

EMERALD CITY

Issue 11

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Introduction

Now here's a rare thing. Not only does this issue have a genuine guest article, it also has a sort of letter column. Please don't think that this is the start of a trend. I am, of course, very grateful to Jay Freeman for allowing me to re-print his review of *Independence Day*, but I do not intend to follow the fannish tradition of filling up half the 'zine with a letter column. Most people receive this 'zine over the Net, and if I'm going to make them pay to download waffle I'll try to make sure it is informative waffle, not general conversation. If people write me something really interesting I'll print it, but I won't print letters just because I get them.

Everyone's gone to the Ball

Once upon a time, in the land of make-believe, the beautiful people had a grand ball. Their costumes were wondrous to behold: there were queens, witches, butterflies, dragons, vampires, brave knights, beautiful damsels and evil lords. A fabulous time was had by all.

On June 22nd 1996 in Melbourne we did pretty much the same thing.

Everyone has a dream. Wendy, Chris, Gail and Kerri probably dream of a large, thriving Costumers' Guild which runs large, successful costume cons. Me, I'd be happy with a Worldcon masquerade that makes our American visitors gasp with awe the way they did when Teddy and co. lit up their glass armour at Intersection. In the end it boils down to the same thing. We need to be able to run good costume parades, and we need good costumers to enter them.

Before in *Emerald City* I have been fairly critical of the organisational abilities of Australian con runners. It seems a little rich that the first time I get involved in an event I praise it to the skies, but then its success was hardly anything to do with me, I only got involved in the last few weeks. There are three points in particular that I would like to single out.

First, it was well publicised in the right sort of places. Adverts went to places like haberdashery shops and drama schools. The SCA guys complained that they heard about it rather too late, but at least they were told. Also Kerri's artwork was superb. The material that went out looked professional.

Second, Wendy was not afraid to ask for sponsorship. They provided technical equipment, prizes and advertising. We had a lot less money worries as a result, and there were not big signs up everywhere saying "buy your fabric at Lincraft", or "welcome to the Lincraft Costume Ball".

Finally, Wendy is a ferociously good organiser. Long before the Ball started, she had worked out everything that needed to be done, had created job descriptions, and made sure that the people involved knew what they should be doing. A couple of weeks before we had a big planning meeting where we went through it all in detail looking for things that might go wrong and devising means of coping if they did. Any big convention would have been proud of the approach.

The chosen venue was the Dallas Brooks Centre on Victoria Parade. As this is owned by the Freemasons I had a few pangs of conscience, but then I suspect that their grip on Australian society is somewhat less insidious than it is in London, and they had the massive advantage of charging only per head, not for function space, so the regular requests for more room due to attendance continually outstripping expectations were not the problem they might have been. They wouldn't let us take down the pictures of the Queen, but then she was obviously in costume too so I figured if she was entering into the spirit of things she might as well stay.

We finally ended up with over 160 guests and 28 acts in the parade. Given that we only had an hour and a half to get through the parade and photo call, and the reputation that costume parades have for over-running, there was a certain amount of concern about timekeeping. We relaxed just about every other rule because it was the first time for many people, but time we were going to be strict about.

As 7.30 approached the level of panic in the green room rose rapidly. Every contestant was convinced that everyone else looked great and they looked awful. This is normal. A lot of people complain about the way costumers insist on particular facilities and procedures at cons, but getting up on stage in something you have made in front of several hundred (or several thousand at a Worldcon) people is a scary business. It is also no fun at all to be kept waiting for hours in a hot, heavy costume, lashings of latex and make-up and a complex hair do that you know has a shelf life of no more than 30 minutes whilst the guy in the swamp creature costume drips green ooze over your best crinoline. Especially when your costume is too wide to get through the toilet door. The more you can do to keep the contestants calm and comfortable, the better the parade will work. Good Den Mums are invaluable.

Thanks to Alex's wonderful headsets, Wendy was free to welcome guests and judges whilst I kept an eye on things backstage and consulted her when necessary. We only had two real questions: the girl with the barb wire skirt, which we just kept well out of everyone else's way until it was needed, and the girl who wanted to come on wearing nothing but a loin cloth and body paint (Wendy made an on the spot ruling: tits are OK, full frontal is not).

And suddenly it was time to go. Wendy directed things from out front. The headsets kept her in touch with me backstage and Alex at the tech desk, ensuring everything was kept in synch. It worked brilliantly. So brilliantly, in fact, that we finished about half an hour early and had to schedule some impromptu dancing. The only real snafu we had was playing the wrong music for one act, and that was because we'd stupidly left the tapes in their boxes, giving poor Alex far more to do in a hurry than was necessary. We won't make that mistake again.

For a first time, the standard of costumes was pretty high. A lot of the entrants had no real idea of what was expected, or how to present themselves on stage, but they all looked wonderful. I'm not really competent to judge workmanship, but Gail did and seemed well impressed. But what really pleased us was the audience. Many of them were stunning,

and plenty good enough for the parade. I can't do justice to the costumes in words, but we are hoping to put up a web page for the Guild sometime soon and there should be pictures on that. I'll also have a photo album with me at LA Con.

It seems unfair to single anyone out for particular praise when there were so many good costumes there, but I do think that a few people deserve particular praise. So, in no particular order, we have a few extra awards:

- to Chris Ballis for his splendid Napoleonic naval uniform, every stitch of which was hand done;
- to Debra Cunningham for her superb Elizabeth 1st outfit - anyone who takes two weeks off work before the ball to finish a costume deserves to win Best in Show;
- to David Roberts for his completely insane shower, rubber ducks and bubble gun costume which kept the whole green room laughing;
- to Angela Hicks whose flower costume was one of the most eye-catching of the lot even though she chickened out of the parade because she thought she wasn't good enough;
- to Anna Lui for the most beautiful mediaeval dress I have ever seen;
- to Kerri Valkova and Jenny Hitchcock for finding some fabulous materials;
- to the guy in the stone angel outfit and the guy with the red bat-wing cape and skull codpiece, both of whom should have been in the parade;
- to the guy with the pneumatic boobs, short leather skirt and thigh boots for managing to walk in 6 inch heels;
- to the girl in the Scarlet O'Hara dress for hand-printing the fabric herself;
- and of course to Wendy, Chris, Gail, Kerri and the rest of the crew for making it all happen.

Did I forget to mention the displays of old costumes, the mask and doll competitions, the fact that the disco was good and the food palatable? It really was a good night. I was running on so much adrenalin that, on getting home at 2.30 in the morning, I switched on the computer and wrote a long, enthusiastic email to Kevin. We all got a tremendous buzz from how well it went, and judging from some of the comments from the audience we are going to have a much bigger event next year.

So how do I feel now about the Worldcon masquerade? Very confident. I have no doubt that we know how to run a good parade and will have some excellent entries and hall costumes. My one concern is that as things get bigger Alex will not be able to handle all the tech stuff by himself. He was stretched enough this time. So if there is anyone out there who is interested in working in tech, sign up for next year's ball now. If this year is anything to go by, it should be great fun to work on.

Australia in 1499

As if one weekend's dressing up wasn't enough for me, I followed the costume ball with my first SCA revel in Australia. It being midwinter, I was expecting a fairly big event, but my expectations were exceeded.

Several of you reading this will be Far Isles members and will know the sort of things we normally get up to back in Pommie Land. The rest of you will have to get bored whilst I draw comparisons, but if you've never been to an event like this before I hope you'll get a basic idea of what goes on.

The first thing that struck me was the number of people: around 200. I've never seen even half that many at a Far Isles event. The standard of dress was pretty high too. I rather let the side down because most of my good stuff is back in the UK. If you think you'll feel silly dressed up in mediaeval costume pretending to be some historical character, try doing it in the company of 200 others. You'll be surprised how normal it feels after a while.

Another thing that was really impressive was the decoration of the hall. It is traditional in Stormhold (Melbourne) for there to be a table dressing competition at Winter Revel and some truly sumptuous stuff resulted. There were candles and flower displays everywhere. Banners were flown, tablecloths carried coats of arms, and several tables had beautiful awnings arrayed above them. Some people had even made their own furniture. It helped that the hall was passingly mediaeval (quite an achievement for Australia), but it would have looked great without the vaulted ceiling and minstrels' gallery.

Where we Poms did score was on the food. Oh, there was plenty of it all right. Most people on my table were newcomers and, despite my warnings about pacing yourself, were well stuffed long before the final courses arrived. But much of it was a little unimaginative. There were some very splendid honey and nut appetisers, and an excellent fish dish, but a lot of the courses were rather bland: boiled asparagus, roast beef, boiled zucchini, roast chicken, and, much to my horror, mushy peas. Of course some mediaeval food was bland, but a lot of it was very heavily spiced (for the very good reason that it probably wasn't very fresh). I think they could do better here.

By the way, for those of you who are not familiar with such things and are confused about my list of dishes above, mediaeval cooks never served more than one food item at once. There was no meat and two veg. You would get three separate courses, one of meat and one for each vegetable. In Far Isles it is also traditional to divide the feast up into separate "removes", each of which comprises a savoury or soup, a meat dish, a vegetable and a sweet. I believe that this is also good mediaeval practice, but Stormhold did not seem to follow it.

I must also compliment the people of Stormhold on the quality of their music. Several of the members seemed to be professional musicians and quite a few also made their own reproduction instruments. I saw a harp, a lute, a lyre and bagpipes around the hall. And the singers could hold their own against most choirs of monks.

With such good music, of course, the dancing was very popular. There was also some exhibition dancing during the meal, and a couple of jugglers whose skill with the diablo was most impressive. I must admit that I missed the rousing renditions of such classics as *Sir Jock of the Sword*, but you can't have everything. I gather that the society does have good filkers. I just need to find them.

Court was well done, although there seemed to be very little skulduggery going on - it consisted largely of lots of people being rewarded for good service. I also think that Prince-Archbishop Theophilus, not to mention the sadly missed Princess Helloise, could knock spots off Australia's royalty when it comes to speeches. Still, can't have everything, and it was a most enjoyable evening. At this rate I'm going to have more social events to attend than weekends in which to attend them.

Oh, and I discovered Fabian's back rubs. Aussie FemFen will know what I mean.

Courting disaster

It is not an easy thing to review the third part of a trilogy when you are fairly certain that most of your readers have never even heard of the first two volumes. However, I will not allow an Elizabeth Hand novel to go unmentioned, so I guess I'll just have to skim quickly over the first two as well.

We open with *Winterlong* and find a far future decayed America that is post more holocausts than many people can remember. What government there is resides in the orbiting HORUS colonies, it being deemed better to have an entirely artificial environment than an entirely polluted one. The members of this new nobility are called Ascendants, because at some point or other they managed to get up there (probably massacring the previous inhabitants along the way) and what little law there is is enforced by their space pilot corps, the Aviators.

It soon becomes obvious that the "shinings" are not the only things to have devastated poor Mother Earth. Genetic engineering has also run riot, leading to abominations such as the dog-like Aardmen. The most obvious new lifeforms are called Geneslaves and are treated as such, but many people are not quite people any more either. And so we meet Wendy Wanders, a once autistic empath now on the run from the scientists of the Human Engineering Laboratory (HEL - geddit) in the company of Miss Scarlet, a talking chimpanzee. They end up in the City of Trees, the former Washington now given over mainly to pleasure parlours.

Meet also Margalis Tastanin, Aviator Imperator, the most ruthless of the Ascendants' generals. He is searching for METATRON, an android AI programmed with the military knowledge of previous Ascendant hierarchies. It would be an invaluable weapon if found, and Washington seems like a good place to start.

Much blood and suffering follows. It is plain that Hand sees this world as ultimately corrupt, and she loses few opportunities to rub the message in. There is also a suggestion of developing mental powers in mankind and possibly a return of Ancient Gods, or at least Powers The Like of Which.... Tastanin is killed, Wendy and Scarlet escape with the help of a zoologist called Jane (and there may be some sort of joke intended here).

So to book two, *Aestival Tide*, where we find Tastanin rescued by some of his Ascendant masters and resurrected as a Rasa (cyborg). It is unclear what role this episode plays in the overall story except to make Tastanin less than human and to reinforce the message of the debased evil of the Ascendants. In particular we are introduced to the practice of Harrowing, the ritual consumption of the brains of victims who were at least living when

you started. Yuk! Note also that the scientist in charge of Wendy's case in HEL was called Emma Harrow.

The action takes place in the domed city of Araboth, one of the few places on Earth deemed fit (thanks to its environmental control) for Ascendants to live in. By the end, of course, it is destroyed, with only Tastanin and a few companions escaping. It was a strange book, but I still loved it if only for the party scene in which we learn that the band are playing a well-loved traditional folk song called *Court of the Crimson King*.

And so to the final volume, *Icarus Descending*, which was never published in the UK and has taken me a couple of years to track down. Thanks, as usual, to Alan Stewart who seems to own every SF book ever published.

As we might expect, Wendy and Tastanin are re-united eventually, and both become embroiled in a Geneslave rebellion lead by the resurrected clone of a leading geneticist, Luther Burdock, and the miscreant METATRON. Burdock, whose mind is distinctly flaky, seems genuinely concerned about his "children" (he did, after all, make many of them from his own daughter). METATRON, on the other hand, has an entirely different agenda. And I must admit that choosing an military AI as your embodiment of ultimate evil has a certain elegance to it. I leave it as an exercise to the reader to decide just what awful denouement Hand manages this time. It is appropriately awful, promise.

There's a lot of heavy irony in the book (ssh - not a word to Ben Yallow!). For example, Jane, who was so devoted to her animals, is least able to accept the Geneslaves as fellow humans. And Tastanin, whom we have been lead to think of as the ultimate evil, is slowly transformed into the only possible saviour of humanity, more a victim of the Ascendants than their ally.

These were not easy books to read (unless you like having your stomach churned), nor do they have a hopeful message. The Hand line seems to be that we have done badly by Mother Earth, are likely to continue to do so exponentially, and eventually we will reap our just rewards. In many ways it reminds me of John Brunner's eco-disaster novel, *The Sheep Look Up*. You keep reading it, expecting things to get better, and they just get worse. But these things need saying, and if they are going to be said I would prefer them to be set down by a writer of Hand's elegance and intensity than by some lesser hack. If a book is painful to read, but you keep at it anyway because of the quality of the writing, that speaks volumes for the author.

No men, no pain?

David Brin makes it to the pages of *Emerald City*. But this is not a review of *Brightness Reef*. I hate starting series in the middle, and have avoided Brin's books in the past on the grounds that any series with "war" in the title is probably naff. Having now tried his work, I'll probably give the Uplift War a go. But this is something entirely different.

Those of you who know me well will be aware that one of my all time favourite books is Sherri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (warning to male readers - avoid this book if you have a delicate ego). Like Joanna Russ's classic *The Female Man*, it is concerned with societies divided on gender lines. It is the sort of thing you expect intelligent female SF writers to tackle. It is not the sort of thing you expect from a man.

The idea of a planet settled by a seed ship which then loses touch with the rest of humanity is not new: the name Pern springs to mind immediately. But as far as I know, David Brin is the first person to have such a world settled by a group of radical feminists intent on creating a society free of the evils of men. *Glory Season* describes this world, and its first encounter in millenia with the outside galaxy.

Technically, as I might have expected from Brin, the book is fascinating. Sensibly rejecting the high risk (and high tech) strategy of relying solely on artificial insemination, Brin's founders looked instead for a means of reducing the need for men without doing away with them entirely. Many of us probably remember from school biology lessons the fascinatingly naughty fact that aphids reproduce asexually for part of their reproductive cycle. In mammals, according to Brin, such natural cloning is possible, but not without certain chemicals present only in male sperm to prepare the womb for action. So for the most part you can have a society consisting of female clones, but you need a few men around to "spark" the process.

The next problem is how to keep those men you have in order. If you must have them around, how do you prevent them from starting wars, raping people and all those other silly little games they play? You could castrate them all. Eunuchs are noted for their calmness. However, that rather defeats the object. Ah, but what if you could give them a sexual season like other animals. Then they would only be a nuisance for a few weeks each year. Much more controllable.

Now, what do we do about all those sexually frustrated women. (Contrary to what Andrea Dworkin might think, so of us **do** enjoy it.) Simple, we give them a season too. And to prevent things getting too silly, let's make it the opposite side of the year from the male one. Men get hot in midsummer, women in midwinter. Conception isn't impossible at either time, but there is much less urgency about things, and very little romantic nonsense. It is clean, clinical, clever.

The final plank of the social design concerns the potential flaw of relying on clones. Without variation, how will evolution work? The species may stagnate and die out. Brin's designers overcome this by making only those children conceived during the female season clones. Those born as a result of matings in the male season are true sexual offspring and this genetically unique. They are second class citizens, never able to take a full part in the life of their clone clan, but they may just have enough natural talent to go out and make enough of a fortune to afford to found their own clan. Natural selection is given a chance to work its magic.

Some of Brin's follow up sociology is interesting too. There are definite echoes of *Brave New World* in the way that each clone family has its economic niche to which its members are ideally suited. The political tension between the more moderate adherents of the founders' plans and the radical Perkinites, who want to do away with men altogether, is also well done. There were some very strange views about what jobs men could and could not do, but then I remembered that in our society people who are capable of surviving childbirth are deemed incapable to any work that is strenuous or dangerous. Brin was just being clever again.

Where the book falls down is in the portrayal of the lead character. She is a naive young summer child trying to make her way in the world and accidentally getting involved with the inconveniently male interstellar visitor. The first problem is that writing about naive characters is very difficult because any reader with half a brain will quickly be miles ahead of them. I kept wanting to slap the silly bitch round the face and point out to her the

obvious truths about her world that were right under her nose. If she was as good a maths are we were told, surely she'd work things out quicker than she did.

Brin's other problem is that he is hopeless at portraying females. The book reads as if he based his knowledge of women on a Mills & Boon story about an innocent virgin emerging from a convent upbringing and discovering that men exist. Surely no one can be that dumb, and even if they were they couldn't possibly be that wet with it. It is also noticeable that when female characters do become smart and capable they also adopt tomboyish tendencies. Some men can portray female characters well (Ian McDonald springs to mind, as does a book by Sean McMullen that I'm reading now and will be reviewing next issue). Brin, it seems, is not amongst them.

Which is a shame, because this is a very brave book for him to have written. Many of the concepts presented are very interesting. I still think that *The Gate to Women's Country* has got it right, but Brin has some excellent ideas. I only wish I hadn't had to force myself to think about them, rather than submit to my instinctive desire to strangle them along with the idiot lead character.

Hollywood Attacks

by Jay Freeman

If the PR for the new SF thriller, *Independence Day*, has already convinced you won't like it, don't go, but if you are not sure, read on. This special-effects-to-the-max movie has pushed the classic invasion-from-space theme to new levels of both plausibility and implausibility.

The plausible part is that the logistics of invading a planet are demanding, and the movie has taken the matter seriously in the fashion of Niven and Pournelle's *Footfall* -- the alien mother ship is hundreds of kilometres across. It in turn spawns a squadron of fat flying frisbees a mere twenty or thirty kilometres wide, which provide yet another opportunity for impressive specials as they descend upon the world's cities, cast menacing shadows, and hover at a few thousand meters altitude for long enough to build suspense.

Implausibility now takes over. The aliens have technology that allows an asteroid-sized body to travel between the stars, yet they cannot coordinate command, control and communication of their invasion without borrowing time on our own satellites, and their main city-busting weapons system seems limited to range not in excess of long cannon shot. Why the cities were not busted by simpler means, such as having the giant spacecraft merely land and sit on them, and what the aliens need from a planet that they can't find cheaper and more plentifully outside a gravity well, are questions perhaps best not considered. There's more, but to tell would give away plot, and the movie has little to spare.

Yet *Independence Day* has other virtues. We all get to watch and cheer as such unsavoury places as New York, Washington, and Los Angeles get wasted. Next, the defenders having discovered that alien force fields will bounce air-to-air missiles and fighters alike, we eagerly await the decision of where the military will try a nuclear weapon -- and it's Houston! At this point half the audience was rooting for the invaders; I was hoping they would get to San Francisco before humanity developed a counteroffensive, but no such luck.

More seriously, some of the air-to-air combat scenes are lots of fun. Ever wonder how you score a kill on a flying saucer that is equipped with an impenetrable force field? Think carefully...

Special effect detail was spotty. The alien hulls appeared to be made of mixed grades of textured acoustical ceiling tile, stained with coffee and cemented together in random orientation, so that patterns did not match at the join lines. On the other hand, the alien creatures were good enough that you didn't immediately think about them as specials, the force fields were well done, and the some of the architectural and, um, alien-factors-engineering aspects of the invaders' equipment were fascinating.

And there was enough action that plot and characterisation didn't really matter. Certainly no character was well developed, but a few were entertaining cameos, and the appeal to human unity in the face of terrible threat was powerful and plausible. It was also novel having a political leader participating in a battle that he had helped to plan -- the American President in this movie is a young Gulf War veteran, a former military fighter pilot, and following the tremendous casualties of the early close encounters of the worst kind, he quite plausibly takes a mission on the theory that if they win, it won't matter, and if they lose, it won't matter either.

I am not sure whether I am damning with faint praise or praising with faint damnation, but if you like spaghetti westerns and world war two action films, *Independence Day* might be a movie to see.

Particularly the part where they nuke Houston.

This review originally appeared in the BASFA mailing list. It has been edited to English spellings.

Whose Doctor?

The Doctor Who movie finally arrived on ABC last weekend amidst a blaze of publicity. By some stroke of fortune, US version rather than the BBC one which reportedly has all the sex and violence cut out. (Three kisses, in Dr. Who? Scandalous!)

I must admit that Paul McGann looked extremely dishy, and I note with approval that he has a penchant for redheads. I can also confirm that the special effects are very impressive, although did think that the interior of the TARDIS was rather over done. The main living area and the splendid steamer-punk construction of the control panel were perfect, but all of the pillars and stuff would have been more at home in an Indiana Jones movie.

There has been some criticism of the fact that the only two British actors were the two doctors. So what? The film is set in San Francisco, after all, so most of the characters should be Americans. Had it been set on Skaro things might be different. I mean, can you imagine a Californian Dalek?

"Like, er, eat exterminator ray, man!"

I think not.

As for the rest of the film, well. Kevin did say that it was very true to the spirit of the series, and he was dead right.

It is deeply embarrassing.

NOT the letter column

Marc Ortleib

“The reason for the regular mention of drumming in books about nanotechnology is that bongo drumming was one of Richard Feynman's main interests, apart from being a damn good scientist, a polymath and a fucker of other scientists' wives.”

So now we know. Thank you, Marc.

“Have you ever read Ed Regis' *Great Mambo Chicken & the Transhuman Condition?* An interesting book that manages to weave Drexler, Moravec, O'Neill and Evel Knievel together with a concept he calls fin-de-siecle hubris. Entertaining reading.”

Ah, yet another one on that ever increasing pile of unread books. I think it was Frances Papworth who said to me at Terry Frost's house warming that one of the most depressing things in the world was to work out how quickly you read and from that deduce how many books you will be able to read before you die. Weird, but true.

Footnote

Well, now, here's an issue that contains the words “sex”, “tits” and “fuck”. That's me in the shit with the censors again.

Which is about as witty as you are going to get this time because it is late and I have a dress to finish for an SCA event this weekend.

Next issue will be an LA Con special. Look out for lots of reviews of Australian authors, some shameless Hugo campaigning and a little silliness.

Good night.