

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Well, here I am back in England. This wasn't quite my plan for life, but it does allow me to attend a couple of good conventions and, most importantly, spend a few happy hours in Marks & Spencers and the British Museum. More on the sorry Old Country later, but first it is introduction time again.

Hello Corflu. I'm new. Well, at least it is my first time at a fanzine convention. I do know what corflu is. Indeed, I have even used the stuff rather more than I would have liked. Dave Langford will vouch for the truth of this. These days, however, I am an evil heretic. Though this zine you see before you is on paper, it is normally distributed electronically. The paper is thus impregnated with Satanic influences which you can only purge by reading the entire run of *Mimosa* in a single sitting whilst abstaining from beer and chocolate. I am told that people like me are anathema to true fanzine fans and that I can expect to be burned at the stake, have my ashes spat upon and be condemned to spent eternity attending Worldcon. It could be an interesting convention.

Alternatively, if you have a slightly more open mind, and in particular if you would like to know more about some of the wonderful fanzines produced in Australia, come and find me. If I'm not in the bar, follow the smell of chocolate.

Land of Faded Hope and Glory

That was actually the first half of a 70's Conservative slogan. It ended, of course, with "give us back those wicked Tories". And so the Great British Public did. They gave us Margaret Thatcher and John Major, repeatedly. They got their glory too. The British Empire got to beat up on the Miners, the Argentinians and Saddam Hussain. And believe me those guys were tough. Well, compared to Fuzzy-Wuzzies and Zulus anyway.

Those days of right-wing thuggery are long past. Nowadays Britain is the vibrant, happening home of the world's most innovative fashion and music industries, it is in the forefront of political reform, it is leading Europe into a new age. Progressive, inspiring stuff. Peace, love and rock 'n' roll for everyone. If only John Lennon could have lived to see this. I mean, can you imagine a Labour Prime Minister declaring war on some tin-pot Middle-Eastern dictator just to help the US President divert attention from a domestic scandal?

Oh! OK. Maybe it hasn't all changed much after all. Take the Great Rail Privatisation, for example. Now have a bunch of separate operating companies providing services. Competition, innovation, we even have a Great Western Railway again. But the tickets still come on British Rail stationery, the coffee still comes in the same cups that BR used, even most of the trains are still painted in BR liveries. And they are still late. Manchester United is still top of the Premier League, the national soccer and cricket teams are still a joke, the IRA and UDF are still shooting each other on the streets of Belfast. The Sun still has naked tits on page three. Even the Queen Gran is still going strong, despite all that the Germans, Japs, Commies, Argies and Arabs could throw at her. Thanks goodness for Lord Rupert of Wapping whose determination to keep Her Great-Grand-Motherly Majesty (God Bless Her) in G&T has put the vast profits generated by the aforementioned naked tits to Glorious and Patriotic use.

Oh, there are a few changes. There's an extra TV channel, though it doesn't seem to have done anything to improve programme quality. When I left the airwaves were thrumming to a bunch of cute but talentless blokes called Fake Twat, whereas now they are replaced by a bunch of somewhat less cute and somewhat more talentless girls called the Pop Tarts. Other than that, it is the same decrepit old country. The new coat of paint is monomolecular-thin, visible only from overseas.

OK, OK, I've been reading London's "alternative" press again. Just *Time Out*, guys, even I have sufficient dignity to avoid stooping so far as reading *NME*. Yeah, the style is predictable. But at least this time I know what I'm doing. Yup, you guessed it, I'm whingeing.

It is strange that it took a return visit to Britain to make me understand what the Aussies meant, but after 2.5 years away, much of the recent time spent amongst the rampantly and unrepentantly positive Californians, I have finally come to realise that they are right. The Poms are a nation of whingers.

I blame the weather myself. Though the British climate is capable of producing almost every kind of weather you could wish for, it never does it when you want it to. It never snows at Christmas, the week of "heat wave" never coincides with your summer holiday, and although June is statistically a very sunny month, the few vagrant clouds around always find their way unerringly to south London in time for a certain tennis tournament. And so people complain. Take now, for example. According to the forecasters the weather we are experiencing is "unseasonably warm". I'd call it rather less damn cold than I'd been expecting, but my mother is complaining that all of the plants in her garden are budding too early. She's right too, because we all know that come the middle of March we could be under six feet of snow and all those fresh, new buds will be dead. It will probably happen just in time for Corflu, giving our American visitors more chances to realise that, far from being a quaint tourist town in romantic Yorkshire, Leeds is actually Britain's answer to Cleveland.

But I digress. When you live in a country where complaining about the weather is a daily requirement, I guess it is not surprising that you get into the habit of complaining about everything else. Where Americans talk about diversifying their investments in case of a downturn in the stock market, Britons complain that they have Never Had It So Bad, despite the fact that the government has just taken a massive ten billion quid off the national debt. Where Americans revel in new technological advances, Britons resist every form of change to their last breath. It is almost a disappointment when a national sports team wins, though people will probably complain that they did so unsportingly.

There's a class thing too. Talk to sufficient pan-handlers on the streets of San Francisco and you'll soon find one who'll tell you that he has a great idea for a new software product and as soon as he can get the venture capital together he'll be as rich as Steve Jobs or Mark Andressen. (Not Bill Gates. Never mention Bill Gates in the Bay Area save in the hushed tones required when contemplating Evil Incarnate.) Talk to people in London, however, whether street dwelling or not, and you'll get a different answer. "What's the f-ing use, mate", they say, "it's all them posh bleeders from f-ing Eton wot gets the jobs and the money. I can't be f-ing bothered, mate. I'm off down the f-ing pub, me." And then they start on an extended whinge about the government, the nobility, the manager of their favourite soccer team, the weather, the trains, the traffic, the quality of the beer, BSE, the irradiation of food, Europe, Saddam Hussain, the Americans and the fact that the tits on page three of The Sun aren't as big as they were when Maggie was in charge. It is depressing, it really is.

The trouble is, of course, that I am one of them and, just as I hadn't realised how much Poms whinged until I'd been away, I may not realise how much I do it myself. Oh dear...

On a Wing and a Prayer

Oh, mea culpa. Here we have a really interesting book which has been out for over a year and I only found out about it at Potlatch. Sorry guys. I know it is too late for the Hugo nominations - it should have been in last year - but the author ought to be on your Campbell Award list. I'm talking, of course, about *The Sparrow*, a very impressive first novel from Mary Doria Russell.

Plot synopses always sound banal, but I'm going to give one anyway 'cos you'll need it. In 2019 SETI finally comes up trumps. Radio signals carrying strange and beautiful singing are discovered emanating from somewhere in the Alpha Centauri system. No government seems eager to fork out for an expedition, so The Vatican decides to go it alone and send a bunch of Jesuits on the first ever mission to the ETs. When this is discovered, the UN gets its act together and, a few years later, sends a slightly more representative party. The time debt between our system and Alpha Centauri is 17 years.

41 years later, Father Emilio Sandoz returns to Earth. The report of the UN delegation who sent him back arrived years earlier and is damning. He is the only surviving member of the Jesuit expedition. They found him in a brothel - staff not customer - and witness him kill a native girl who had befriended him. He is very sick, physically mutilated, and deeply mentally disturbed.

The book follows Sandoz's story in two parallel threads. The first tells the story of the expedition as its members saw it. The second follows the debriefing of Sandoz by his Jesuit superiors. It is very well done. Russell does a fine job of maintaining tension by, on the one hand, introducing you to a likeable bunch of people and, on the other, letting slip that all but one of them will die horribly. And they are the lucky ones.

Other aspects of the book are well done too. The astrophysics seems competent and believable. The linguistics is occasionally fascinating, and the anthropology is excellent, as it should be as Russell has a PhD in the subject. My favourite SF books are always those which create a believable and truly different culture for their aliens. Le Guin does this very well. So does Russell.

I must admit that parts of the plot are very far-fetched. Quite how The Vatican managed to put this secret mission together is never quite thoroughly explained. Nor do I understand why they were willing to send a bunch of rank amateurs who behaved as if they were on a jolly picnic in Darkest Africa. These things, I suspect, must be marked down as "necessary for the message".

And there are two messages that Russell intends us to take away from the book. Sadly, this is where she falls down.

Message number one is theological. As with Saul Weintraub in *Hyperion*, Sandoz is forced to question the morality of God. But whereas Simmons deals with this fairly well, Russell just ends up making the Catholics look stupid. Given that she had converted from Catholicism to Judaism shortly before writing the book, this is perhaps not surprising.

Message number two is political. Russell has a bee in her bonnet about how nasty historians are these days to poor, misunderstood people like Columbus and the Conquistadors. They were just trying to do the best they could for the native Americans given their cultural background, she says. And in a similar situation, we'd make just as many awful mistakes.

She has a point that we may well stuff up. Certainly an expedition as badly equipped and crewed, and fatally over-enthusiastic, as hers is asking for trouble. They violate the Prime Directive like it is going out of fashion, but then so does Picard when his sense of morality is affronted. What I refuse to accept is that we can't get it right. Nor do I believe that ancient colonialists should be exonerated of all blame simply because the job was hard. The Persians and Romans made a better job of colonialism than the British and Spanish.

My point, however, is that the book got me thinking about all this stuff. Even if I don't agree with the conclusions, I like a book that makes me think. The sequel is due out in March. Here's hoping it gets parallel publication in the UK.

The Sparrow - Mary Doria Russell - Ballantine - softcover

God Goes Swimming

Meet Anthony van Horne, tanker captain. Well, ex-tanker captain actually. Very, very ex. You see, the *Carpco Varparaíso* ruptured her tanks in the Caribbean, spilling oil over miles of prime Texan beaches. Captain van Horne quickly became the world's most hated man, especially in the offices of his employers. He thought he would never command a ship again. Then he met a very strange person. A person with radiant skin, huge white wings and a halo. A person who was the bearer of very bad news.

"Our mutual Creator has passed away," said Raphael with a sigh compounded of pain, exhaustion and grief.

"What?"

"God died."

Anthony took an involuntary step backwards. "That's crazy."

"Died and fell into the sea."

So there we have it. A 2-mile long divine corpse floating somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic and nothing on Earth capable of salvaging it and *Towing Jehovah* to where He can get a decent burial short of a very, very big super-tanker.

A good joke, isn't it? Unfortunately that is it. That is the only joke. And in a book that is supposed to be a satire, that is hardly the requisite level of humour. Morrow certainly has big ideas. The cover claims that he is laying into religion, feminism, machoism, environmentalism and any other ism that happened to pop into the blurb-writer's mind at the time. What is more, most of those isms actually turn up in the book, usually in the middle of attempts at humour reminiscent of the jokes told by Neil on The Young Ones.

That in itself wouldn't be so bad. We have enough Terry Pratchett in the world already without anyone else trying to write funny novels. What really got my goat was that Morrow was trying to deal with big ideas and did so with all the intellectual depth of a Sun editorial. Coming straight after the intensely erudite *Sparrow* only made it seem worse. Sad really, but I couldn't recommend it to anyone. Nor will I waste any more space on it.

Towing Jehovah - James Morrow - Harcourt Brace - hardcover

Hugos in a Hurry

Botheration. Those of you contemplating holding Worldcon on anything other than the traditional weekend please note. Here was me thinking that we didn't even discuss the Hugos at BASFA until April last year and suddenly I realise that the early date for Bucconeer has resulted in the nomination deadline being March 10th. This will probably get to you too late to affect your votes, but for what it is worth, here are a few of my favourites from the past year.

Best novel - What a choice: *Back in the USSA* by Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne, *Rise of Endymion* by Dan Simmons, *Glimmering* by Elizabeth Hand, *Earthquake Weather* by Tim Powers and I think but need to check the date) *Phoenix Café* by Gwynneth Jones. *The Sparrow* deserves to be on the list but was published at the tail end of last year so is not eligible. I should also put in a good word for *Nymphomation* by Jeff Noon which I haven't read only because I haven't been able to find a copy (next time, Ackroyd, keep me one!).

Best Dramatic Presentation - Again a mass of possibles of which *Contact* gets my vote by a long way. Some B5 episode will probably win but I doubt that my favourite from Season 4, *The Face of the Enemy* in which Garibaldi and Bester have a little tête à tête, will be the one to get the JMS seal of approval. Also on the list are *Fifth Element* (for the wonderful Jean-Paul Gaultier costumes), *Men in Black* (for being very silly), *Alien Resurrection* (because if it is anywhere near as beautiful as Jeunet managed on *City of Lost Children* it will be the most atmospheric film of the year), *Starship Troopers* (because Heinlein fans hate it) and *Batman & Robin* (for Uma Thurman and the motorbikes, everything else about it was crap). *Star Trek* does not deserve a look-in.

Best Fanzine - *Attitude* and *Aparatchik* (RIP), *Mimezine Flashback*, *AMD*, *Plokta*, *File 770*, *Thyme* and, of course, *Ansible*. Boy there is a lot of good stuff around.

Best Fan Writer - Dave Langford, of course, but also Terry Frost, Mark Plummer, Bob Devney, Mike Glycer, Paul Ewins, Andy Hooper. Bruce Gillespie and Marc Ortlieb should be up there too but as they only write for ANZAPA I doubt they'll get many nominations.

Best Fan Artist - Ian Gunn, Sue Mason, Kerri Valkova, Steve Scholtz and Taral Wayne.

John W. Campbell Award - Mary Doria Russell. No contest. But I'll put in a good word for Eugene Byrne.

The rest of them I don't really feel competent to judge. I don't read short story magazines so I can't comment on the other fictional and the professional magazine categories (though I'll cheer wildly for *Interzone*). I never take much notice of cover art credits. I think the semi-prozine category is a joke. I shall be nominating *Nova Express* and *Tangent* for it even though they try to pretend that they are fanzines - anyone who spends that much money on a fanzine is either a lunatic or trying to buy an award.

Sadly Corflu is just too late to badger people to vote. As I remember, most British fans are convinced, even after so many Langford wins, that the Hugos are an American plot and that it is impossible for anyone from outside the US to get nominated. There are more than enough Brits who go to every Worldcon to get someone nominated to any of the fan categories if they all voted together. Perhaps we should start a campaign to nominate Joseph Nicholas next year to prove that it can be done.

Sailor Moon - Warrior Goddess?

As many of you will know, Kevin is a big fan of the Anime series, Sailor Moon. As a matter of urgent self defence (i.e. understanding what he was wittering on about all the time) I decided to educate myself and watch a few episodes. At first I confess that I was absolutely appalled - Kevin is normally such a sensible fellow and the first few episodes I watched were utter crap. However, as time went on, I began to take an interest in some aspects of the series, in particular the way in which the series was tailored to appeal to young girls. Xena it ain't, but in some ways it is very clever.

Before I go on I should comment that I am not at all keen in Anime. I find the idea of Japanese superheroes having blonde hair and huge eyes deeply disturbing, and although Anime often shows a refreshingly relaxed attitude to sex and gender roles, it always seems that this is a social safety valve more than any evidence of actual attitudes in Japanese culture. Anime is a world in which the normal strictures of society are turned on their heads. It reminds me of Punch & Judy shows or the Comedia Del Arté. There are, of course, whole articles to be written on this subject, not to mention on how US translations of Anime differ from what is shown in Japan. Sadly I don't think I'll ever be able to stomach enough Anime to write them, but you never know.

But the subject for today is Sailor Moon. Who is she, what sort of role model is she, and is she a Warrior Goddess? Well, she's the leader of a group of teenage girls who, for reasons which are still a mystery to me, have supernatural powers and spend their time defending the Earth from the evil Negaverse under the direction of a couple of talking cats. All of the girls are named after celestial bodies and, to a certain extent, take on the characteristics of their planets. For example, Sailor Mars is very brave, Sailor Mercury very smart, Sailor Jupiter is the oldest and biggest and Sailor Venus the prettiest. I don't know enough about

Japanese culture to know if the correspondence with Graeco-Roman mythology is some sort of mythic synchronicity or just cross-cultural infection.

Sailor Moon is clearly marked out as the Moon Goddess. I guess she is the leader as the Moon is the largest celestial body that we see. Her name, in the American version, is Serena. This takes the Roman name of the Moon, Selena, and then makes a joke of the Japanese inability to pronounce the letter L. In Japanese her name translates as Bunny which recalls the Moon's sacred hares that have come down to us as Mad March Hares and the Easter Bunny. Robert Graves would have had a whale of a time with the series.

And yet Serena is a selfish, lazy, cowardly cow and a complete klutz. She is by far the least likeable of the characters. Why? This is hardly the way we expect our heroes to be portrayed. It confused me for a long while, and then I remembered that, years ago before it became inadmissible for Western comic heroes to have faults, Peter Parker (Spiderman) and Scott Summers (Cyclops of the X-Men) were also walking disasters. Those were the days in which Marvel and DC comics always carried adverts for Charles Atlas bodybuilding courses. No matter how puny you were, they claimed, you too could learn to kick sand in people's faces and get away with it.

Sailor Moon isn't in quite the same mould, but then she is designed to appeal to girls, not boys. Serena is just the sort of character that an insecure teenage girl can identify with. She is always in trouble with her teachers and parents, she can't stop eating chocolate and ice cream even though everyone tells her she will get fat, and she has massive crushes on older boys but never gets a date. Significantly, all of her friends are noticeably better than her in some way. Mars is braver, Mercury smarter and Venus prettier. Jupiter is older, more competent and at least claims to have had lots of boyfriends. And yet it is made clear that this disaster of a girl will grow up to become the Moon Princess and marry the handsome Prince Darien. There is even a character whom we are led to believe is Serena and Darien's daughter brought back in time.

OK, so there is a lot of slushy nonsense in the series - the girls most often get into danger because they have stupidly fallen in love with someone who is either a bad guy or a puppet of the bad guys. But overall the message is very positive. It is saying to young girls that that, whatever adults and classmates may say, whatever insecurities they may have, they do have a chance, they can grow up to have happy and fulfilling lives. Significantly it is not Serena's super powers which help her. The cats, in particular, despair of her. She has to learn to make it herself, and eventually she starts finding the strength of character that she needs. As role models for young girls go, this is pretty impressive. It takes all of their fears, worries and obsessions and helps them face the future in a positive way. It was a long time ago that I was 14 and, as I remember, I wanted to grow up to be Jean Grey. I think that, had it been around at the time, I might have been a fan of *Sailor Moon*.

Divine Doggies

Alan Cole has kindly sent me a review copy of his latest novel, *Wolves of the Gods*. It is a sequel to *Wizard of the Winds* (reviewed in the last issue). This time our hero, Safar, is chased all over the world by a bunch of lycanthropic baddies. The interesting twist is that he has the entire population of his home village of Kyrania with him. The bad guys figured they could get rid of him by killing off his family and friends, so he decided to take them into

hiding with him. Naturally a bunch of goatherds and the like with little knowledge of the world don't take kindly to travel, and some of the best bits of the book are the agonies Safar goes through trying to decide whether fooling them into doing what he wants in order to save their skins is a moral thing to do. Once again, Alan is providing fantasy with rather more thought to it than the average fare.

Other fine bits are some of the scenes between Safar and his adopted half-demon son, Palimak. The kid gets caught up in the moral dilemmas and, from the way the conversation is portrayed, Alan would make a fine father. He has a nice line in cynicism too, as this selection shows:

"When I was going to wizard's school", Safar said, "they had a special class for first year acolytes called 'The Ethics of Magic'. Naturally, it only lasted a week, and no one ever attended." He snorted humour. "In fact, it was the only class at the Grand Temple of Walaria where students were expected to cheat. You could buy the tests from the teacher for six coppers. Four if you were on scholarship."

"Did you cheat, Father?" Palimak asked. "Did you buy the test?"

"I confess I did, Son", Safar said. "I didn't have any choice. The master of the course didn't attend either, and the only way you could take the test was to buy it with a set of answers."

I found this book slightly less interesting than its predecessor, largely because the characters and world were all familiar giving you little to learn as you read. The one interesting new character got killed off almost immediately which I thought was a terrible waste. We didn't even get to find out much about her motivations. Also, whilst the last novel was complete in itself, this one ends on a solid gold classic in media res cliff-hanger. Tut, tut. Naughty Alan. Guess I'll have to read the next one now.

Wolves of the Gods - Alan Cole - Del Rey - softcover

Fan Scene

Not a lot to report this issue, largely due to my having been rushing about. The only fanzine which is following me with any efficiency is *TommyWorld* and that is because a) it is delivered by email and b) it is weekly. Tommy Ferguson gets wonderfully over-emotional about everything in a way that probably only the Irish can manage. I also think that all English and American fans could benefit from reading a zine written by a Catholic living in Belfast. You can get it from Tommy at tferg@dial.pipex.com.

One item of note in the Bay Area is that SFSFC has been approached by this year's World Fantasy Con for assistance with legal and tax stuff. The main purpose of SFSFC's existence is to help promote conventions and we've done a lot of this stuff before. For example we provided a similar service for last year's Corflu. The deal with World Fantasy Con is currently subject to their agreement to abide by the necessary organisational safeguards that are required for SFSFC to make sure that a bad convention doesn't bring the whole organisation down, but I fully expect things to go through without a hitch. Nor do I have many worries about World Fantasy Con's ability to come in under budget. With a low

membership cap of 750, a large percentage of professional members and a high membership fee they'd have to try pretty hard to stuff up.

The convention will take place in Monterey in November. Regular readers will know that I'm very partial to Monterey so I'll be there if I can. I'm hoping that a lot of other Bay Area fans will get involved too. It will be good practice for our (hopefully) forthcoming Westercon and Worldcon. Also it will provide a good fannish input to the convention which, in the past, has been accused of being dominated by people who enjoy sucking up to the pros. Last year's event in London, for example, got a firm thumbs down from most British fans and pros who attended for being snobby and badly organised. The authors are generally great fun, but their acolytes, and occasionally the publishers, can be a pain. The Monterey organisers do not look like that sort of people (for example, Sarah Goodman is on the board). Let's do what we can to reclaim the convention for fun and fandom. I suspect that most of the pros will thank us.

Marc Ortlieb reports that Multiverse, Melbourne's regular media con, went off well. It is expected to break even, raised A\$2000 for charity and, with an attendance of 540, is the largest con I know of in Australia for many years. Of course it is run by those dreadful media fans whom members of the AussieCon Three seem to think should be excluded from the Worldcon. Encouragingly, Terry Frost and a few fellow MSFC committee members got involved in a lot of the panel items. This is the sort of thing I was hoping would happen in the run up to A3. Marc reports that A3 did manage a presence, but didn't have any fliers.

Talking of Australia, Jean Weber reports that Eric Lindsay is cheerful and well and making life a misery for his doctors and nurses. Alan Stewart has apparently been into hospital to have something removed but is recovering well. What with a GoH dropping dead and two of the Board hospitalised one could be forgiven for thinking that A3 had inherited the Curse of ConFrancisco. Just keep it down there, OK guys. I'm rather fond of Kevin.

Meanwhile, back in the UK, MSFC Publicity Officer, Tracey Oliphant's first novel, *Exile's Return*, was reviewed in *SFX*. Sadly the reviewer, Sharon Gosling, panned it. She commented that the research and detail were excellent, but said that this did not make up for a formulaic fantasy plot. I have a certain amount of sympathy because I hate formulaic stuff too, but by that logic the Mona Lisa is a bad painting because lots of portraits of women had been painted before. Not that the reviewer seemed to have paid much attention. I know Tracey was using a pen name but you would have thought Ms. Gosling would have recognised that "Kate Jacoby" was female.

I arrived in London a week late for the February Tun but, work willing, I hope to be there for the March meeting. I guess I'll catch upon a whole load of BritFan gossip then.

Footnote

Tsk, February again. I always seem to struggle to get the zine out by the end of the month when it is so short. My excuse this time is that I spent the whole of last week on the road (well, rails). Yes, I could have been working on the zine on all those train journeys, but I

read the Alan Cole book instead. And it is still (just) February. Better get that ASCII version done PDQ.

With the web-based letter page having proved a complete waste of time, I've decided to abandon it and try something else instead. I'm going to resurrect the mailing list I tried to use for distribution. This time, rather than send the 'zine out on it, I'll just use it for letters. That way you only need to sign up for it if you want to see the locs. It needs a bit of set-up at the LunaCity end but it should be active shortly. Watch this space.

I guess I should confess that there are a few good things about Britain after all. Good quality Cheddar cheese for only two quid a pound. An excellent new band called *Catatonia*. A superb series on BBC2 about classics of children's literature (although in true condescending BBC style they include *Lord of the Rings* in it). *Time Team* and *Have I Got News for You*. We even managed to win a Test Match. But it is cold and wet and the Melbourne Grand Prix is due up and I heard Tina Arena's *Sorento Moon* on the radio today. It is hard to know whether I am more homesick for San Francisco or Melbourne. Ah well, at least spring is on the way.

Talking of weather, dear old El Niño seems to have made its mark at last. We'd got heartily sick of it in California long before Christmas, but now, after the heaviest winter rain since 1867 (which for California is just about all of recorded history) it doesn't seem quite such a joke. Things are going decidedly pear-shaped around the world too. Indonesia is covered in forest fires and an algal bloom caused by unusually warm sea temperatures is causing havoc on the Barrier Reef. Most surprisingly of all, I spent a day in Manchester and it barely rained at all. Whatever is the world coming to?