

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Avast there Bucconeers. Those of you who happen to drop by the scuttlebutt at the fan lounge to swill some grog may chance upon this 'zine amongst the vast piles of other worthy broadsheets there available. Know then that this is *Emerald City*, the 35th of that name, and that you art right welcome here aboard. Should you happen to wish to contact the editor, she can best be found via the San Francisco in 2002 Worldcon bid table. Offers of beer will be gratefully appreciated.

Actually this issue is a little unusual for a Worldcon issue. To start with it is a whole month early. Having a monthly schedule means that I should always hit Worldcon with an issue whose number is divisible by 12. This doesn't mean anything to you, but it feels very weird to me. Secondly, the one thing I always try to do for Worldcon issues is promote a whole bunch of good Australian writers, people that most of you have probably never heard of. For various reasons I just haven't got the right books read at this right time this year. All we have to represent Down Under is New Zealand author Cherry Wilder. Still, she is darn good, so can't complain. Anyone wanting to know more in advance of Aussiecon Three is best advised to check out back issues on my web site.

Talking of Australia, this issue contains a brief report of the first week of DUFF delegate, Terry Frost's travels through America. So far he and the US of A seem to have survived each other. More details in the Westercon review.

And now, enough burbling, on with the issue...

Virtual Heaven

There are times when the commercial imperative is a pain the butt. In a gentler time, J.R.R. Tolkein laboured at peace over his massive epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. Only after it was finished and sold did publishers look at the size, draw a deep breath, and invent the Fantasy Trilogy. These days, of course, books are rushed into print hot off the word processor in convenient-sized chunks and stuck with convenient cliff-hanger endings to keep you drooling with anticipation for another year whilst the poor author labours frantically over the next instalment.

Normally I tend to avoid such opuses. Other times, such as in the case of David Brin's *Uplift* books, I find I am able to resist buying until the final episode has been published (which it has so more on Uplift II next issue). Tad Williams is a different matter. Ever since *The*

Dragon Bone Chair I have rushed to the shops the moment a new volume in one of his major works appears. I always regret it, of course, having reached the end of the book and being no nearer a resolution to the story, but I do it anyway, because he's so good.

To give him credit, Tad well knows what he is doing to his readers. Copies of *River of Blue Fire*, the second volume of the *Otherland* series, bear a contrite apology to fans for the cliff-hanger ending of the previous volume. But Tad is quite firm about what he is doing. Like Tolkein, he is not writing a trilogy, he is writing one very long novel which, for purely practical reasons such as weight and binding technology, is being published in several pieces.

It is a funny business, epic writing, and liable to run away with you if you are not careful. One of the more common questions posed to George R.R. Martin on his antipodean tour was "how many volumes will there be in *Song of Fire and Ice*", to which George could only reply, "I don't know, but it is more than I initially intended". As George explained it, although writers normally have a vague idea of where a story is going and the major events, they do not necessarily plan things out chapter by chapter. An author who is good with characters (and George is very good with them) will just sit and write, ponder on what the characters would do, and write some more. As a result, what might have been envisaged as two chapters can become ten or twenty. Tad admits to having this problem himself, which is why *To Green Angel Tower* grew so enormously that it had to be split in two for paperback publication. These days, he says, he knows the pitfalls, and *Otherland* will only be four volumes, promise. Only another two years to wait, then.

But where do they come from, all these words? How come one author can tell a story in 500 pages and another needs 5000? In Tad's case they come from side tracks. If you've ever seen Tad fronting up to fans (and I hope you will, the man is a superb entertainer) you'll know just what I mean. Someone will ask him a question and from that he'll dash off at a tangent, expounding some theory, relating an anecdote, nesting himself several levels deep, and calmly returning to the original question several minutes later in the manner of a well-written piece of structured software. His big novels work in the same way. He'll be describing a piece of the action, when all of a sudden a character will start to mull something over, or remember some incident from the past. Suddenly several pages have passed and suddenly we are back with the main flow of the story but, and this is the clever bit, with a much greater insight into the character in question or some element of the plot. Other writers may simply say "it reminded Jane of an incident in her childhood where she'd been scared witless by a savage dog". Tad will relate the entire incident in detail.

And here I am doing the same thing. I've wittered on for a good page or so on the subject of epic creation without saying a damn thing about the book I'm supposed to be reviewing. If this were a finely crafted piece of structured journalism I'd now present an elegant conclusion which would bring us neatly back into the review. But it isn't, so I'm going to cheat.

End Subroutine

Goto [Main_Review](#)

Of course that isn't entirely inappropriate. After all, the vast majority of the action in *River of Blue Fire* takes place inside a virtual world, *Otherland*, in which our heroes became entrapped in volume one. Well, not just one world, but many of them, each a separate simulation, each a carefully crafted environment in its own right. The river of the title is a

sort of software thread which allows knowledgeable travellers to navigate through each simulation and, at appropriate points, pass from one world to another.

In a similar fashion to present day role-playing campaigns, each of these worlds is the painstaking creation of a dedicated, and potentially quite crazy, creator. In this particular case each of the creators has billions of dollars of software development costs to play with, but hey, what's a few greenbacks between fellow aspiring deities, huh?

Ultimately, of course, Tad is the creator of all these worlds, except why should he bother when it is so much more fun to borrow them from elsewhere. Like literature, for example. Ever wanted to write Bertie Wooster into a novel? Ever wanted to take the sickly niceness of Oz and pervert it. Ever wanted to see orcs laying waste to the shire armed with Kalashnikovs and Uzis? Ah, the fun you can have with virtual reality.

But wait a minute, hasn't this been done before. Somewhere, back in the dark recesses of my mind, I recall another book in which the heroes travelled between parallel worlds each one based on a famous piece of literature. What was it? Ah yes, I remember, *Number of the Beast*.

Oh dear.

Fear not, dear reader, a Heinlein our Tad most certainly is not. Sure it is fun creating all those alternate worlds. But for starters there is a fairly sensible reason for their being there, and more importantly the story does have a point to it beyond the literary games. Quite what that point is is not entirely clear. After all, we are only half way through the book, remember? A few clues have been dropped here and there. Clearly Tad is playing with concepts such as the nature of reality and perception. What is more he clearly has some important points to make, not just a burning desire to write a book in which the aliens have more than one knee per leg. To say more would be to give away the plot, not to mention the fact that I haven't got any idea where he is headed just yet. But it is going to be interesting when he gets there.

What I can say is that it rolls along strong, steady and unstoppable. Have you ever tried cooking dinner with a 600+ page hardback novel in one hand? Have you ever had to do it anyway because you can't put the book down? Part of the plot of the novel is that the heroes are unable to log out of *Otherland*. Obviously this is a very strange thing to people used to normal VR. That part of the plot at least I have fathomed. They can't log out because the plot of the VR system was written by Tad and they can't help themselves but stay with the story until it is finished.

River of Blue Fire - Tad Williams - DAW - hardcover

On the Border

This year's Westercon took place in San Diego and the first thing I must say about it is that I would have been perfectly happy if the con had been a complete disaster. San Diego is a lovely city. The hot, Southern Californian climate is tempered by the ocean-side location. The shore is studded with marinas and hotels. There is an excellent public transport system. The restaurants are great (especially the seafood). And it is the home of what is reputed to be the best zoo in the world. If I had ended up having a four-day holiday in San

Diego instead of a convention it would not have been long enough. As it was, I got a great convention instead.

Of course the one obvious negative thing about San Diego is that it is the home of the US Pacific Fleet. Sensibly the Navy boys have been quartered well away from the more affluent parts of the city, but the major saving grace is that, given a night off, they are far more likely to head south than north. In that direction that can find a place where the sort of entertainment they are seeking can be found much more easily and cheaply: Tijuana.

Yes folks, take the Blue Line Trolley southbound from San Diego and you end up in a place called San Ysidro where a short walk through the checkpoints will take you out of the USA and into Mexico. Seasoned international travellers such as Terry and myself could hardly resist the opportunity to add another country to the list and so, even though we'd been warned in advance that the border guards are far too lazy to stamp your passport, we took half a day off from conventioning to go explore.

Tijuana does not have an efficient, modern light rail system like San Diego. There are times when it seems that it doesn't even seem to have any roads to speak of, but it does have busses and they know just where their business comes from. A very regular service meets visitors at the border and for a mere dollar takes you the 5 miles or so into the city centre where, it is assumed, you will shop to your heart's content.

Well, that's the theory anyway. However, downtown Tijuana is most emphatically not designed for tourists. It is designed specifically to separate the poor people of San Diego and, of course, the US Navy, from their dollars as swiftly and painlessly as possible. The tourist shops, of which there are plenty, stock the most amazing quantity of junk you have ever seen. Very little of it is priced - the only thing we didn't have to barter for was postcards. Everywhere you go, shop owners rush to steer you into their premises and assure you of your burning desire to take away the entire contents. And, most bizarrely, the street is lined with vendors proudly showing off donkeys painted up as zebras on which, for a suitable sum, they will take you for a ride. In both senses of the expression.

One of the main businesses of Mexican border towns is the sale of pharmaceuticals. In America everyone has medical insurance, as a result of which no one has to pay for medication. Well, not directly anyway. Consequently no one notices that the over the counter cost of their pills is absolutely extortionate. No one, that is, except innocent travelling Brit girls who find themselves paying over a dollar a day for certain important little pills. I went back to the UK, bought up several months supply and took them back with me. Americans, if they have to pay for medication, go to Mexico. I found one shop which claimed to sell Viagra over the counter. Terry claimed not to need it and muttered about taking some back for members of the MSFC whom he regards as hormonally challenged.

In the end, of course, we didn't buy any pills. We did buy a rather specy straw hat for Terry. We bought a lace tablecloth with an Aztec design for Sharon, his girlfriend. I looked around for something for Kevin but there wasn't a single thing to be seen with a train on it. I didn't even buy any booze, there being little on offer except tequila, which I know little about, and Mexican beer. I bought some postcards. And we went back to the US having got a thoroughly poor, and probably undeserving impression of Mexico. Maybe I should try Cancun.

And now I'm going to do something very unusual. I'm going to talk about the convention programming. Normally, of course, I manage to attend one or two program items per

convention. This time I took a look at the prospective programme and decided that it was pretty good. I asked to be on a bunch of programme items, and lo, it happened. Of course I got my comeuppance for this, but hey, I enjoy doing panels. It was worth it.

So what awful thing happened? It was like this. Entirely by chance, I had been scheduled to appear on the first programme item of the convention. I arrived at the room at the appropriate time and found some of my prospective colleagues. Then in walks the programme ops lady with the name cards for the panelists. "You much be Cheryl", she says. Well yes, I was. "I'm glad you are her". Uh oh... "The moderator hasn't turned up". I look at my two fellow panellists. Both are writers. One is GoH Katherine Kurtz. I see the trap closing. Talk about deep end.

Well, I've never moderated a panel before, but I remembered admiring how well Roz Kaveney had handled and enthusiastic audience at Wiscon and tried to follow the same style. It seemed to work. We didn't grind to a halt, and I managed to prevent any of the audience talking over. I was rather pleased with myself.

From there, of course, things could only get worse, through the two fannish panels I was on were good fun in a somewhat different way. One or two of the other panels were a bit dead. I also noticed a very strange thing about panel drift. Several of the panels I was on had titles of the form "xxxxxx in Science Fiction" or "xxxxxx in Fantasy". It didn't seem to matter what xxxxxx was, the panel always ended up talking about that and ignoring books altogether. I shall remember this if I ever end up designing a convention programme.

It seemed like I was fairly lucky with my programme items. None of them drew a huge crowd, but none of them were too sparse. Mary Kay Kare tells me that many of the science track programme items were in rooms way to small for them, and Janice Gelb had a panel that only attracted one person. The latter problem was at least in part to poor Janice being scheduled against JMS's big Babylon 5 presentation. The small room problem, however, was more fundamental.

The assembled SMOFs were generally of the opinion that the hotel was somewhat too small for the convention. The dealers' room was OK, especially compared to the minuscule cubicle provided last year in Seattle, but there was very little other space aside from some small rooms. The big event room was "the pavillion", a large tent erected over a couple of tennis courts out the back of the hotel. The acoustics were atrocious. I did one panel in there and even with microphones we could only make ourselves heard about five rows back. This problem wasn't helped by the fact that a light rail service went past every 7 or 8 minutes drowning out everything.

JMS was scheduled to appear in the pavillion on Saturday. He politely pointed out that the lighting was so poor that people could not see the video he'd brought, and offered to perform again on Sunday if a different room could be found. The only way to do that was to knock out a bunch of air walls, thus destroying three small rooms and making a load of other panels homeless. The newsletter guys had a lot of programme corrections to print on Sunday morning.

But this is griping. Overall the programme was very interesting and it was hardly the fault of the programme director, Scott Norton, that the facilities people didn't deliver. The guest list was good too, although it helps if you are only a few hours down the freeway from LA. Tim Powers got lost along the way and missed a panel, but he was his usual entertaining and thoughtful self for the rest of the con so no one minded. David Brin came despite having his right arm in a sling. I'm not sure what he had done to his hand, but he seemed to

be in considerable pain. That he turned up at all is a testament to how much SF authors value their fans.

One of the most interesting panels I attended was entitled *Wither Worldcon?* It was, of course, a SMOFfish thing, but despite the title the subjects discussed were not solely applicable to Worldcons. Indeed, the panel might have been more accurately called *Wither Westercon?*

Old time fans, as you might have guessed from my comments on *Mimosa* last issue, seem to be forever bemoaning the fact that "things ain't what they used to be". SMOFs are no exception and the role of chief doomsayer on the panel seemed to have been allotted to Drew Saunders who droned on morosely about declining Worldcon attendance. Statistically, this is by no means proven. People look back on the phenomenal numbers that attended ConFrancisco and LA Con II, but really they are anomalies. Attendance at US Worldcons has been pretty steady at around 5000 for many years. Then again, interest in SF has never been greater, so shouldn't the numbers be growing? Westercon, in contrast, is clearly in decline. In the past it regularly drew around 2000 people. These days, even after omitting the anomaly of El Paso, numbers are about half that.

Part of the problem is publicity. Seated Westercon committees don't seem to put a lot of effort into promoting themselves. And of course publicity is a hard thing to get right. We all have horror stories of conventions where some outsider has seen the publicity for the con, turned up and then complained vehemently that the event was a rip off because it wasn't what they expected. Fandom is a difficult concept to sell, but we should at least be able to sell it amongst ourselves. If BayCon can attract 1700 people from the Bay Area alone, why can Westercon only manage 1000 from the entire west coast? The guys from Spokane who are running next year's convention seem much more enthusiastic than recent committees. Let's hope they manage to draw a good crowd.

The other factor raised at the panel which seemed highly relevant was the increasing specialisation of fandom. Back when Worldcon first started you really could get all of the SF fans in America to one convention. Sure they might have had slightly different interests, but if they all got together there were, gasp, hundreds of them. They days a specialist fan convention like Anime Expo can attract as many people as a Worldcon. Sure many of the people who go there like other SF-related stuff. Some of them will go to Worldcon as well. But for many of them the question is "why should I go to a massive convention devoted to all SF when I can go to one just as big devoted entirely to my special interest?"

The answer, of course, is that you might discover something new and interesting rather than stay in the same old rut, but it is a hard message to sell. There's also the question of if we got 10000 people to a Worldcon, could we cope with them all. Fortunately, Worldcon doesn't seem to need to go out and sell itself. But Westercon clearly does and I'm not at all sure how it should go about it.

Sticking with the SMOFfish theme, my one staff job at the convention was as secretary of the business meeting. This is the sort of event that most people regard a load of boring nonsense attended only by crazy SMOFs. Thus it was with great surprise that Westercon members passing the business meeting room heard gales of laughter pouring from it and, checking their watches, found it was running an hour over its allotted time.

The culprit, of course, was Mr. Frost. Terry had been enjoying his first American convention immensely. So much so, it seemed, that he wanted to go to it again next year. Having been part of the team (along with Jerry Kaufman and Eric Lindsay) who won the right to stage the Australian NatCon in Seattle, Terry thought it only fair that we give him the chance to have a Westercon in Australia. Of course the bylaws don't allow that. So, with a little coaching from Kevin, Terry introduced a motion to change them.

Fortunately, only one of the Americans present was so humour-challenged as to fail to see the joke. Besides, the whole idea had been well canvassed (though not in smoke filled rooms because we were in California) the previous night. Ben Yalow, never one to miss out on a good joke, but still concerned to preserve the sensibility of the Westercon bylaws, moved to amend by adding a proviso "that the change not take effect until such time as Australia is annexed by the US". Linda Deneroff politely added "or vice versa", and we were set for a highly entertaining debate.

It should be said that the whole thing would have fallen flat were it not for Kevin's masterly chairing of the events. It is clear that the seven types of Hell that we put him through every BASFA meeting have honed his skills to the point where he can keep control of a room full of maniacs no matter what crazy motions they throw at him.

And so it was that after much earnest discussion, Terry's motion was passed, with Ben's accompanying proviso. So can we now hold a Westercon in Australia? Well, not yet. Remember that the proviso states that Australia must have been annexed by the US, or vice versa. What can we do about this?

It just so happens, that BASFA is in the habit of appointing visiting fans to ambassadorial posts. It further happens that we have Ambassadors both to the US Congress (Roger Wells) and Australia (Stephen Boucher). It occurred to me, evil minded person that I am, that we might ask these good people to take up their duties and approach the relevant governments and do whatever they can to arrange an annexation, one way or the other, and thereby help bring Terry's plan to fruition. BASFA, of course, enjoyed the debate, though some concern was expressed at the propriety of actually asking our Ambassadors to do something. Fortunately, one of them at least is entering into the spirit of things. Roger has a business trip to Washington lined up and has promised to do what he can to further the cause whilst he is there. We have yet to hear from Stephen. Perhaps he will turn up at Bucconeer with the news that he has the whole thing arranged. Certainly there must be people in Australia who would trade almost anyone, even Slick Willy, for John Howard.

Of course having got Terry to BASFA, we had to make him an Ambassador as well. This left us in a quandary. We already have an Ambassador to Australia. Eric Lindsay and Jean Weber were made Ambassadors to Queensland. What was left for Terry? Fortunately Trey Haddad had a flash of genius. He proposed that we make Terry "Ambassador to Australia at Avignon". Those of us well schooled in mediaeval history promptly collapsed in hysterics, whilst those blighted by the American education system gazed on in confusion. Terry is now revelling in the title of the "Anti-Ambassador", and I must say it suits him.

But wait, what are we doing at BASFA? This was supposed to be a Westercon report. Where was I? Oh yes, the business meeting.

You should be aware, of course, that we don't only have business meetings to debate silly motions about Australia annexing the USA. There are serious purposes to them as well, and chief amongst those purposes is the announcement of site selection results. Like Worldcon, Westercon locations are decided by vote, although the bidding period is two

years not three. Thus this convention was charged with selecting a suitable venue for the year 2000. There were two serious bids: one for Phoenix, and one for Hawaii.

I have to admit that I feel sorry for the Phoenix people. They try very hard to win conventions for their city, and are completely bemused when people look at them blankly and say "Arizona? In the summer? You've got to be kidding". This time they thought they were in with a chance. I mean, who can afford to go to Hawaii? And where will they find local fans to run it?

Well it so happens that there are SF fans living in Hawaii. More significantly, two of them happen to be my good friends James and Kathryn Daughtery. They also have a house in San Francisco and are part of the SF2002 Worldcon Bid Committee. Which is how come San Francisco Science Fiction Conventions Inc. ended up sponsoring a bid for a Hawaii Westercon.

And the good news is that we won. Honolulu will take place over July 4th weekend 2000 on Waikiki Beach (well, in the Sheraton, but it is built right on the beach). Guests of honour will be Dan Simmons, Bay Area artist Ctein, and Portland fan John Lorentz. Programme, we suspect, will be relaxed, but we are expecting a serious science stream which just might include field trips for such educational purposes as studying marine fauna and peering into the mouths of volcanoes. Most importantly, we are anticipating an international convention. After all, Hawaii is almost the same distance from New Zealand as it is from California, and Australia isn't that much further away.

Currently membership prices are quoted only in US dollars. However, wherever SF2002 goes, we'll be happy to take Honolulu memberships. This includes Aussiecon Three and the '99 UK Eastercon. Furthermore, once this year's World Fantasy Con (which we are also sponsoring) has finished with it, Honolulu will be given use of our corporate credit card account and we'll be able to accept memberships in any currency. For more information, go to the SFSFC web site (sfsfc.org) and follow the links.

Gosh it is good to see the team win something. Well done James and Kathryn, and here's hoping it is a good omen.

Alive & Kicking

Last issue I related how I'd met Cherry Wilder at Construction and had been most impressed. Well you can hardly go around making friends with authors and not read their books, and Cherry had copies of her latest novel, *Signs of Life*, for sale. And a rather fine book it is too.

The story begins on a cargo ship in deep space. The regular crew is blessed with a bunch of VIP passengers to look after and the 'help' of a unit of the private auxiliary force, Silver Cross, who are supposedly galactic do-gooders but who have a profoundly militaristic culture - sort of like grown up Boy Scouts run by Clint Eastwood in one of his tough commander roles. In a very short time, the ship is in deep trouble. Something has gone wrong, everyone is herded into the evacuation modules, and everyone hopes that the Earth-like planet that the crew has spotted is as habitable as it looks. Not to mention that they don't burn up on entry and that they manage a decent landing.

Meanwhile, afloat on the planet's seas, a trading ship is filling her holds with spices from remote islands. The crew is part of a society descended from another disabled spacecraft that landed their centuries ago. When they spot strange lights in the sky that look suspiciously like man-made craft, the captain decides to investigate. It means a perilous trip over the unexplored ocean, but at worst they should come back with a catch of the mighty blackwing ray, and at best they may return with passengers from the stars.

The evacuation hasn't gone well. Maintenance on the space worthiness of the modules has not been good. Fear and panic is hampering the efficient working of the crew. Something in the atmosphere seems to be inhibiting radio contact and there just isn't time to work round it. One module reports splashdown in mid ocean, another lands in a swamp and begins to sink, some are not heard from at all. What may be the single surviving craft touches down on the beach of an island far out in the ocean. It just happens to be the one where the crew is outnumbered by Silver Cross auxiliaries.

What follows is a tale of first contact with your own species plus the political intrigues between the crew, the Silver Cross and the passengers. It is an entertaining and thoughtful tale, perhaps marred a little by the exaggerated nature of some of the characters. The Silver Cross in particular are so stereotypically stupid that they could exist only in an American war movie or in a survivalist militia in Texas. But I very much liked the additional dimension provided by the exploration of the personal growth of the android members of the castaways now that they were outside the environment they had been built for.

This is certainly a book that is worth reading, and I will have to go look for more of Cherry's work sometime soon. I do hope that Aussiecon Three makes a big fuss of her.

Signs of Life - Cherry Wilder - Tor - softcover

Exquisite Tastes

There are lots of fantasy novels that have a cat as a principal character. There are somewhat less that have an appendix giving the recipes for all of the dishes mentioned in the text. I suspect that there is only one that has both. I could hardly not read it, could I?

The Stars Dispose is a strange book. Set in Renaissance Florence, the book tells the story of a family of cooks whose employers are allies of the powerful Medici. Or should I say, once powerful, for at the time the book is set, although the Pope was a Medici, the family's influence over Florentine life was waning fast. Besides, everyone hated the Pope (even his own family), and many of the good citizens of Florence thought it about time that they got rid of this silly idea of having a Medici Duke and went back to being a republic.

The plot unfolds against a background of intrigue and, eventually, war. Our heroes are involved because they have been befriended by Caterina de' Medici, the young girl on whose shoulders the family's hope and fortunes rest. The Florentines want her dead. The uncle the Pope wants her in his power and married to his bastard son. Only a family of cooks stands in the way.

Well, not quite only. There is old Ruggiero the Mage, their employer, whose potion and mirrors watch over Florence's first family. And there is the great Michelangelo Buonarotti who has never forgotten the patronage shown to him by Lorenzo the Magnificent. And, of course, there is the cat.

This isn't a great book. It has its moments. All the stuff about cooking is fun, and it does a good job of portraying homosexuality as a fairly normal part of Florentine life despite the official religious line. But it is predictable in the way that only an historical drama can be, and it seems singularly pointless. Why, other than as an excuse to try out a pile of mediaeval recipes, did the author write it? What is the significance of the events that unfold? I can't work it out. What saves the book is that it contains by far the best description of the Old Religion in action that I have ever read.

Old Ruggiero and his spirits have some effect, but the real protection for the young Medici comes not from him, but from the women. They are the guardians of the old traditions. They are the ones who know the herbal preparations that will take them to the spirit lands. They are the ones entrusted with a feline familiar. All of this is portrayed in a matter of fact way that makes you feel that this was the way it really was. For that alone (well, and maybe for the recipes), it is worth reading.

The Stars Dispose - Michaela Roessner - Tor - softcover

Another Border Entirely

At Eastercon I was pleased to see a couple of British writers buying SF2002 pre-supports. One of them was Michael Scott Rohan, a name I'd seen around a lot but whose works I'd not tried. On spotting *The Lord of Middle Air* (awful title) in Melbourne I figured I'd give him a try.

This book is inspired by one of those little delights of ancestry that many American authors would give both arms for. Rohan's mother is a direct descendant of the Scot family of border warlords that gave us Sir Walter of Ivanhoe fame and the Bueccleuch's who play such a prominent part in Lymond's early adventures. The family also includes one Michael Scot, magician and alchemist, who rose to be an advisor to no less than the Holy Roman Emperor. There aren't many writers who can produce a novel one of whose major characters is a famous eponymous ancestor.

One of the best parts of the book is that Rohan knows the borderers well and captures their spirit perfectly. The great Celtic tradition of cattle raiding that we read of in *The Tain* survived along the English-Scottish border for centuries after Rome had come and gone and the wall had become nothing but an inconvenience and a good ditch in which to hide. They raided each other as much as they raided across the border. Go to a rugby match between Jedburgh and Melrose these days and you'll probably see the same spirit in action, not to mention many of the same surnames.

The other interesting point is that the book attempts to capture the difficulties of a young mediaeval lord, brought up a good Christian, who discovered that to defeat an evil sorcerer he has to take as an ally someone whose habits seem equally ungodly, for all he has an official pardon from the Pope. Sadly here things don't work quite so well. Young Walt adapts to things, which rapidly get very fantastical, rather too easily. I think a longer book which spent much more time on character reactions would have been better.

Nevertheless, interesting stuff, and once again worth a read. Gosh, four books reviewed, and liked them all. I must be getting old.

The Lord of Middle Air - Michael Scott Rohan - VG/SF - softcover

Footnote

Not much to report in the way of fan news this issue. Most of it, of course, got swept into the Westercon review, and I suspect that most people are holding fanzines back in anticipation of Worldcon.

Next issue, the second Uplift trilogy and the Bucconeer report. This one might be a little early because current plans see me heading off to the UK towards the end of August and I don't want the 'zine to get held up in the chaos of moving continents yet again.

Finally, for reasons that will mean nothing except to readers of a certain mailing list, I have to say what an absolutely wonderful person Fiona Anderson is. I wonder if she will notice.

And so, until then,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl