

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Before anyone else asks, the answer is, "I don't know". No one offers you a job at an interview these days. I had what appeared to be a fairly fruitful time in the US, and there are a few interesting developments in Australia. By next issue I hope to have heard from one or more of these people, and if I haven't we can safely assume I'll be heading back to England.

The good news is that Janice Murray was victorious in the DUFF race and will therefore definitely be in Melbourne for Basicon. I expect that she and Alan will also be trying to see as much of the country as possible. If anyone is interested in her itinerary, let me know and I'll pass on the message. Now all I need to do is make sure I will be there. Right now, September seems a world away.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to the beginning of the month.

Back in the USA

As I said last month, the difficulty of getting a visa for Australia has lead me to start looking for a job in the USA. This is a fairly drastic step to take. For starters, US companies do not normally pay expenses for job interviews, and it cost me almost A\$2000 just to get there. But, if you want a job, and you are a highly qualified specialist with concomitant few opportunities, you have to do what it takes. The plus side was that it also gave me another opportunity to visit my second favourite city in the world. San Francisco here I come.

I should also point out that the whole trip would have been much more difficult without the Internet. I looked up potential employers on the web, I communicated with them by email, I even booked some of my tickets on the web. It was cheap, efficient, and avoided most of the time difference problems. Every home should have one.

Sunday April 6th

Due to booking very late, I was obliged to take the QANTAS service that goes via New Zealand. It takes a little longer, but I was happy to have the opportunity to spend an hour on the ground exploring Auckland airport rather than the usual boring hour in Sydney. On the trip across the Pacific I was sat next to a big, blond New Zealand rugby player. We

introduced ourselves after he accidentally stepped on my foot getting into his seat, and got on famously from there. Thanks for a great flight, Steve.

The main film on the trip was *Daylight*, a disaster movie starring a very small Italian guy. I didn't put the sound on, and I don't think I missed anything. The plot involved a bunch of people being trapped in a road tunnel in New York after a tanker explosion caused a cave in. Most of them get out in the end. Those that don't die nobly. Rumour has it that the film had to be re-shot after audience testing showed that letting the pet dog die was a Bad Idea. All I can say for it is that the SFX guys must have had a whale of a time doing the collapse scenes. They got to destroy lots and lots of cars.

LAX was it's usual unpleasant self, and I compounded the problem by choosing to save money by using the Southwest Airlines flying bus. These guys are by far the cheapest operators in the US, but they get there by cutting corners where ever they can. This includes not bothering to book seats. They just sell tickets for the number of seats on the plane (and probably a few more as there are normally no-shows) and let the passengers fight it out. However, they got me to San Jose on time where I met Kevin on his way home from a weekend in Portland. Here I was again.

Monday April 7th

Jet lag day. Spent most of my time on the phone confirming arrangements with various companies. A systems house in Houston want me to come and see them. Given my already full schedule, and theirs, the only time we can agree upon is Wednesday morning. I have a meeting in San Francisco on Tuesday afternoon, and another on Wednesday afternoon. Can I make it? Ask the web.

It turned out I could, though it would be rather unpleasant. Continental, who are the main carrier for Houston, have a red eye flight leaving at 1:45 on Wednesday morning, arriving Houston at 7:12. The return flight leaves Houston at midday and arrives at 2:01. (If the times seem weird, remember that Houston is 2 hours ahead of San Francisco.) But, as I said earlier, if you want a job... Next time someone accuses me of having a glamorous, jet-setting life-style I will remind them of this trip.

In the evening we trotted down to BASFA. I showed the guys the superb poster that Michael Jordan had made for MSFC. They want one too, Michael.

Tuesday April 8th

I headed off for the city to have lunch with a couple of clients from PG&E, the local electricity utility. This not being a business thing, we went for value. There is a little Chinese place called B&M's where you can get a large plate full of reasonable quality food, and as much tea as you can drink, for US\$3.75. It is only a few minutes walk from the Moscone Centre. Yet another plus point for the SF2002 site.

The afternoon was spent in a meeting with PG&E's gas people who have apparently bought a pipeline in Australia. From there I went back to the station and headed off to meet Kevin. He had been invited to a memorial service for Seth Goldberg, a well known US fan who died suddenly the previous week. Given the option to go, and knowing what respect his work in Hugo administration had earned Seth, I jumped and the opportunity.

The service was to be in Benica, a town about 50 miles north-east of Silicon Valley. Getting there meant we had to cross the bay, and this gave me an opportunity to experience some more of San Francisco's bridges. Coming back we used the Oakland bridge, the other famous one, but on the way there we used the San Mateo bridge. This is an amazing thing. About 15 miles long, most of its length is built on pylons with the roadway only a few metres from the water. The wind that evening was fairly strong — around a force 5 judging from the wave tops. I wouldn't like to do the trip in anything stronger.

By the way, the Oakland bridge is one of the few I know which genuinely has a troll beneath it. During the last big quake, part of the bridge collapsed and had to be rebuilt. The engineers took some of the girders from the ruined section and fashioned them into a troll which they fixed to the bottom of the new bridge as a good luck charm. The troll can only be seen from the water, which is perhaps just as well for the nerves of drivers. So far it seems to be doing its job.

The route took us up through the Berkeley Hills. I gazed around at the hillsides sparsely dotted with smart houses and wondered at the affluence of someone who could afford such space in the crowded Bay Area. Then I noticed a familiar charred sight. "See how few houses there are", said Kevin, "that's all that's left after a firestorm swept through the eucalyptus trees. The hillside used to be covered." Dangerous things, eucalypts. And of course **they** were all growing back.

The Caldecott Tunnel runs under the hills and into the valley beyond. As we entered it, Kevin cheerfully informed me that it was restricted to cars and vans during the day since a tanker explosion in the tunnel had killed several people a few years back. So that's where the writers of *Daylight* got the idea from.

The Seth Goldberg Memorial

Seth's memorial was attended by a wide range of people and included a fair number of local fans. Chief amongst them were David Bratman, Seth's partner in his Hugo work, and Alyson Abramowitz. In addition there were many people who knew Seth professionally, and, of course, family. We learnt a lot about Seth that night, and went away deeply impressed.

Many of you will know Seth for his work on fanzines. He was an indefatigable contributor to APAs and edited several of them. You will be pleased to know that the substantial obituary he received in the local paper included mention of his fanzine. There can't have been many faneds who have been so honoured.

David spoke about Seth's work on the Hugos. He and Seth have had the administrator's job three times now: at ConFrancisco, ConAdian, and L.A.con III. Kevin, who worked with them on the first two conventions, was full of praise for their work. In a very short time the pair had gained an impressive reputation for efficiency, accuracy and incorruptibility. David said that they were very much a team, splitting the work according to their abilities. He won't be able to do the job without Seth. They will be sorely missed.

It was, however, Seth's work for schools that was most impressive. He and his partner, Judy, ran a small network consultancy and were in the forefront of the campaign to get computers into schools. They had donated a large amount of equipment to local colleges,

and even had a program of giving jobs to school kids during the holidays. It was this work that led to the most moving moment of the evening.

Judy had asked various friends of Seth to speak about their memories of him. At one point a young man with a pony tail in shabby jeans and granddad shirt came to podium. He apologised for his appearance, but pointed out that he could normally be found dressed in leathers and chains. Without embarrassment he told us that he had come from a background that didn't encourage respect for anyone, but he had been given a job by Seth as part of the school program, and he had found a hero. I don't think many of us will get a better obituary than that.

Wednesday April 8th

After the service, Kevin and I spent some time chatting to Alyson. We listened with amused delight as she recounted her almost religious conversion to the joys of con-running after chairing the recent Corflu. Most of you will know Alyson as the consummate fanzine fan, the sort of person who regards convention runners as barely human, let alone fannish. Yet here she was recounting with pride having been asked to help with site liaison for next year's state Democratic convention. What job would you like on the SF2002 ExCom, Alyson?

Back in The Valley, Kevin and I had a bizarre half hour in which we found ourselves in the only part of the area which did not seem to have any 24 hour restaurants, but we spotted one in the end, and then Kevin dropped me off at the airport. Many people view the prospect of an overnight flight with horror. I'm lucky, I sleep easily on planes. In fact I was asleep before we even took off, and didn't wake again until my ears registered the descent into Houston. Of course I had only got 3 hours sleep, but sometimes you just have to grit your teeth and get on with things.

We have, of course, all seen pictures of Texas on cowboy movies. Everybody knows that there is a lot of desert and scrub, and not much else. Doubtless the desert now sprouts oil wells everywhere, but it won't have changed that much, will it? It was thus with some surprise that I found myself coming down over the top of a lush deciduous forest. Every so often you could see a road snaking through it and a small domestic enclave. In the distance was a small cluster of sky scrapers not that much bigger than Melbourne's or Sydney's. Everywhere it was flat, and everywhere was covered in trees.

It was a 45 minute ride from the airport to the office, mostly down tree-lined concrete freeways. The airport, however, had followed the British example and lined its roads with grassy banks. These were covered in brilliant spring flowers. It was quite beautiful. I leaned later that I'd come at just the right time of year. In summer it is sweltering and the collection of chemical factories that line the coast give rise to pollution that only Los Angeles can imitate.

Along the way we passed through several toll booths. My driver had an electronic device on his car which passed a signal to the toll gate as he went through. His company was billed monthly. All those people in Melbourne who have been saying that such a system for CityLink cannot possibly work please take note.

The interview went pretty well, but I then embarked on a return trip that I'd not wish on anyone. I was due at an interview in San Francisco at 4:30, so I could not miss the flight.

The first disaster was that my car didn't turn up. The driver had initially thought I wanted him at 10:30 that evening, and I had made plain to him that it was AM and I had to be back in California that day. Apparently he had found the concept so outlandish he thought he must have misunderstood and that I had meant the next day. I got a cab, and arrived at the airport just in time. I skidded to a halt at the gate and looked out of the window. There was my plane. The cover of one of the engines was off and men were peering into it.

We finally took off an hour and a half late. An oil hose in the engine was leaking and had to be replaced. Meanwhile, I had been trying to make a phone call. Interstate calls are, of course, expensive, and the largest coin most US phones accept is a quarter. (There is a dollar coin, but most Americans hate it and a large number don't believe it is legal tender.) Of course they all accept credit cards, but they wouldn't take mine. Why? I have a theory. Once before I had tried to make a call in LAX. The phone had rejected my Australian cards, but took one issued by a UK bank. The Houston phone rejected all of them. The cards were all Visa or Mastercard, but none of them were drawn on an American bank. If you are travelling in the US, take note of this. Buy a phone card.

In desperation I approached the gate staff and asked if I could use their phone. They said no, I had to wait until I got to San Francisco and ask there. They promised me that I would be there before 3:00. This was a lie. Once on the plane the pilot announced a 3:15 landing time. I appealed to a flight attendant for help. There were no phones on the plane. She said it was all my fault for not calling from Houston. I picked the customer comment card out of the in flight magazine determined to give someone an earful that evening.

Fortunately some heroic efforts by the pilot got us disembarking just after three. I rushed to the desk and was at last allowed to make a call. Kevin, hero that he is, came and collected me and got me to the interview on time.

Thursday April 9th

Sleep, blessed sleep. Having cooked dinner, written a special version of my resume for the Houston people, and waited in vain for a call from my Australian office about potential work for PG&E, I had finally got to bed at 11:30. I was knackered, and slept almost 12 hours. It is a good job I had no interviews that day.

Friday April 10th

The next interview I had was in Sacramento. This city is the capital of California and is situated in the central valley. It is only a couple of hours from San Jose by freeway, but never having driven in America before, I wasn't about to take any silly risks. I could probably have flown, but that would have been very expensive, so I took Kevin up on his suggestion of a train ride. Unfortunately this meant catching the 6:20 out of San Jose and not getting back there until 9:15 in the evening. The trip took 4 hours each way. It was going to be another long day.

Although I am well familiar with the CalTrain service that runs from San Jose to San Francisco through Silicon Valley, this was to be my first experience of the notorious Amtrak. I was therefore greatly surprised when Kevin pointed me on board a gleaming, modern double-decker carriage with well-spaced, comfortable seating, excellent rest rooms and a cafe car whose food is not wholly inedible (spot me learning American here). The carriages even had electric lifts to help wheel-chair bound passengers board, but I later

found that their use had been discontinued due to a tendency to break down whilst extended and prevent the train doors from shutting.

Unfortunately, once the train left the station, the illusion of modern efficiency was quickly shattered. Those of us used to racing up the east coast of England at 175 mph know that the damn Froggies have a train even faster than ours. To find this flash American train barely able to exceed 50 mph most of the time, and have to sit in frustration as it grinds its way through the derelict docklands of Oakland and Emeryville at less than walking pace, is deeply disappointing.

Much of the problem, of course, is that US towns grew up around their railways, whereas in the UK the rails were an afterthought. In the US it is therefore quite normal to find a railway running through the main streets of a town and peppered with level crossings. To do something about this now is almost impossible given the environmental laws and the love affair that most Americans have with their cars.

Nevertheless, the train was packed. I figured that it must at least be making a profit. Once again I was disillusioned after Kevin had explained to me some of the idiocies of accounting at Amtrak. On a marginal cost basis, that is revenue less variable operating costs (fuel, train staff wages, etc.) the service is profitable. But Amtrak also has massive fixed costs (line maintenance, stations, headquarters, etc.) which are allocated between services. On this basis, just about everything they do makes a loss.

The obvious thing to do in this case is to run more services that are profitable on a marginal cost basis and share the fixed costs over a larger number of services. Unfortunately Amtrak is run by idiot accountants and people philosophically opposed to rail travel who think that the right thing to do is to close "loss-making" services. <sigh>

One good thing about the trip is that much of the journey is through the protected wetlands of the estuary. I lost count of the number of different bird species I saw, and the slow progress of the train gives plenty of time for bird-spotting.

It also gives you plenty of time to catch up on lost sleep.

Saturday April 11th

Kevin's company was upgrading its network from Novell to NT over the weekend. Having done this myself recently, I offered to come and help, practical experience being immeasurably more valuable than any of the sparse documentation where anything Microsoft is concerned. Fortunately head office had sent down a network expert who understood the vagaries of NT installation (including the well known dictum, "if anything goes wrong, start again from scratch, you'll never be able to fix it"). Kevin and I therefore got shooed and allowed to get some sleep. It later transpired that the girl didn't know the first thing about Windows 95, so although all of the machines logged in, few of them worked properly, but that was a delight awaiting Kevin on Monday.

The experience also brought home to me how far Microsoft has gone in embracing the Great Gods in White Coats philosophy for its network systems. In the bad old days of computing, every program you wanted to run had to be submitted to the Guardians of the Mainframe who would process your job sometime in the next few days if it suited them. Then came the micro and at last the humble worker was able to do what he wanted, when he wanted. Now the pendulum has swung back the other way. Sure the PC still has the

power to do what you want, but you will probably find that its ability to do so has been subtly disabled by your IT department in ways that you cannot crack.

The theory behind this, of course, is that users are so inept with computers that they have to be protected from the temptation to meddle. The practical effect is massive frustration amongst workers who have come to depend on that flexibility and many of whom, such as Kevin and myself, know far more about PCs than the pea-brained morons employed to do user support.

Fortunately I am in charge of the computer systems for my office, but I know that the minute we got a permanent link to our UK office, the IT people there would be demanding the “manage” the system for me, thus instituting a 24-hour turn round time for all problems because of the time difference. A recent example of their stupidity was when one of the UK staff had to come out here with his portable. The machine had been configured so that the minute he logged into an NT network, the set-up routines on Windows were all disabled. It was possible to get him onto our network in the first place because if you booted the machine stand-alone you could do what you wanted (so much for security), but installing a network printer required that you be logged in. I could probably have got him printing if I had studied the security sections of the NT manual for long enough, but he was only in Melbourne a couple of days and we couldn't be bothered to waste any more time.

But I'm digressing again. We had lunch at High Tech Burrito in San Carlos, an excellent fast food joint which I am particularly fond of because it is one of the few places I know where they serve the semi-mythical Habanero Tabasco. It turned out that they were having a customer survey that day, thus allowing me to enjoy myself by giving truthful answers to such questions as “how long does it take you to get here from your home”. I noted with interest the question on gender. It read, “are you generally male or female”. Only in San Francisco... Don't you just love the place.

Afterwards Kevin took me to a shop nearby that specialised in imported British foods. I was delighted to find haggis, and even more pleased to discover Batchelors packet soup. As you will know, packet soup is disgusting stuff because you can never, ever get it all to dissolve, and even if you do the end result still tastes powdery. Batchelors are the only soup company I know who supply their soup in freeze-dried granules (like Gold Blend coffee) which dissolve much more easily. You can't get it in Australia or the US, and I'm amazed that the idea hasn't caught on.

Both of us were so tired that we ended up spending the rest of the afternoon asleep. In the evening I took Kevin out for a thank you dinner at one of the Indian restaurants in downtown Mountain View. The food was OK, but I also got a little taste of what life must be like for women in India. When it came to the sweets, the waiter asked Kevin what he wanted and assumed that he was speaking for me as well. After the meal, I paid with my credit card, and the waiter returned it to Kevin. I thought that sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen in California.

Sunday April 12th

Despite Saturday's laziness, neither of us managed to get out of bed much before midday. After a brief trip book shopping in San Jose, where I picked up the new Sherri Tepper and noted with pride the presence of novels by Melbourne's Jane Routley and Damien Broderick on the shelves of big chain bookstores, we headed off to the coast.

The hills above San Jose are nowhere near as wild as those north of Marin County, but there are still redwoods to be seen if you know where to look. There are also plenty of interesting switchbacks. A local bike group was happily throwing their Jap racers round curves at impossible angles to the road and playing tag with the local sheriff. I don't have the nerve for that sort of thing, but it looked great fun. Instead I kept a lookout for unusual cultural phenomena.

The most obvious thing was that the whole area was a little Scottish enclave. We saw numerous houses sporting St. Andrew crosses, businesses with tell-tale names (and no golden arches), even a Scottish pub. Here's hoping that they served good whisky and not Scottish beer.

Being closer to the city, the area was more commercialised with numerous tourist lodgings and entertainments. There were children's playgrounds and nature parks a-plenty. At one point I even noticed a "Christian Park". I guess that a lot of you probably feel that keeping these creatures cooped up in parks is cruel and unnecessary, but large numbers of them do cause a nuisance to the general public, and personally I think that confinement is kinder than culling. What beats me is why anyone would pay good money to go and gawp at them. I guess it takes all sorts.

Further down the road we noticed a sign which advertised "carved bears, half off". Kevin, who is a bear totem person if ever I met one, did not take kindly to my musings on which parts of the unfortunate bruins had been removed. Nevertheless, we were expecting to see some fine examples of coastal redwood carved in the shape of the noble grizzly as is the case in other areas. Imagine our surprise when we discovered the entire collection infected with TCV (television culture virus). All of the poor bears sported the duffel coat, floppy hat and marmalade sandwiches of a well known cub from Darkest Peru.

Monday April 13th

One final interview, at a small company in Los Altos, a mere mile or so from Kevin's flat, and a second chance to visit BASFA before heading home. It being only a few days from my birthday, I was subject to infamous Birthday Auction. Sadly for statistics fans, Dave Gallagher and his girlfriend, Spring, were also up for auction. Thus, although the total amount raised was well above the record, no individual records were set. No need to guess who bought me.

The Company of Wolves

Pat Murphy, you may remember, is half of the fiendishly amusing feminist duo responsible for the Tiptree Award. She last featured in these pages when I lambasted her handling of the David Brin incident at L.A.con III. Now a new novel appears. What is more, it comes highly recommended by Dave Clark, whose taste in fiction I have much respect for. And Karen Joy Fowler, the other half of the Tiptree team, is very good indeed. Conclusion: must read it.

Nadya, the story of a young, female werewolf in 19th Century America, comes in three parts of unequal length and quality. The first of these tells of how her parents, werewolves both,

came to emigrate from Europe to the New World, and of Nadya's childhood in Missouri. It exemplifies, in my view, one of the very worst traits of women's writing: morbid fatalism. From the start you know that Nadya and her parents are outcasts, you know that Nadya herself will not be a model little girl, that she will fall in love with a boy who is a complete bastard and who will betray her, and that her family will be killed. You don't need to wade through 100 pages of depression to find out.

Why is it that so many women writers seem content to dwell on the fact that the world has drawn our sex the short straw? Sure we get our minds filled with nonsense by cowed mothers and aunts, sure we get beaten and abused by drunken fathers and uncles, sure we get called whores by idiot preachers, sure we get raped by guys we trusted, but why be so nobly downtrodden about it all? I'm fed up of stories in which the best the heroine can hope for is to say that she put up with her lot with courage and fortitude. I want heroines who fight back.

Fortunately, after a while, Nadya gets the message. She has to go through all the nonsense first, but then she pulls on a pair of trousers, chops off her hair, gets even with the boy, and heads off for Oregon.

The second part of the book is the longest and, in my opinion, by far the best. Disguised as a man, Nadya travels west along the pioneer trail. Along the way she meets up with a pampered city woman whose men-folk have died of fever, and a young girl whose party were killed by Indians. It is a bizarre family, and Pat handles the developing interactions very well. She has also done her research. The route, the landscape, the correct Indian tribes, the wildlife: every aspect of trail life is portrayed. It is a refreshing change. Books and movies about the settlement of the West tend to focus on blood, gore and heroism, not on wolves, water quality and Indian culture. It is likely that more far more pioneers died of thirst, hunger, disease, drowning and exposure than ever died from gunshot or Indian arrows.

It did, however, get me thinking about the whole process of pioneering. One of the classic modern proverbs, much used by the likes of Heinlein and Niven, is "There's no such thing as a Free Lunch". Michael Wallis, a space fanatic if ever I met one, holds the view that our approach to space travel is too risk-obsessed. Sure everyone regrets things like the *Challenger* disaster, but Columbus would never have set out if he had been expected to make his ships so safe that all his crew were guaranteed to return home alive. California would never have been settled if the pioneers had expected a risk-free journey. If we want to conquer space, we must be prepared to pay the price. Along the way there will be tragedies and heroism. We'll never get there if we don't accept that.

This is not to say that there are no heroes these days. There are epic struggles going on all over the world, not to conquer areas of land, but areas of the mind. People are still dying simply because they are gay, or black, or the wrong religion, or just different. And this, by a circuitous piece of linking, brings us back to Nadya.

There is no immediate reason why Nadya should have been portrayed as a werewolf. The story would probably have worked well enough had she just been a strong-minded woman. Why did Pat choose this additional level of complication? To make it a fantasy book? To make a play for the Anne Rice market? To get an angle on animal rights? I hope not.

Personally, I think she was trying to challenge us. Most of her readers are, after all, going to be pretty PC. OK, so Nadya is not a WASP (Polish father, French mother), she doesn't

follow accepted conventions of female behaviour, she's anti-Christian and she's bisexual. Are many SF fans going to be troubled by this? No. A werewolf, on the other hand, is a traditional representation of evil. How will we react to a heroine who turns into a wild animal at full moon, who hunts down deer, ripping out their throats and revelling in the taste of fresh blood? Are there limits, even to our level of acceptance of deviance?

The final section is a bit of a let down. It is cast almost in the form of a folk tale in which the fairie people use cunning and magic to overcome the gullible invaders. It gives Nadya a happy ending, but I found it a bit of a false one. If there is a way to turn sideways to the sun, I've not yet found it, and until I do I will class it just as much running away as any physical flight. But please don't take this as a condemnation of the book. Pat is a fine writer, and her prose is full of astute observation, finely drawn characters and meticulous research. I'm glad Dave put it on BASFA's Hugo list.

Of course the irony of reading a book about seeking a new life in California is not lost on me. Thankfully, I don't have to contend with the sort of dangers that beset Nadya, just the monstrous evil of QANTAS air fares and the old enemy, jet lag. People who know me well may find a few other resonances here and there, but here's one that Pat found.

In the epilogue, Pat appears to be suggesting that the idea for the book came to her after a chance encounter at a petrol station in a small Oregon township on Highway 101. Kevin and I did not quite get that far north on our trip (see *Emerald City* #13), we stopped at Eureka, just short of the Oregon border. But I've seen enough of the territory to understand how the idea might have come about. In particular there was that beautiful stretch of road north of Fort Bragg where Highway 1 cuts inland to meet the 101. Twenty-two miles of mountain, forest, and demon switchbacks. I still have the photograph that Kevin took of me that day, stood on a small grass verge, miles from civilisation, surrounded only by the sights, smells and sounds of the forest. And there, looking back at the camera from the pattern on my jumper, seeming for all the world like they belong there, are three gray wolves...

Nadya - Pat Murphy - Tor - Hardcover

Loving the Alien

Last issue, you may remember, I recounted a drunken stagger from the Tun to Reading, with a significant interlude in the pub at Paddington station, in the company of Dave Langford. Much of our conversation was the usual ribald abuse of mutual acquaintances that passes for fannish gossip, but somewhere along the line we got serious about books. The names of Elizabeth Hand and Ian McDonald passed my lips, and Dave said that in that case I would find Gwyneth Jones simply wonderful. Such recommendations should not be treated lightly, and on my return home I headed straight for Mr. Ackoyd's emporium.

White Queen is a Tiptree winner (is there a theme developing here, I wonder) and was also nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. It is the first in a series of three books, all dealing with an alien visitation, but, in marked contrast to books like *Otherland* or *Map of Power*, is a complete story in itself. It is, I suppose, cyberpunk of a sort, in that it deals with a

near-future Earth gone expectedly to seed, and the major characters are journalists. But it has none of the obsession with technology and weaponry that is typical of the genre. Instead it focuses firmly on characters and on the thorny problem of first contact.

Rumours of alien landfall have been commonplace since way back in the middle of the previous century. It is not the sort of thing that a respectable journalist wastes his time on. But Johnny Guglioli is far from respectable. He has contracted the QV virus, a mutant descendant of AIDS for which a human is only a carrier. The primary target of the virus is Coralin, the mysterious 'living' clay that is the basis of all modern electronic devices. If Johnny so much as touches Coralin-based technology he could bring an entire city down. When you work as a multi-media jock this is kind of limiting.

So Johnny is chasing rumours of an alien landfall in West Africa, armed only with an antiquated tape recorder. Sure it is a long shot, but if it were true... And if it isn't, what is Braemar Wilson, Queen Bitch of freelance investigative journalists, doing in this run down hole? Why, for that matter, is she trying to seduce him?

First contact is a theme that has worried many an SF writer. When the aliens arrive, how do we communicate with them? What will be different? How will we misunderstand each other? Niven and Pournelle did a reasonable job in *Mote in God's Eye* but, as they always do, they treated the question as a purely scientific problem. The Moties were strange, but we studied them, and we worked out how they thought, and then things were OK. QED. It is about time the subject was brought up to date.

In *White Queen* the aliens are humanoid. Their noses are flat, their hips a little too wide, their hair the texture of seaweed, but with a bit of care they can pass for one of us. There the resemblance ends. Psychologically, sociologically, biologically, genetically, chemically, they are very, very different. Much of this difference is not revealed until late on in the book, for one of Jones' objectives is for us, the readers, to make the same mistakes as us, mankind.

Not that the aliens are immune from mistakes. When we first meet them, they have just rented a beast of burden from a local supplier. The tradesman said that it had unlimited mileage. The aliens were not pleased when they found that the creature required vast quantities of liquid food called petrol.

Did you spot that the aliens think of the van as an animal? Why? Is it a mistake? Are they mechanical themselves? Or are they just soppy about machines the way we are about animals? Does it tell us anything about their culture?

This is just an example of the sort of trick Jones uses to keep us off balance. The most obvious, and possibly most disturbing, is that the aliens frequently refer to human males as 'she' and human females as 'he'. The gender of the aliens themselves is kept in doubt for most of the book. Their names don't help as they don't seem to see the need for them: they just adopt whatever names the humans give them. Do they have males and females? Are they hermaphrodite? Or do they bud like amoeba? Does that explain the lice-like creatures that cover their bodies?

But if they have no gender, why is one of them claiming to be in love with Johnny? And why should it simultaneously say it is his daughter?

Now all that is quite enough mystery for one book, but Jones does not stop there. She has enough intrigue and plot shifts to satisfy any lover of spy stories or political thrillers. In particular the book focuses on *White Queen*, a terrorist group devoted to persuading Earth to expel the aliens. Who are they? Are they just racists, or are they the only sane people on the planet? I was talking to Jane Routley about the book last week and she said one of the

things that impressed her most was that, even though some of the characters ended up doing things which she found politically reprehensible, she still had sympathy for them. That is the mark of a very good writer indeed.

Gwynneth has since published two more books about her alien visitors: *North Wind* and *Phoenix Cafe*. I'll be buying them. So should you.

White Queen - Gwynneth Jones - VGSF - softback

Snoopy's Nightmare

The concept of the vampire is right up there with dragons, ghosts and fairies in our list of top fantasy memes. Unlike the others, however, when you think of vampires you think of one particular creature: Dracula, Prince of Darkness. Vlad the Impaler has not yet been quite as thoroughly portrayed in fiction as King Arthur, but he must be doing pretty well. The books I am about to review are probably the most imaginative uses of the Dracula legend yet published. But then what else should one expect from Kim Newman.

Kim's obsession with vampires is well known, at least in the UK. Given that I've known him for over 20 years, I wasn't exactly surprised to see him take on Dracula. His Jack Yeovil books for Games Workshop had featured a fine vampire character in the elder, Genevieve. It was only a matter of time before he went for the big target. When he did, with *Anno Dracula*, it was a bull's eye.

Consider: England, just before the turn of the century. Queen Victoria is practically Empress of the World. She is getting on a bit, but this is to be an Empire on which the sun never sets. Prince Albert is dead, but the Queen has a new lover. His name is Vlad Tepes, Count Dracula. The Queen could yet live for ever.

Kim has moved on directly from Bram Stoker's original novel. Harker and Van Helsing have failed to destroy the Prince of Darkness, and London is now a very different place. Ancient vampires have emerged from hiding around Europe and flocked to Victoria's Court. Aristocrats seek vampirehood as a matter of social status and boast to each other of the glory of their new bloodlines. Prostitutes are inevitably amongst the first of the lower classes to be turned. In the rest of the population, confusion reigns: are vampires the future of mankind, or has evil finally conquered the world?

The police, however, have more urgent matters to attend to. In the East End, someone is murdering prostitutes in a most unpleasant fashion. Scotland Yard is embarrassed, and has been forced to call upon the mysterious Diogenes Club for help.

The most delightful thing about the book is the cast of characters, both real and fictional, that Kim uses. Genevieve has been imported from the world of Warhammer. Inspector Lestrade is in charge of the murder enquiry and consults Dr. Jekyll for scientific advice. Mycroft Holmes is on the ruling council of the Diogenes Club, and Rupert of Hentzau is a member of Dracula's Carpathian Guard. The book is a treasure simply for the enjoyment of remembering who all those characters are, although perhaps the greatest challenge is to find a character from the era, or from vampire legends, that Kim hasn't used.

I was particularly impressed with the way that Kim wove together the legends of Dracula and Jack the Ripper. It won't spoil the book to tell you that Jack is actually Dr. Seward from Stoker's original book - Kim tells us in the first chapter. Eventually, of course, the scourge is ended, thanks to Charles Beauregard of the Diogenes Club, ably assisted by Genevieve. Lestrade moves on to investigate a new spate of murders carried out by one Edward Hyde. But Charles and Genevieve have bigger prey in mind. Can Dracula be prevented from marrying the Queen?

Last time I saw Kim he said that writing *Anno Dracula* had pretty much exorcised vampires from his soul, but it had been so successful that his publishers clamoured for a sequel. Thus was born *The Bloody Red Baron*, a tale of derring do amongst pilots on the Western Front in WWI. You can see it coming, can't you.

Having been driven out of Britain, Dracula moved to Germany where the young Kaiser made him more than welcome. Now Europe is aflame as Dracula's armies roll through France, seeking access to the Channel and thence the chance to wreak revenge on the country that rejected him. The prevalence of vampires has made little difference to land warfare, save for the cost of munitions. English gentlewomen run a campaign to persuade aristocratic families to hand over their family silver to help the war effort. The air war, however, is a different matter.

Flying the skittish, fragile aircraft is an art that few men can master. Fortunately, vampire pilots have a useful talent of coming back from the most horrific crashes. British ace, Albert Ball, has his limbs bent at all sorts of strange angles, but he still flies like a bird. Yet Ball is no match for Germany's leading ace. Manfred von Richthofen is the king of the skies.

But wait, these men are vampires, correct? Both the Allies' elite Condor Squadron and Richthofen's Flying Circus are staffed largely by undead. Some vampires, especially those of Dracula's bloodline, have shape-shifting abilities. Dracula can turn into a giant bat. How much better would Germany's pilots be if they too had that knack?

Intelligence agent Edwin Winthrop is despatched by the Diogenes Club to work with Condor squadron and find out just what the jolly old Boche are up to at Richthofen's new base, the Chateau de Malinbois. When the truth is learned it becomes clear that the Red Baron and his men must be destroyed at all costs.

Once again, Kim fills the book with a wonderful cast of characters, both real and imaginary. Several characters, including Beauregard, Danny Dravot and Kate Reed, survive from *Anno Dracula*. A young pilot called James Bigglesworth is one of the stars of Condor Squadron. In search of scientific advice, Charles seeks out Dr. Moreau and his assistant, Herbert West. On the way he meets a young officer called Simon Templar. And so it continues. I'm sure I haven't spotted them all.

On the other side of the lines, a vampire writer called Edgar Poe is enlisted to ghost Richthofen's autobiography. This gives us a glimpse of life inside the Flying Circus, where experienced aces such as Richthofen and Udet are joined by younger men like Herman Goering and Erich von Stalhein. It also gives us the sweetest and shortest character reference in the book...

Ewers reluctantly abandoned his trunks into the care of a fire-eyed little corporal with a dash of a moustache and a stiff-armed salute. Poe saw in the man the makings of a martinet.

The book reaches its climax with the German spring offensive. Will Germany's new aerial secret weapon make sufficient difference to break through the allied lines? The answer is obvious, but the point is made. This is not so much a book about Dracula, but about a far greater horror: war. Most of us brought up in Europe are well schooled in the insanity of commanders such as Generals Haig and Mireau, but Kim has been thorough in his research, coming up with such fascinating snippets as the order that banned allied pilots from carrying parachutes as that would encourage cowardice. Compared to that, Dracula seems positively sane.

If you are a lover of popular fiction, I can't recommend these books too highly. Kim has a delightful knack of bringing in just the right character to make his point. I particularly liked the use of Bulldog Drummond as the idiot army officer in *Bloody Red Baron*, but there are many other such examples. Nor is history too badly bent. Richthofen still meets his end ignobly under the guns of an Australian anti-aircraft crew. You'll probably find yourself rushing off to reference works and re-reading old novels after finishing the books. As stories they are great stuff too. I know I am biased, but I have been delighted by the number of people who have told me that Kim is one of their favourite authors: Kevin, Terry Frost, James Allen, Dave Clark, to name but a few in Melbourne and San Francisco. Don't take my word, take theirs.

Anno Dracula (Pocket) and *The Bloody Red Baron* (Avon) - Kim Newman - softcover.

Queen of Fantasy

When a publisher's blurb describes an author as "the new Queen of Fantasy" I tend to cringe. It reminds me of the infamous "comparable to Tolkein at his best". When it goes on to say "in the style of David Eddings and Robert Jordan", even the poor author will probably be cringing. Nevertheless, the long queue of people that materialised at Alan Stewart's side when the new Maggie Fury novel was spotted in the MSFC library suggests that the first epithet at least has some substance. Anyway, if anyone was going to be crowned Queen of Fantasy, you could not do much better than Maggie.

After all, what does the title "Queen of Fantasy" bring to mind? Could it possibly be an overweight, elderly American matron who wears voluminous dresses and has thousands of cats? Maggie Furey is not in this mould. She is a small lady with a broad Geordie accent and a pile of thick, black hair she could almost hide inside. At Intersection she could be seen in a white shirt, jeans and leather jacket. She only owns six cats. That's the sort of Queen I'd like to see.

But I digress. The book: *Dhiammara*, the fourth and final volume in the *Artifacts of Power* saga. It has been a long time in coming (volume three was reviewed in Emerald City #1). Maggie does have a good excuse: she and her husband (and the cats) have been moving home to the wonderful artists' tax haven of Eire. But for us readers it has been a painful wait.

Thus, for possibly the first time in my life, I was slightly irritated that the author did not spend the first few chapters re-capping the events of the previous books. I didn't have a clue who half the characters were, and wasn't entirely sure I hadn't missed a volume. Nevertheless, in the space of fifty or so pages, Maggie had managed to drop enough hints, without resorting to flashbacks, to get me back up to steam with the plot. This is the way it ought to be done.

From then on the plot proceeds at a frenetic pace. At the end of *Sword of Flame*, Aurian lost her struggle to master the Sword and was plunged through a rift in time. In Dhiammara she emerges in Nexis many years in the future, unaware that her enemy, Eliseth the Weather Witch, arrived a few years earlier. Not only that, but the accident with the Sword loosed the Faerie on the world once more, and they have set out to conquer the place. Anvar came through with Eliseth and was captured; only his magical skill keeps him at the gate of death with a faint chance to return. Meanwhile, the mad arch-mage, Miathan, has had years to prepare for the return of the women he hates. Is that enough plot for you?

Actually, I think it was a bit too much plot for Maggie. Certainly it was too much for the book. Oh, she weaves it well enough: the usual fine mix of mythic wonder, fast-paced action and tear-jerkers that make up a good quality fantasy novel. But there is so much to resolve that in the end there just isn't the time to do it all justice.

The book is less than 500 pages long and has nothing of the excess verbiage of Eddings or Jordan, but so much is glossed over. There is an entire book to be set between Aurian's disappearance and Eliseth's arrival, and another leading up to Aurian's return. The supporting cast is strong enough, they could have carried it. Instead we have a four volume epic and two powerful villains wrapped up in less than 100 pages. Maggie had set up a wonderful clash between Anvar and Forral for Aurian's heart, and then wimped out on it because she had run out of space. Given the love that publishers have for multi-volume series, I'm a little surprised that Maggie finished things so quickly.

Of course it is not entirely over. The Faerie are still on the loose; Nexis has been almost destroyed under Eliseth's rule; Raven has been deposed at Queen of the Skyfolk; Chiamh, Sciannath and Iscalda are still exiled from their people. There have to be a few more books in there somewhere. Personally I hope that Maggie gives it a rest and turns her imagination to something else for a while, but I don't think we have heard the last of Aurian.

Dhiammara - Maggie Furey - Legend - softcover

Growing old disgracefully

I arrived back in Melbourne at around 1:00 on Thursday morning. That evening Terry Frost and I were having a joint birthday party. Terry was proudly turning 40. I wasn't admitting to anything except that fact that Terry and I had been born only a day apart.

Of course, having been gallivanting about the US at great speed for the previous week and a half, I had not been able to do much to help with the arrangements. It should all have been arranged weeks ago. We'd planned to use the *Rio Grande*, but when I'd popped down the Swan Street to make the booking I found the door locked and a notice on it talking about non-payment of rent. Another casualty of the Australian fear of funny, foreign

cooking. I have no means of contacting Andy, but he is a fine chef and I'm sure he'll find other work soon.

Anyway, there followed a period of desperate head scratching in search of an alternate venue. Enormous thanks to Sharon Nebel for coming up with the *Café Via Mercato* in Peel Street. It is a fine Italian restaurant with reasonable prices and some excellent gourmet pizzas. It is also opposite the back of the Victoria Market and thus only a few minutes walk from the site Basicon 2. Ian and Karen please note.

There then followed a small communications failure between Terry and myself. I thought he was inviting everyone, he thought I was inviting my friends. I kept thinking I should chase him up by email, but kept forgetting in the rush. So it was that rather a lot of people I wanted to invite were not there. If you didn't receive an invitation, please accept my apologies. If I have to leave, I'll see about holding a farewell party to make up for it.

It was, however, a splendid evening. I don't want to single out particular presents for praise: they were all wonderful, and very thoughtful given my imminent departure. However, I think my readers might be interested in the Fantasy Home doll's house furniture I got from Jane Routley (it will be very useful if I do move, if only I can lose enough weight to fit in the swimming pool). I should also mention the fine preserves and chocolates flavoured with Australian plants that I got from Bruce Gillespie and Elaine Cochrane. This country has some fascinating food plants to offer, but sadly very few local manufacturers ever make use of them.

Unfortunately, although I managed to remain awake all evening, I don't think I was exactly at my charming best. I also found it hard to rid myself of the feeling that I had gate-crashed Terry's party. Maybe I was just depressed at being so old.

The following night, which was actually my birthday, we had a special guest at MSFC. Hugo winning artist, Bob Eggleton, was passing through Melbourne and Justin Ackroyd persuaded him to pop in and say hello. Given that the topic for the evening was "images of women in SF", having such a fine artist on the panel was very appropriate. Bob also signed copies of his latest book, which Justin was conveniently selling at a discount. Terry and Danny Heap managed to drag the discussion into the gutter in the funniest way possible, and a splendid evening was had by all. Well, everyone except Cheryl. I was tired and snappy and I made a complete arsehole of myself. Fortunately it was early in the evening when few people were about, but it was completely unforgivable and something I will never be able to forget. I think maybe I'd better quarantine myself from social events for a while until I am less stressed out.

By the way, that evening also marked the first appearance at a fannish event of Lucy Ackroyd. Those of you wishing to see the proud father and his bouncing babe can find a photo on the EmCit web site.

Footnote

One of the advantages of visiting Kevin is that I get to read his copies of *Locus*. A new issue arrived on the 7th and, by one of those delightful coincidences, included the results of this year's Tiptree Award. The winning novel was *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell and the winning short story was *Mountain Ways* by Ursula Le Guin (*Asimov's* 8/96). A special award was also given to Angela Carter. A short story by Tess Williams (*And She Was the Word, Eidolon* 11/96) was on the recommended list.

Locus is a magazine which rivals Alan Stewart's *Thyme* for worthy and informative but often dull content. It normally carries an interview or two (this issue featured Poul Anderson and, much to my delight, Garth Nix) and some industry news. The rest of the magazine is filled with book reviews of varying quality (sometimes several columnists cover the same book which can be interesting) and endless lists of new publications. It is very useful, but not very inspiring. The main pieces of news I got from it were as follows: there is a new Sherri Tepper novel out (which I subsequently bought); Liz Hand and Jerry Kaufman are amongst the judges for next year's Tiptree; Stephen Dedman's novel is out soon; Alan Moore has written a collection of short stories that he claims is a novel about Northampton; and Larry Niven has written a new novel. The latter is interesting. *Ringworld Throne* was an appalling piece of hack work, but the new book is supposedly a completely new departure: not even set in Known Space. Does Larry still have the spark? We'll find out in June.

One of the other books I saw in the US was the new Foundation book by Greg Benford. My first reaction to this was that it was just another hurried cash-in. However, Greg has written a stirring defence of the project in the latest *Apparatchik*. Now I'm not so sure. The substance of Greg's defence is that re-working a classic theme is an honoured artistic tradition. He's right, and Kim Newman's Dracula books are a fine example of that tradition. He also said that he greatly admired Asimov's work when he was young and has always wanted the chance to give his take on the Foundation. So far so good, but...

There is to be a series of three books. Bedford's will be followed by works from Greg Bear and David Brin. Given that these are three of the best regarded SF writers of this generation, there should be no problem. On the other hand, a big name is no guarantee: witness *Ringworld Throne* or some of the recent Pern books. Hopefully their respect and admiration for Asimov will lead the "Killer B's", as they call themselves, to do a good job. And, for all his interesting ideas, it isn't hard to be a better writer than Asimov. I guess the only way to find out is to buy the books.

This year's Hugo nominations were published recently. They are largely uninteresting. I have an awful feeling that Lois McMaster Bujold is going to win again, though *Blue Mars* may give her a good run. As with last year, several *Babylon 5* episodes qualified and JMS withdrew all but one: *Severed Dreams*. Best of luck to Ian Gunn and Andy Hooper in the fan categories. With local heroes Teddy Harvia and Brad Foster declaring themselves ineligible, and the FAAN win behind him, Ian stands a very good chance. What a shame he'll only get a handful of votes from Australia.

I spent the last week in Brisbane on business. The weather was a vast improvement on the monsoon I experienced at *Parliament of Dreams*, and I found some very good restaurants. I was particularly impressed with the use the city had made of its river frontage. A small photo gallery will appear shortly on the web page.

Finally, a minor miracle: Cheryl talks about soccer. Most of you know that I consider it a particularly stupid game, not to mention boring when played by anyone except Brazilians. However, this year's FA Cup Final is worth watching from a sociological point of view. Chelsea is a club from a posh suburb of London. Their colours are blue - the same as those of the Tories - and John Major is one of their more famous supporters. Middlesborough are from the north-east of England and wear Labour red. Indeed, given that it is south of the Tyne, many of the population the famous unionist town of Jarrow support the 'Boro. If I remember rightly, the game will be played two days after the general election. More is at stake than just the trophy.

Next issue the Sherri Tepper review, the long awaited look at David Brin's Uplift books, the MSFC 45th birthday party, and hopefully the final word on my likely location for the next few years.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Sam Moskowitz, chairman of the first ever Worldcon, who died on April 15th at the age of 76.

Ciao,

Cheryl