that she was doing this with everyone, including Danny Heap).

Of course the fact that the major guests were two Goth icons meant that the convention was swathed in acres of black cloth and enough white face powder and mascara to paint a 747 up as a panda. It was: interesting. But quiet and civilised all the same. Some older fans complained that the guests were over-escorted and difficult to get to talk to. Perhaps, given the level of hero worship to which they are subjected, this was inevitable. Fortunately I am a brazen hussy who just muscles her way in and talks to people anyway. It is a rather useful talent for a journalist.

Jack Dann is now more or less resident in Melbourne having married an Australian. As with Neil, he is remarkably erudite and an excellent panellist, being able to converse intelligently on almost any subject. This is not always what one expects of a science fiction author. He is also flexible: his last novel was about Leonardo Da Vinci, and he is currently working on a piece about the American Civil War. His wife, Janeen, is charming and has hair to die for, but she is far from the pretty girl married to the rich American. A respected critic in her own right, she is just as capable as her husband of holding forth on fiction and did so on several panels. The pair of them are sadly deluded about the merits of Gibson and Sterling's execrable *The Difference Engine*, but then no one is perfect. So far, four intelligent, approachable guests, and two of them female. This is getting good.

The convention also invited several Australian authors. Simon Brown I hardly saw or heard. Even when he was on a panel he hardly ever said anything unless prompted. All I can tell you about him at present is that he is desperately in need of a new cover blurb writer for his novels. Sara Douglass, on the other hand, did speak. Whenever she got on a panel there always seemed to be a danger of some fatuous remark issuing from her lips. You could also most see the speech balloons floating along and dragging banners with big arrows that pointed back at her and screamed "look, I'm making a complete idiot of myself". This was strange, because Sara was obviously intelligent: you don't get to head a university history department without brains. And yet she drifted through the weekend with the air of someone totally bemused, if not a little intimidated, by her surroundings. It was left to Sean McMullen, forceful and opinionated, Terry Dowling, beaming beatifically as ever, and Stephen Dedman, just plain laid back, to hold up the honour of Australian writers.

Incidentally, I am planning to work my way through as many Australian authors as I can over the next year, reviewing their work here and, with any luck, helping them gain a wider audience. Come 1999 you should all be eager to meet them.

Neil on Hollywood executives: "She looked as if she had just mugged a sixteen-year-old girl and stolen her hair do".

An interesting departure from tradition was that the masquerade involved no actual parade. Instead the entire convention was invited to a masked ball and prizes were awarded for the best costumes. Attempts to enforce mask wearing soon collapsed, though not before I had lost my rag with the odious little fascist on the registration desk who persisted in demanding to see my badge at every available opportunity despite the fact that he had seen it several times before and knew damn well who I was. I calmed down a little after I learnt he had been harassing other female members as well, but seldom have I been so tempted to inflict grievous bodily harm on a member of a convention's staff.

The ball itself was a spectacular success in terms of costumes. Neil quite correctly awarded first prize to a group spectacularly attired as the principal characters from Babylon 5 and second to someone in a magnificent Transformer costume. However, the entire event was let down by the disco which catered almost exclusively for Neil and Storm's Gothic admirers. I did manage to persuade the DJ to play The Cure's superb Love Cats, and someone slipped The Time Warp in when no one was looking, but aside from that the music was dismal, discordant and thoroughly disappointing. Only Eric Lindsay had come prepared. He wandered round with a smug smile on his face and an anti-noise generator's

headphones over his ears. It was a truly amazing device which cut out base sounds completely. I must get one before I do many more long-distance plane trips: sleep will become so much easier.

Karen Pender-Gunn: "When's our anniversary?"

Ian Gunn: "Remembrance Day".

There were a surprisingly large number of panels that I wanted to go to, and most of them were thoroughly enjoyable. The only one I walked out of was the one on Nanotechnology where the panellists sat there and happily admitted they had read neither Drexler's theoretical book, nor *The Diamond Age*, nor *Terminal Café*. Sigh.

I was also impressed by the breadth of choice available. There were panels on Future Shock, Women in Mediaeval History, Fashion in Blake's 7, Use of Mythology in Literature, How to create a comic, writing folk lyrics, designing role-playing worlds and Hong Kong movies. Almost everyone was catered for. The only mistake the organisers made was to elect not to have moderators for each panel, resulting in several discussions degenerating into a free for all where only those with the loudest voices could participate, and others which wandered woefully from the point or became trapped in circles of unprovable assertion and counter-assertion.

Neil on the lot of the writer in Hollywood: "A few years ago Diana Ross bought the rights to make a film about the life of Josephine Baker. Appearing on a chat show, she announced that she intended to produce, direct and star in the film, not to mention sing the soundtrack. The interviewer asked her if, in that case, she was going to write the script as well. 'Oh no', she replied, 'I'll leave the paperwork to someone else'."

And so we came to Sunday night and the event we all had been waiting for, the Awards Ceremony. Who was this mysterious Cheryl Morgan, and would she win a Best Fan Writer award in the face of stiff competition from Terry Frost, Ian Gunn and Alan Stewart? Fat chance. In a convention of 250 people of whom about 20 knew who I was and only around 10 actually received Emerald City, I had about as much likelihood of winning as Salman Rushdie has of becoming president of Iran. To be honest I was absolutely staggered that I had been nominated. Whoever was responsible, thank you very much.

As it turned out, I was awarded an honourable mention in the short story competition (equivalent to equal third place) with which I was well pleased. The idea was great, the execution abysmal. But the major excitement of the evening was provided by Ian Gunn who walked off with five out of twelve awards, probably an unrivalled achievement.

For the benefit of overseas readers I should explain that Ian's success was not quite as impressive as it seems. Swancon was both the National Literary SF Convention and the National Media SF Convention, and as such awarded both the Ditmars and the abominably named ASFMA's. In Perth, lit and media fandoms exist side by side, there not being enough people to get territorial. In the Eastern States, however, fandom has bifurcated, and media fans themselves split into multiple clubs each dedicated to just one TV series. Every so often the media fans turn up at a NatCon and demand vociferously

that they need their own, separate convention. Then they ignore the media NatCon completely and organise their own, series-specific events. Thus the ASFMA nominee lists for categories such as Best Fan Writer and Best Fan Artist were almost indistinguishable from those in the equivalent Ditmar categories. Ian won the lot. Even more confusingly, Ethel the Ardvark, the Melbourne SF Club newsletter, was nominated for an ASFMA in the best fan fiction 'zine category despite never having carried fiction in its life. Just to prove how stupid the whole thing is, it won.

In the Business Meeting for the Media NatCon we discussed this nonsense and decided to try to amalgamate the awards and rationalise the categories. I'm fully in favour of this. That Terry and I should be nominated for Best Media Fan Writer seems to me utterly absurd, and I was surprised to find that, whilst I desperately wanted the Ditmar, I couldn't care less about the ASFMA. It was something I felt I didn't deserve.

What was agreed at the Business Meeting was that the whole subject of awards be opened to debate in fanzines over the coming year with a view to formulating a substantive motion for discussion at Basicon 2. So here I am starting the process by stating that Something Needs to be Done. I have this awful feeling that the entire debate will be ignored by media fans until such time as the Basicon Business Meeting arrives, whereupon they will turn up in droves and vote solidly to retain awards that they will proceed to ignore in subsequent years until another such motion is proposed. I hope not, because this is a wonderful opportunity to bring East Coast lit and media fans together in time for the Worldcon. I'm just not very optimistic right now. Derek, Sharon, Glenn, Carole, Jocko: over to you.

Philippa Maddern on sex in the Middle Ages. "With regard to homosexuality they tended to look more leniently on the active partner. If you were on top it was alright. But then they had funny views about women being on top too. They believed that the man could get pregnant if the woman was on top."

Looking back over this report, I see that I have had a number of complaints about the way the convention was run. And yet I enjoyed myself thoroughly. Being in the position of having to try to arrange social events to promote the Worldcon bid, I found myself at times wishing I could strangle members of the ConCom. You got the impression that, given a brewery and a bunch of real ale fans, they would arrange a sewing circle that would then fail to take place because they had neglected to order any thread. And yet, somehow, nothing much seemed to go wrong.

It was, Leigh Pemberton suggested to me in our hotel lobby on Tuesday afternoon, a convention that succeeded in spite of itself. Richard Scriven and his team had worked hard, in the face of ever decreasing committee membership, and come the day were too burnt out to think much, let alone care. But the assembled ranks of Australian fandom clubbed together to create a successful convention purely from the strength of their desire to have one.

In some ways it was very encouraging. In the nine months I have been in Melbourne I have been to three conventions there. None of them has been a disaster, although ArCon came close, but neither has there been anything of the scale and richness of a big British or American convention. SwanCon proved that Australian fandom has what it takes to create

an enjoyable convention. All we need now is a bit better organisation. With three years to go that shouldn't be too difficult, I hope.

Tuesday evening: Perth International. In the gathering dusk, my plane careered down the runway and set off in vain pursuit of the sun. Mindful of the karmic burden necessary to get a 747 off the ground, I looked wistfully down at the city as it fell away below.

Down on the beach, Lucifer looked out at the reddening sky. He wore black, a leather jacket and dark glasses in the hope of being mistaken for someone else: Lou Reed, perhaps. Life, he thought to himself, was a bitch, especially when you couldn't get out of it. On the other hand, if you had to be immortal, Perth was a damn fine place to do it. A damned fine place.

Thank you, Neil, for everything.

Highlights of the Convention

1. Listening to Jack and Neil, deep in discussion, comparing notes on their favourite authors: who inspires them, who's hot and who's not. And why. Better than any panel I attended.
2. The auction, in which I picked up some real bargains, and Justin Ackroyd provided splendid entertainment.
3. A near homicide in McDonalds. Wandering away from the counter with my sausage and egg McMuffin, I chanced upon the Turner Twins and some friends. "Mind if I join you", said I. "Not at all", replied Ruth, "given your other half the slip, have you?" "Sorry?", I asked, not sure whether to be just confused, or sad because Kevin was so far away. "Well, the other Worldcon bid person", she explained. I'm not sure whether she meant Eric or Perry, but blood nearly flowed.
4. The tickle fight with Elaine Kemp on the dance floor at the masked ball.
5. Basicon 2 winning the 1997 National Lit Con in the face of fierce competition from the charming and utterly un-devilish Tasmanian, Robin Johnson. Well, we smiled aggressively at each other.
6. Being invited to the literary lunch by Storm Constantine.
7. Getting an honourable mention for my short story.
8. Sean McMullen's daughter, who seemed to have more energy in her little finger than I will ever have in my whole life.
9. Danny Heap's speech at the closing ceremony, in which he cursed Neil to suffer a Sandman movie directed by Sam Pekinpah, and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as Dream and Pamela Anderson as Death.
10. Someone in the Feminism in SF panel explaining that any novel with a plot was essentially phallogocentric due to its urgent thrusting towards the climax of the story.

And, of course.....

Neverwhere

Somewhere, on the other side of a dream, there exists another, darker, magical London. A city in which an Earl really does have a Court, there is really an Angel called Islington, and the Black Friars are still a force to be reckoned with. Its name is London Below. It is a dangerous place.

Looking at the video clips, it is plain that we have entered a Gaimanesque world. Shadows play upon the protagonists, suggesting portents in their shapes. Characters wear a bizarre mixture of styles, representative of British Street Fashion at its most eccentric: clothes by Vivienne Westwood out of Oxfam. The overall look of the production reminded me strongly of Malcolm McLaren's *Ghosts of Oxford Street*, but when I mentioned this to Neil he said he had never seen the film. He then proceeded to tell me an amusing tale about how he and Alan Moore, sharing a pint and comparing their lots, discovered that they were both working on similar stories. Alan, having only a plot idea rather than a TV contract, nobly abandoned his project. There is nothing new in London, above or below.

In showing us the clips, Neil regaled us with fascinating tales of his experiences on set. By far the most amusing concerned a banquet scene starring Julie T. Wallace which was filmed on a dis-used underground station on the Piccadilly line. There was no way that the film crew and cast could avoid being seen. Indeed, Neil's script called for the scene to begin with a shot of the revellers reflected in the windows of a passing train. Yet there was no way that the passengers, flashing past in an instant, could be sure that they had seen the bizarre banquet, decked with stuffed pythons and apparently floating in mid air. It was an interesting day for Londoners. Just for a moment, a glimpse of London Below became real.

The atmosphere of the film was very much Sandman. There was blood, torture, violence, and lots of obscure pronouncements. It was not until Neil started to read from the novelisation that I realised the whole thing was also a classic British Comedy in the grand tradition of Douglas Adams, Dave Langford and that Terry fellow whose books I can never finish. It was violent and hilarious by turns. It was very, very clever.

The comedy element is provided by the hapless Richard and his awesomely organised, terrifyingly yuppified fiancée, Jessica. The contrast and conflict between the two characters is exemplified by the following passage (with thanks for Neil for proof-reading the quote):

"Jessica was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. She always waited for him there. Jessica didn't like Richard's flat: it made her feel uncomfortably female. There was always the chance of finding a pair of underwear, well, anywhere."

The strictures of writing comics have honed Neil's use of language. He is economical, elegant, poetic.

Contrapuntal to Richard and Jessica is the mortal plight of Door, a young girl from Below who is pursued by the villains of the piece. Their names are Croup and Vandermeir, but they might just as well have been Hale and Pace, Moriarty and Griptype Thynne, or any other classic pair of comical British thugs. Of course, in Neil's world, they draw real blood.

The other major element of the narrative is the intimate knowledge of London that only someone who has lived there for years can bring. Having done so myself, I find that Neil's prose really resonates for me. I know those places. I'm not sure why he chose Hanway Place for Richard's first entry into London Below. Perhaps he wanted to give a plug to a favourite Indian restaurant. Perhaps it was because it is just a great little location: so

cloistered, yet so close to Oxford Street. Or perhaps it was because some old memory of the original location of Games Workshop seemed to make it an ideal place for an entry to another, magical world. Only Neil can tell us, but if the location hadn't been real, the question would not have arisen.

And that just about describes it. The plot, quite simply, tells of how Richard rescues the wounded Door, how his normal life falls apart as a result, his involvement with the politics of London Below, and his quest to return to the world he knew. It will cover six episodes and be broadcast on BBC 2, after the watershed, beginning some time in October. The novelisation will appear at the same time, and the music, by the very wonderful Brian Eno, will doubtless be available for purchase as well. Non-UK readers should start pestering their Pommie friends for favours now.

Heart of Madness

There are some authors whose work can be safely skimmed. Read every fourth word or sentence, and you will lose none of the sense of the story, miss no nuance of the narrative art. There are others whose prose is so dense, so intense, that you find yourself reading each sentence four or five times to make sure you haven't missed anything. M. John Harrison is one of those writers.

Bloomsbury, London. Above a small bookshop in Museum Street lives a man called Yaxley. The bookshop specialises in occult tomes. I've been there myself on many occasions, both in search of reference material and to while away the time after a visit to the British Museum. Yaxley never went into the museum. It frightened him. He was a real magician.

The novel is called *The Course of the Heart*. It is not science fiction, but Harrison's Virconium novels count as fantasy which is how, with the invaluable recommendation of an old friend, I found him. Thank you, Richard. One of your best suggestions.

Yaxley is a user, a manipulator. His drug is sorcery, his fuel, people. He searches out those vulnerable individuals whose lust or curiosity leads them to yearn for some source of power or beauty beyond our normal experience. Invariably their purposes are thwarted, their dreams dashed. It is not clear whether Yaxley ever benefits from his betrayals.

Some of his victims are as evil as he, seeking some perverted satisfaction that only sorcery can provide. Others are innocents, seekers after a better world than the one in which we find ourselves. Had he spoken to me one day in the Atlantis Bookshop, I might have been one of them. Instead it was three young Cambridge students: Pam Stuyvestant, Lucas Medlar and the narrator, whose name might be Jack, but is really anyone who sees a land just beyond ours, a Narnia for adults in which, somehow, everything is better.

Harrison on amateur landscape painting: "One or two of them showed the cottages and the breakwater of a fishing village in some less well-designed world than ours. There was a sunset of suety ochre bands. The boats with their crude triangular sails, you imagined,

would shortly go out and fish for something more amorphous, less evolved, than haddock. Someone there would be looking out of a window, writing a letter, 'We must not judge God by this. It's just a study that didn't come off'."

We never quite learn what it was that Yaxley did with those innocent lives, but years later the scars still haunt them. Pam and Lucas have got married, clinging to each other in a vain attempt to protect themselves from whatever horror their curiosity had awoken. Sensing a need for support, they construct a vast, sweeping buttress on the gothic cathedral of their lives.

The world they sought through Yaxley's magic had failed to materialise, so they built their own, a fantastical mediaeval kingdom called The Couer which exists, Tanelorn-like, between our world and heaven. This they 'discover' through the fictitious diaries of travel writer and amateur historian, Michael Ashman.

Sensing Pam's need for security and attention, Lucas writes her into the story as Gallicia Heirodole, the sacred Empress whose physical body might die, but whose immortal spirit is preserved through the line of her descendants until it finds final flowering in the Stuyvestant family. She, ever the romantic, plays along, writing a role of her own with all the skill, insight and worldliness of Barbara Cartland.

Lucas, of course, needs to be needed. He sees in Pam a weaker spirit whose frailties he must bolster to give himself purpose in life. In his own way he is as insecure as she. Naturally they are doomed to failure. Pam dies, burning herself up with illnesses in a desperate quest to become the centre of everyone's lives. Lucas, unable to save her, sets out on a quest to emulate Michael Ashman and, in discovering The Couer for real, bring his beloved back to life.

"We must not judge God by this world. It's just a study that didn't come off" - Vincent Van Gogh.

When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse,
Out of the corner of my eye.
When I looked around, it was gone.
I cannot put my finger on
It now, the child is grown,
The dream is gone.

Roger Waters

Our narrator, meanwhile, simply lives his life. It has ups, it has downs. Through all the strains of Yaxley's betrayals, Pam and Lucas's neuroses, he tries to see the good along with the bad. Van Gogh looked beyond the world and glimpsed something better. Unable to capture it on canvass, he drove himself mad and committed suicide. But there is only one world, and it behoves us to make the best of it. Like Lucifer on the beach at Perth, we have no escape, only holidays.

Across Realtime with Vernor Vinge

Whilst Australian fandom was living it up in Perth, the UK equivalent descended on Heathrow for Evolution. I was well peeved that it could not be on both sides of the globe at once. One good reason for this was the sheer embarrassment of leaving poor Martin Hoare to carry the Melbourne Bid on his own in the face of four coachloads of Croatians laden down with free booze with which to ply the unsuspecting Pommie voter. But I was equally annoyed at missing out on meeting Vernor Vinge. I have read three of his novels now and, whilst I would never hold them up as paragons of literary merit, I have thoroughly enjoyed all three and have been impressed with his inventiveness and willingness of play with scientific ideas.

Across Realtime is a collection of two novels linked by the theme of a common invention. *Publisher's Weekly*, which I guess is pretty much an expert in the field of hyperbole, informs us that "this is *true* science fiction". Elsewhere in the blurb the phrase "hard SF" is bandied about. Truth, of course, is largely a matter of perception. As Aleister Crowley once sagely commented, everything I say three times is true. But the hard SF tag I would certainly quibble with. Larry Niven this ain't, and you should not expect any great degree of scientific rigour in Vinge's work. Instead what he does is to take an idea, what if *this* had been invented, and think through the implications, weaving a story around them. Provided you are not the sort of person who would immediately think, "that couldn't possibly work", you should enjoy the results.

When Captain Allison Parker (USAF) took off from Vandenburg airforce base on a surveillance mission she had more than taking a precautionary peek at the Soviets in mind. Her boyfriend, Paul Hoeler, worked at Livermore Laboratories and had intimated to her that something was going on there that might be a threat to national security. The airspace over Livermore is restricted, but that should not pose problems to an official USAF spy plane, especially one whose flight path was practically in orbit. Allison instructed her pilot to lay in a course that would take them home directly over the labs, then settled back to see what her sensor equipment could come up with. It was the last action she took for over fifty years.

In the case of the two novels in question, the idea that Vinge postulates is the bobble, a freezing of space-time that allows a portion of the universe to be cut off from the rest of the reality. Such a thing, if you could do it, would constitute a military weapon so powerful that the scientists who invented it might be reluctant to hand it over to their own government. They might even be tempted to use it themselves to promote World Peace. Or rather, to enforce it.

And so we arrive in a future California reduced almost to mediaevalism through the restrictive dictates of the Peace Authority concerning scientific research. There is little medicine, only cottage industry, and no motorised transport. Only those forms of technology necessary for entertainment: radio, television, home computers, are allowed to develop. Science will never again be allowed to produce the frightening instruments of mass destruction that once threatened the planet. Anyone caught trying to do so gets bobbled.

But what if bobbling is not a permanent process? What if the field that generates a bobble is unstable and might decay? What has happened to the people inside the bobbles? The tanks, the aircraft, the soldiers, the nuclear warheads (some of them on the point of going bang)?

And so we have the first novel, *The Peace War*. The bobble is invented, it is poorly understood, but used immediately because of the immense power it confers on its owner. The second novel takes place in a world in which bobble technology is available to all and can be used as a sort of one-way time machine. Don't like the world you live in now? Can't wait for the interest on your investments to accrue? Want to see how your grandchildren grow up? Want to see the end of the universe? No problem, just bobble up with as much kit as you think you might need so many years into the future. You'll come out fresh and ready to go at the designated time. Just bear in mind that the world you end up in might not be the Utopia you expect. Far from finding a world crammed with masses of amazing new inventions, you might find a world with no people in it at all.

Remember also that you can't go back. If one of your party should happen to get left outside the bobble they will be stranded in whatever unpleasant milieu you were hoping to escape, with no chance of rescue unless they can live long enough to still be around when your bobble opens. That would not be a nice thing to happen to someone. It could also be a neat new method of murder.

Marooned in Realtime is essentially a detective novel based around the idea of bobble-based time travel. It is rather well done, containing all of the obscure hints and clues, all of the perverse characters brimming with motivation, that you might find in an Agatha Christie. I was impressed that Vinge managed to mix genres so neatly.

There is also another thread running through the novels, that of runaway scientific progress. My own feeling is that Vinge has not thought this one through properly. He has taken what is currently happening in the field of microcomputers and applied it to the whole of science without regard for the possibility of things like physical limits that might occasionally slow progress. But it is an interesting idea. What would happen to the world if scientific progress were truly exponential?

So there we have it (she says, dropping into a Barry Norman impression), two novels, common idea. Not great art, but good entertainment. Seven out of ten, and deserves to earn the publishers a few shekels. There should be more SF like this.

Screen in flight

One of the benefits of travelling to London via Perth is that you get to fly BA. You can still have your QANTAS Frequent Flier points, but the film programme is more interesting. You are freed from the endless parade of Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock.

If I were to be asked to be the subject of one of Terry Frost's fan interviews in *Mimezine Flashback* there is one question I would find difficult. What is my favourite James Bond

film? Hard to say, really. Until recently I had only seen one, *Live and let die*, and that only because I had a contract to write a computer game based on it. Given the chance to see *Golden Eye*, I thought I should broaden my horizons.

Two scenes into the film, I was ready to give up. It was the most appallingly implausible, macho, ego massaging (and no, that is not the m word that first came to mind) garbage I have ever seen. Eventually the film made a few desultory nods in the direction of political correctness. This time Bond's girl is not utterly helpless, though this does not seem to lessen her susceptibility to the testosterone twerp's charms. Judi Dench does her best to salvage things with a fine performance as M, and Robbie Coltrane is his usual thuggish self as a KGB agent turned gangster, but basically the film is a pile of not very engaging nonsense. Next time some guy tells me that Anne McCaffrey novels are crap I shall ask him if he likes Bond movies.

Oh, and Pierce Brosnan as Bond? Well, he is less wooden than Roger Moore, but then so is an oak tree. Give me Sean Bean any day. Yum.

The other film I watched through was *Jumanji*. I have to say that this was not Robin Williams at his best. Indeed, it was not very funny at all. But the special effects: wow! On the way from Melbourne to Perth QANTAS had treated us to *Ace Ventura: when Nature calls*, which I had not watched properly because they had seated me bang in front of the big screen and trying to watch it hurt my eyes. But I did notice that it had animals, lots of them, real ones.

Jumanji has lots of animals too. None of them are real, they are all computer generated, and it is not that easy to tell. The effects in *Jumanji*, like the morphing in *City of Lost Children*, are so good that it seems likely it will soon be possible to film anything. *Jurassic Park* had it easy because dinosaurs have no fur or feathers, but the techniques are getting there. So what do you want? Dragons? Gollum? Puppeteers? Cthulhu? Anything is possible. Just give us a few more MIPs. I look forward to it.

Passing through Britain

This was nearly entitled "passing out in Britain", which is partly a reflection of the level of alcohol consumption involved in spending a weekend with Martin Hoare and Dave Langford, and partly the result of the wonderful British weather having gifted me one of the worst bouts of flu I have had in ages. Those of you who still think that I have a glamorous, jet-setting life-style might like to ponder on the fact that if someone has paid for you to fly half way round the world to do some work for them you darn well have to do it, no matter what sort of temperature you are running.

Fortunately I did manage to catch up with a fair number of friends whilst I've been here, and profuse thanks are due to everyone who lent me a bed for the night or fed me. I should also note that Mr. Langford would like to extend his warmest felicitations to the whole of Australian fandom, with the exception of Peter Nicholls who likes to believe that a vicious hate campaign is being waged against him in *Ansible* and would be deeply disillusioned to find Dave saying anything nice about him.

The thing which has been most noticeable about the UK this time round has been the plague of notices afflicting every restaurant, café and fast food outlet in London. "Our beef is 100% imported", they promise, except of course for McDonalds who can proudly claim that their burgers never contained any beef anyway (joke copyright D.Langford). This, of course, is bizarre. No one has been proven to have died from BSE, most of the known CJD cases are directly linkable to the use of growth hormone treatments made from human corpses, and nothing is being said about the sheep from whom the cows are supposed to have caught the disease. It is far more likely that people will die from cigarette smoke, from AIDs or from crossing the road, and yet there are no panic measures in place to ban cigarettes, sex or cars. Sometimes human beings can be very strange.

The other major news item whilst I've been here was the Queen's 70th birthday, which gave me an opportunity to remind myself of the awful jingoism of the BBC. Arriving in my hotel room on a Monday evening, I was shocked to find the BBC news devoting 15 minutes of a 30 minute broadcast to the Queen's life story. I thought she must have died. But no, she was having a birthday in 6 days time and they were just starting to get warmed up for it.

In the middle of all this, Andy and Fergie announce, much to the surprise of all their friends, that they are getting divorced. The BBC tactfully comments that there was no mention of any pressure being placed upon them by the Palace. The Scottish Daily Record had no such qualms: "Queen orders Royal Divorce", screamed the placards. It amazes me how the Palace press office seems to think that people will believe the most outrageous lies just because they tell them.

Britain: gah! Can I go home now?

Footnote

Well, fortunately I can. I have a flight out this evening and I'm making use of some dead time to finish off this rather late issue. If all goes well, this will also be the first issue available by newsgroup subscription. Emerald City: the only Pommie fanzine produced in Australia and available off a Net site in California. Small world, isn't it.

There's just enough space here to insert a small but heartfelt HOORAY! At the news that Ian Gunn has been nominated for the Best Fan Artist Hugo. Here is a deserving cause if ever there was one. Vote Australian, you know it makes sense.

Ciao.