

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Sometimes it amazes me that I get each issue out. Last month here I was worrying that WFC would be my last ever convention. This month, thanks partly to Travelocity and Reno Air having some great fares to Colorado Springs, partly to my inability to add up my own bank balance, and partly due to the California Energy Commission wanting some work done, I'm looking forward to Silicon and SMOFcon. This issue should be available at both, so if you pick it up there, welcome. Sorry this one is a bit morbid in places.

Fan Scene

Usually in *Emerald City*, convention and book reviews take precedence. The last month, however, has seen a couple of major events in the fannish world (well, major as they affect me anyway), so this issue fan news gets pride of place. I just wish some of the news had been better.

Ian Gunn - the final panel

You will all have seen my various reports of Ian Gunn's long battle with cancer. This is the last one. Ian died at around 9:40 pm on Sunday November 9th. But being Gunny, of course, he was not about to go quietly.

First off, he knew it was coming. There was time to plan, things to do. Most importantly, he and Karen got married the previous day. The ceremony took place in the hospital in Melbourne, but it was well attended by local fans and I gather there is a video which may be appearing on the web at some point.

Then there was the funeral to organise. No black suits and mourning for Mr. Gunn. Ian left instructions that he wanted everyone to wear bright colours, crack jokes and enjoy themselves. Few things could better sum up Gunny's irreverent attitude to life than his choice of music. Marc Ortlieb's *Australian SF Bullsheets* reports that they played the Frasier Chorus ambient version of "Anarchy in the U.K.", the Bonzo Dog DooDah Band's "Jollity Farm" and "Kiss" by The Art of Noise with Tom Jones.

A celebration party was held that evening at which Jane Tisell came up with the wonderful idea of releasing helium balloons with Ian Gunn cartoons, carefully laminated against the

weather, attached to the strings. It is a heck of a way from Australia to other parts of fandom, but keep an eye open, one might just turn up in your garden.

I gather that a large number of tributes were read at the funeral, and Karen has organised a memory book into which all of the good wishes received from around the world by letter and email could be placed. Hopefully it will be on display at AussieCon Three - Perry Middlemiss has already announced that there will be a tribute of some sort.

When it comes down to it, though, there isn't anything that you can say in a tribute that can be as impressive of the body of work that Ian left behind him. Hundreds of wonderfully silly cartoons, the excellent *Space Time Buccaneers* comic strip, incisive and observant fan writing. Those of us who knew him will miss a wonderful personality, but we'll be reminded of him every time we see one of those cartoons, and we'll smile at the memory of some prank he pulled. Wherever it is he has gone, they must be laughing themselves silly by now.

SF2002 - prejudice in action

Wow, what a month it has been. Someone tell me that Worldcon bidding isn't always like this. First the mixed news. Our good friends in the Seattle bid have been shafted something rotten.

The problem is that a substantial proportion of the major hotels in downtown Seattle are owned by a Starwood hotels, a group which includes many well known names including Sheraton, Westin and Doubletree. Seattle's King County Convention Centre was looking forward to getting the business - they are normally empty over the Labor Day weekend. But they have a rule that they will not accept a booking unless the convention concerned has reserved at least 1000 rooms per night in city centre hotels. It isn't that unreasonable. If a big convention can't get those rooms, it probably won't get the members because there will be nowhere for them to stay.

The Seattle bid committee has been trying for some time to secure those bookings. The difficulty they have is that every Starwood property in the city has been instructed by their regional manager, Mr. Yogi Hudson, that they are not to deal with science fiction conventions. The Seattle Convention and Visitors' Bureau has phoned, even the Mayor's Office has tried to help. Mr. Hudson would not budge.

This is not a minor matter. The Seattle folks estimated that a Worldcon would be worth around \$4 million to the city. Our estimates suggest that they have been pretty conservative. The convention centre probably has a good case for a restraint of trade suit, and the city authorities will remember this when looking at planning permission applications. Starwood managers elsewhere in the country who have been approached by worried convention organisers have expressed shock and sympathy. But apparently there is nothing that can be done. Consequently, Seattle has withdrawn from the race.

SF2002 - the fallout

That does not mean, of course, that San Francisco has won. Firstly, other bids have until March 6th 1999 to file their intention to compete. Someone may yet decide to step in. Furthermore, write-in bids are legal. At the 1990 site selection ballot at ConFiction, which ConFrancisco won, a write-in bid for Hawaii came a close second, beating two officially

filed bids along the way. Ben Yalow has apparently promised Kevin that he won't do that to us again, but other people have long memories and it could happen again.

In the meantime, we don't intend to relax. We probably will not run quite as many bid parties as we might otherwise have done, but we certainly are not putting on the brakes. In November we will have attended conventions in Monterey, Portland, Los Angeles, San Jose and Birmingham (UK). Then there is SMOFcon at the start of December. At one point we had 40 lb of Ghirardelli chocolate in the apartment.

We have also taken steps to help out the Seattle pre-supporters. At the suggestion of Pat Porter, the Seattle Bid Chair, we are offering a "cross-grade" scheme whereby Seattle pre-supporters can join the SF2002 bid by paying us only the \$10.01 difference in cost. SF2002 has guaranteed that, should we win, all pre-supporters will be guaranteed at least \$20 off the cost of their memberships, so this is a good way for Seattle's pre-supporters to rescue money that they would otherwise have lost. The Seattle BidCom will be transferring money to us for each person who takes up the scheme. We think that this is the first time that two Worldcon bids have co-operated in this way to rescue members of a failed bid, and we are proud of it.

Of course it would not have happened without the excellent relationship we have maintained with the Seattle committee. They have been great folks to bid against, and I can't express how sorry I am at the awful way their campaign has ended. As I said after Bucconeer, some fans have complained about how chummy the two 2002 bids have been. At OryCon last weekend someone even had the cheek to chew Kevin out for not revelling in Seattle's misfortune. We don't understand this attitude, and we have no intention of adopting it. Guess it must be all that peace and love we've been spreading at our parties.

SF2002 - all change at the top

And if all that wasn't enough, we have also had to announce that Kevin has withdrawn his name from consideration for the post of chairman of the convention. SFSFC, our parent body, has appointed Tom Whitmore to chair our Worldcon should we win.

I should say first off that neither Kevin nor I are very happy about this. The San Francisco Worldcon is a dream we have worked towards together for several years now, and there are few things in his life that Kevin wanted more than to chair it. But, when it comes down to it, running SF conventions is a hobby, and if doing the job is wrecking your life, you need to get your priorities straight. I know better than most people just how much running the bid has cost Kevin, both emotionally and financially, and I respect his decision to stand down.

Having said that, if Kevin is not to chair the con, I can think of no one else I would rather have the job than Tom Whitmore. He is a good friend, is enormously well respected in Worldcon running circles, and is remarkably good at managing people, a skill he put to good use as Chairman's Assistant to Dave Clark for ConFrancisco. It is true that he doesn't live in the Bay Area at the moment (ironically he lives in Seattle), but he does retain part ownership of an SF bookshop in Berkeley and visits these parts regularly.

Another of Tom's assets is that he is well respected by many of the older west coast fans who, up until now, had been expressing a strong desire to stay retired from conrunning. Another immediate benefit has been the addition to the BidCom of Ruth Sachter from Portland. Ruth was one of the two vice-chairs of ConFrancisco. Given that the other vice-chair, Peggy Rae Pavlat, has the perfect excuse, having just chaired Bucconeer, to keep out

of our way, we have all of the ConFrancisco senior staff we could expect available to help with its successor.

All of which adds up to the fact that I'm now pretty confident, not only that we will win, but that we will put on a damn good convention as a result. All I need to do now is get my own life sorted out so that I can actually be there.

PNN - get the goss

Many of you will, of course, have heard some of the above news already. Not many fanzines have come out since the announcements, but the main conduit for fannish news is the Internet with newsgroups such as rec.arts.sf.fandom. Unfortunately Internet newsgroups and mailing lists tend to extend Sturgeon's Law: 99% of all of them are crap, and if you are like me and can't be bothered to wade through the garbage to get the few bits of juicy gossip, you end up late with the news.

Not any longer. There is now a way to keep up with all the important gossip using only a web browser. The jolly folk of the *Plokta* Cabal have launched Plokta Network News (PNN for short), a web-based fannish news service. You can find it at www.plokta.com/pnn. The service relies heavily on input from fans, so if you have anything important to announce, email them at pnn@moose.demon.co.uk. Fanzine editors with news columns to fill should check the site regularly.

PNN sounds like a really good idea to me, and as I was there when they thought of it I can assure you that the Plokta folk are very keen on the idea. Of course it will not work without input from us, and without people using the site. So go use it, OK?

A very different kind of con

It seems that you can't be in America for long without finding a science fiction convention taking place close by. Monterey is only an hour or two's drive away from San Francisco, and as you have heard me say before in these pages, it is one of my favourite places in all the world. Enough reason then, should you ask for it, to attend a convention where, according to rumour, fans are not at all welcome.

The World Fantasy Convention is by no means the standard sort of SF gig. It is, primarily, an event for professionals in the field: writers, editors, publishers and so on. The focus is on fantasy rather than SF, though it seems to lack the rigorous intellectual approach of the Mythopoeic Society, and has some confusion and doubt about the status of horror in its remit. It is a convention which deliberately charges a very high membership fee and deliberately keeps the membership numbers low. In part, it was a very strange experience: the familiar somehow strangely twisted.

In other parts, however, it was familiar stuff. It was, after all, an SFSFC event. A few months back Linda McAllister had approached Kevin and asked whether Monterey was close enough to the Bay Area to fall within our remit. We figured it was, and anyway we were not about to turn down such a prestigious event, especially as, from what Linda said, it was clearly in need of help.

Other reviews you may read about this convention will probably focus on the setting, the business that was done, the fabulous dealers' room and the awards presented. Before I get to any of that I want to say that none of this would have happened without Linda. When you see conventions from the inside you know how much work goes in to getting it right. We saw a large event being rescued almost single-handedly because of the determination of one person not to let folks down.

Part of the blame for the behind-the-scenes chaos must lie with the Board of the World Fantasy Con themselves. In their determination to create an atmosphere in which industry professionals can do business without being pestered by fans, they lose sight of the fact that those very fans run the convention for them, do so for free, and have to do a good job. The WFC Board seems to think it more important to have their convention run by people who fit their view of social acceptability rather than their ability to do the job. Some of the abuse that was directed at SFSFC, and at SF2002, for having the temerity to pollute the occasion by their involvement, was totally uncalled for, and if David Hartwell and his cronies ever ask you to run a convention for them I suggest you turn them down immediately. They don't deserve what fandom does for them.

Having said that, it would take an awful lot of being made unwelcome to detract from a beautiful setting, loads of great authors milling around, a dealers' room packed full of books, many of them very rare, and the satisfaction gained from a job well done. If nothing else, the ability to wander down to the wharf in the morning, listen to the seals and sea lions greeting the new day and watch the flocks of pelicans stirring from their roosts made it a worthwhile weekend for me.

I should follow that with a report of what went on, but of course as usual I didn't see any of it. I didn't get to any program items, though I gather that Kent Brewster's demonstration of how to make your own books was particularly well received. I didn't get to the art show, but I'm told that Linda Butler did a superb job organising it and that some substantial bargains were to be had compared to prices you would pay at a Worldcon. I did run an SF2002 party, for which thanks in particular to Dave Clark and Julie Porter for their help. I also spent a lot of time in the superb and much under-used con suite. Enormous thanks are due to its manager, Tony Cratz, for all his help through the weekend.

I did not miss the dealers' room, of course. Sadly I could not find the two books I really wanted - the new novels by Paul McAuley and Tom Arden. I did pick up a couple of good books in one of the sales, and I very nearly bought myself hardcover copies of *In Viriconium* and *Viriconium Nights*, but suffered a rare attack of fiscal responsibility. I didn't even dare look at the first-edition Lovecraft reputed to be going for over \$2000.

It was also good to catch up with a few friends. Janeen Webb updated me on the great Melbourne gas outage with horror stories of having to fill baths with kettle-fulls of hot water. Stephen Dedman provided news from Perth. And it was good to get to chat with the likes of Tad Williams and Tim Powers. Kim Newman was not there, despite being nominated for one of the awards, which the judges had the bad taste not to give him. I have forgiven them, however, because they did give a lifetime achievement award to Andre Norton.

And that was it. Some good, some bad. Would I go to another, probably not, but then it depends who else was going and how financially stressed I was. I think it would have been a lot more fun if I'd had the time and money to just hang out with friends and to do justice to the books on offer. But, when SFSFC commits to help run a convention, we get the job done, and that takes first priority.

The Man in the Chair

By Jay Reynolds Freeman

On 15 November, 1998, I attended a public lecture by Steven W. Hawking, in San Jose, California, on science in the next millennium. Hawking is perhaps the most celebrated physicist of the late twentieth century. His scholarly achievements and decades-long battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis ("Lou Gherig's Disease") have captured public imagination and enthusiasm. The lecture was sold out, and Hawking got a standing ovation on entrance.

My professional training is mostly in physics. For many years, my substitute for a life was general relativity and quantum field theory. I therefore have had the great honor of being able to understand some of Hawking's work, and thereby to appreciate the intellectual ability it took to establish that "black holes are not forever". I remember videotapes of Hawking, made when he could still speak in a manner some could understand. Those days are gone. During his hour and a half on stage, I am not certain I saw him move a muscle. His communication with the audience was via speech synthesis, under control of a personal computer, with some subtle interface that remained unknown to me. His presentation seemed much the equivalent of reading from a prepared text -- he cued sentences and phrases sequentially, and used a screen behind him to present graphs, stills and video sequences.

Hawking's literary style featured parsimonious use of precisely correct words. He was a superb speaker, reading the audience well and cueing his synthesizer with excellent timing. He kept us attentive and wide awake, and made us laugh at his jokes.

He challenged several popular conceptions of the future, notably that it would be peopled with folks just like us, who had achieved a level of science, culture, and politics that was notably better than ours, but that remained essentially static -- though he did say that getting political organization better than ours would not be difficult.

Describing the exponential rise of human population during the last several hundred years, he asserted that it clearly could not go on indefinitely without big changes. Noting that the rate of modification of the human genome had probably been about one bit per year during the existence of *Homo sapiens*, he suggested that genetic engineering would permit more rapid changes and a more complex genome, so that what might in some sense be described as our biological descendants would not necessarily be anything like us -- certainly, not in the manner in which we resemble the human beings of a thousand years ago. He was careful to state that he did not necessarily advocate genetic engineering, rather that he merely thought it unavoidable that someone would try it out. Hawking also suggested that electronic systems would also be subject to increasingly rapid changes and enlargements of complexity.

After a brief review of the history of physics, he asserted that physicists would probably achieve a successful unified field theory, based on supersymmetry principles, some time during the next century. He offered 50/50 odds of that happening during the next twenty years, though only after pointing out that he seemed on the verge of losing the same bet as made originally in 1980. He described one of the big issues of this theory -- subtracting two infinities in the calculation of the vacuum-state energy of the universe, in such a way that the result is sensible -- as rather like balancing the federal budget, in which an enormous

tax return cancels out an equally enormous gross expenditure so as to leave a small surplus, at least until the next election.

On the ever popular subject of alien encounters, Hawking -- an admitted "Star Trek" fan and one-time guest actor on a "Next Generation" show -- rapidly developed the Fermi paradox, which may be summed up as "If life is common in the universe, why aren't there aliens already here?" He suggested that maybe they already were here, and there was a government conspiracy to keep things hush-hush, but commented that if so, the conspirators were doing a better job than with certain other matters. Hawking's explanation for the Fermi Paradox was either that life itself was uncommon, or that intelligence had less survival value than we supposed, and therefore did not occur often.

After the end of the main talk, Hawking took questions, passed up from the audience and read by an assistant. Asked whether time-travel was impossible, he did not say it was, but suggested that history had to be consistent. For the consequences of neutrinos having mass, he speculated that perhaps the universe would thus be found to be closed, so as to end in a "big crunch", tens of billions of years in the future.

The next question may have made him smile. Could he recommend a science-fiction movie that showed the future developing as he anticipated? His answer was "Dark Star", which surely startled the half of the audience that had heard of it. He elaborated, that the movie featured a smart bomb that started asking existential questions, and that was exactly what he was afraid of -- machines taking over.

The final question was more philosophical. Sir Isaac Newton was once asked whether he believed in god, and replied that he believed in a first cause. Did Hawking believe in a first cause, and if so, what did he call it? His reply, paraphrased, was that in the higher dimensional space of supersymmetry and general relativity, the universe did not have a beginning and an end, it merely was; therefore it did not require a first cause, because it had no first point.

Yet I have saved one of the best parts of the evening for last. Earlier that same day, Hawking had met with disabled youngsters, some of whom were as restricted in physical abilities as he himself, for conversation and discussion. Before his evening lecture, we were shown some video footage from this encounter. The kids all knew who he was, and the screen dumps and voice synthesizer audio of their interaction made it unforgettably clear that behind the expressionless faces and distorted postures that stem from neuromuscular dysfunction, were minds the equal of any bright teenager's. One youth asked if Hawking had ever encountered any prejudice based on his own disability, and by the way, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Hawking replied that yes, he had encountered prejudice based on his disability, but when he did, he always made sure it didn't happen again, and as for the chicken and the egg, it was definitely the egg.

Such meetings and such dialog go far to make sure that indeed, it won't happen again. Nor should it. After all, it is no longer true that if you are a disabled person, you have to be put with a bowl to beg. Today, there is another choice. Today, you can be Steven Hawking.

The Eternal City goes Undead

As promised last issue, Kim Newman is back with another tale of Vlad Tepes, the Prince of Darkness. Hounded out of Victorian Britain, defeated as the Kaiser's war leader, hounded through Europe by Hitler's fanatics, the King of Vampires has found refuge in exile in Italy. There he is to marry a Moldavian princess almost as old as he. All undead society is flocking to Rome. And why not, for is it not the most happening city in the world? This is 1959, the Rome of Fellini. Three Corpses in a Fountain. La Dolce Morte. Drac-u-la, Cha Cha Cha.

And of course it is Kim Newman, so there is a cast of thousands. One of the great things about vampire novels is that characters can last down the centuries. The story travels through time. So many of Vlad's old enemies are here: Charles Beauregard, Kate Reed and, of course, Geneviève Dieudonné. But there are new characters too, as befits the time. Satre, Hemmingway and Welles drift through the text. Special Agent Bond, licenced to carry silver bullets, is a key player. There is a Kansas farmboy of a quarterback, brought in as the beefcake for a movie. He has rippling muscles, blue-black hair and goes by the name of Kent. An American couple, Gomez and Morticia, are newly turned and far too anxious to dress up to the part. And the night clubs swoon to the dulcet tones of the Milanese Nightingale, Bianca Castafiore.

Ah, but I am giving away some of the best bits. Besides, there is a serious story here too. Beneath all the comedy, beneath all the glitz of Italian society, something sinister lurks. After all, in this setting, The Count is a relative newcomer. The Vatican is older by centuries than Dracula, and clings to life somewhat more effectively. Rome is centuries older than the Vatican, and is by no means the sole provenance of the religion that has made her its capital. Dracula and his entourage, for all their age, are but noisy children whose activities have awoken something older and more terrible. Something that perhaps even the Prince of Darkness cannot overcome.

OK, so Kim is a good friend and I'm hopelessly biased. But then Terry Frost, who is not known for lavishing praise on anything without due cause, also loved the book. It has good pace and plot, it is brimming with jokes and cinema references, it is genuinely scary in parts, and it is meticulously researched. Really, you shouldn't ask for more.

Judgement of Tears: Anno Dracula 1959 - Kim Newman - Carroll & Graf - hardcover

Bourbon on Tentacles

If someone came to me and asked me to recommend a book that was really weird, I would unhesitatingly direct her to William Browning Spencer. You only have to look at what other reviewers have said: Dr. Seuss on acid, a Cthulhu film by Woody Allen, to know that his work is bordering on the edge of sanity. Nowhere else can you find anything that is at quite such a tangent to the real world. Except, of course, that it isn't, or maybe it is us.

Sure Spencer's books are very strange. They are full of loathsome tentacled horrors, bizarre cults, crazy people and unexpected goings on. Then you stop and think. Wait a moment. This guy lives in Texas. He lives in the country that elected Ronald Reagan president. Spencer's theory is that everyday life is crazy, and the horrible thing is that he might just be right.

...next thing I know, we are in a hospital. It's a bogus hospital, doesn't feel right. Nobody seems to know anything: the staff doesn't know your name or your diagnosis, the resident shrink can't speak English. That was all authentic, nothing out of the ordinary there, but I still had this feeling...

Unsurprisingly, Spencer fills his books with dysfunctional people. *Zod Wallop* (EmCit #22) was about lunatics. *Resume with Monsters* (EmCit #26) concerned the craziness of modern business life. The new book, *Irrational Fears*, is about alcoholics. No one in a Spencer novel is quite right. If someone is a hero, it is despite his personal failings, not because of some in-built moral superiority or mythological destiny. If someone is a villain, it is because he is absolutely one hundred percent bug-fuck crazy.

There is a raw honesty here too. Read one of Tim Powers' books and you will find weird people who can talk to ghosts after a few cans of Coors. Read a Spencer novel and you will find weird people who talk to ghosts because they have had a few too many cans of Coors. Nothing is glamorised, nothing goes right. That is the way the world is.

How the hell had Kerry gotten mixed up in this? And how, for that matter, had she done it so quickly? Granted, she was an alcoholic, an addict, and a teenager, and therefore vested with an almost supernatural capacity for mischief, still...

Irrational Fears, being about the (real?) demons in drink, is centred round the phenomenon of Alcoholics Anonymous which Spencer, probably quite rightly, characterises as a cult and the inspiration for the appalling plague of self-help books that America has loosed upon the world. The book has a lot to say, in a satirical vein, about such organisations and the bland, content free nonsense spouted by their adherents. It also deals with the more dangerous aspect of cults: the leaps of faith, the unquestioning belief, the brainwashing.

It is set in and around the town of Harken, Virginia, which simultaneously recalls the Arkham of Lovecraft's work and sends a message of warning to a sorry State that is overly fascinated with Christian fanaticism. It is a town right out of Lovecraft, where everyone is drunk except the AA members, and they worship Cthulhu.

The lead character is Jack, a recovering alcoholic. He found his way to the bottle through his relationship with Sara, whom we learn is now dead and whose demise Jack blames on himself. The cast also includes Kerry, a pretty teenager whom Jack falls for, an eccentric ranch owner, a retired commander from a government secret service who sees conspiracies everywhere, and a bunch of other crazies for all of whom AA has become a lifestyle.

The plot, which is not exactly expected to make sense, concerns the efforts of this group of sad people to foil the evil machinations of a bunch of much more serious crazies. It includes drugs, reality warping devices, and the ability to enter dreams. And of course there are tentacles. *Ya! Ya! Nyarlathotep!*

OK, so there are a lot of other people who fill their books with Lovecraftian themes, but there is none more suited to do so than Spencer. Why? Recall that the overriding theme of Lovecraft's work was the vast, uncaring, soulless nature of the universe, in which we are but insignificant motes to be trampled underfoot by powers too awesome to imagine. Spencer takes that theme and makes it personal. The world is uncaring. Shit happens. And

there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. As Sara once told Jack, contemplating the vastness of space, nothing is the substance of the universe.

I'm in love, Jack thought. He thought it the way one might think, after an accident with a chainsaw, "I've just lopped off my thumb," the thought as yet unaccompanied by pain.

Love hurts, as Jim Capaldi once had it. Life hurts. Sometimes things just go wrong. You fire a guy because he is drunk and abusive at work. He goes off and blows away your wife and daughter. Was it your fault? Should you have known? Was there anything you could have done? It is enough to drive you to the bottle.

There is a lot about AA that Spencer clearly despises, but there is one part of their message that is central to the book, and to Jack's recovery. Sure things go wrong. Sure you are going to backslide at times. Sure you have to take responsibility for what you have done. But just as you cannot expect every day to go well, so you cannot punish yourself every day for one that went badly. When it comes down to it, you have to live life one day at a time. One or two of them just might be good.

It gives nothing away to say that the book has a happy ending. Except, of course, as we well know, no one lives happily ever after.

He saw a closed door, behind it the wreckage of his future, the heartbreak, the despair to come.

He saw all the yearning trouble, the obstinacy and desire, the predictable foolishness, the facile censure of his peers (he's twice her age, an old story), the exhilaration and fear...all this behind that door.

He opened it and kissed her.

Irrational Fears - William Browning Spencer - Borealis - hardcover

Country of the Crazies

Now I know what Elizabeth Hand does to keep herself sane in between writing novels.

I mean, you can't possibly write all that depressing, doom-laden stuff all the time, can you? I don't think Hand has written any novels that could be remotely described as positive or upbeat. So how does she keep from topping herself? I think she writes short stories.

Last Summer at Mars Hill is, I suspect, a piece of publisher opportunism. Having seen people comment that the character, Martin Dionysius from *Glimmering* had appeared in one of Hand's short works (the title of which you may now guess), someone decided that it would be a good idea to put out a collection of such material and try to cash in. Personally, I'm delighted they did.

This is partly, of course, because Liz is one of the best writers in the field today. Anything she writes (except perhaps when she tries her hand at comics, but that is another story) is

going to be good. But also it has given us a chance to see some of her more upbeat and hope-full work.

If there is a theme to the stories in *Last Summer*, it is America as the Country of the Crazies. This is not craziness in the Spencer sense, where everything in life is tentacle-shaped, but crazy in the sense of ageing hippies, Andy Warhol, Elvis legends and Wall Street. You know the concept. Whatever daft idea exists in the world, someone in America will have taken it to extremes.

Not all the stories in the book are like that. There's the one about the shape-changer and the astronaut that was rejected by *Weird Tales* for being too weird. There's a story set in one of the orbiting space stations from the *Winterlong* world. There's *The Boy in the Tree*, the story that would become the basis for *Winterlong* itself. And there's a feminist revenge fantasy called *The Bacchae* which was voted Most Hated Story of the Year by *Interzone* readers and is a forerunner of *Waking the Moon*.

Much of this stuff is in the second half of the book, and I think it would be fair to say that the stories get darker and more depressed as you work through them. This is also hopeful, because they are printed in reverse chronological order. Whatever, it is a book full of beautifully written and, in some cases, very disturbing stories.

I would not recommend this book to men. They are, after all, likely to get as far as *The Bacchae* and destroy it in a fit of fury. But, if you are female and not too squeamish, or male and able to cope with being hated, it is darn good stuff. If only more people wrote as well.

Last Summer at Mars Hill - Elizabeth Hand - Harper Prism - softcover

Dance of the Grotesque

I have Roz Kaveney to thank for this one. Roz, as some of you will remember, was one of the assistant editors on the *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*. That is a job which involves reading an awful lot of tripe from people who thought Diana Wynne Jones was being serious when she wrote *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. People whose novels have cover blurbs like "comparable to Tolkein at his best", or perhaps more deservedly, "comparable to David Eddings at his worst". Now when someone who has done a job like that tells you to read a fat fantasy novel with a projected four sequels because it is really good, well you can't help but sit up and take notice.

She's right too. Oh, I know it has the usual stupid hackneyed plot. You can find nonsense at the bottom of any fantasy book if you look hard enough. Roz was happy to admit that. But along the way, if you get good writing, interesting characters and challenging ideas, it is worth persevering. In some ways the bizarre grotesqueries with which Arden fills *The Harlequin's Dance* remind me of *Gormenghast*, and you can't ask for a much better influence than that.

Let's take a look at what he has given himself to work with. Jem, a young boy, is a cripple and a bastard. He lives in a ruined castle with his invalid mother, Ela, and his pompous, fat aunt, Umbecca. The castle is in the kingdom of Ejland, which has suffered the great misfortune of having twin heirs to the throne. Oh, there were laws to cover that sort of thing: firstborn gets the goodies, second born trained from birth to be a loyal companion. It never works, though. Someone always goads the younger twin into rebellion. There was

civil war. The rightful king ended up holed up in a mighty mountain fortress, and was betrayed by its owner. So, whilst the Duke of Irion went off to reap the rewards of his treachery, his disgraced daughter, crippled grandson and social embarrassment of a sister-in-law are left behind in what is left of the castle.

OK, but it is a fantasy book, yes? Where are all the dragons and sorcerers and stuff? Well, the book begins with a fairly dire mythological text (for which I am prepared to forgive Arden because mythological texts are rarely good reading). It has the usual silly story about a creator god with a bunch of dubious kids who range from the ugly (= evil) eldest, Koros, to the handsome (= good) youngest, Agonis. Standard stuff, yes?

Well, not quite. As you read through the book it becomes clear that the good guys, the Vagas (short for vagabonds = gypsies) are the followers of Koros whereas Aunt Umbecca and her fanatically puritanical friends are followers of Agonis. It is not at all clear, and probably won't be for a book or two yet, whether the myth we have been given is a lie or that the humans are somehow inverting the characters of their deities.

There's a nice lot of social satire in the book as well, especially where the odious Umbecca is concerned. But basically it is enjoyable because it is just darn good writing. It is a bit raw in places, but then it is Arden's first novel. And if that means it will get better, all well and good. The second volume, *The King and Queen of Swords*, is not out in hardcover in the UK. I don't think any of them are published in the US yet, so pester your local book dealer (or check out Amazon.co.uk). Meanwhile, if you are making a list of candidates for next year's Campbell Award, make sure Mr. Arden is on it.

The Harlequin's Dance - Tom Arden - Vista - softcover

Predator and Prey

Just to prove that I don't spend all of my time reading books, here's a review of a comic strip. Not just any comic strip either. This one is available on a daily basis only on the Web. Dead tree collections do exist, if you'd like to see back issues, but the real action takes place on www.herdthinner.com.

This is an animal strip, yes? Very perceptive of you, Watson. To be precise, it is about a happily married couple called Kevin and Kell, and their three children. Kevin is (in this continuum) a rabbit and Kell is a wolf. The kids are Rudy, Kell's wolf/fox son from a previous marriage, Lindesfarne, Kevin's adopted daughter, an English hedgehog, and Coney, the couple's new baby, who has Kevin's looks and Kell's eating habits.

Spot on once again, Watson, it is indeed a satire on American life. Why, the happy couple even met on the Internet, and fell in love long before they realised what species the other was. Sure life can be hard at times in a mixed marriage. When Kevin first applied for a mortgage he was turned down on the grounds that he had a predicted life expectancy of 20 minutes. But, aside from occasional prejudice from their families, they do OK.

The kids, of course, have a few problems, but these only serve to equip them well for the real world. Lindesfarne in particular is a fount of good sense. She is always trying to help out her friend, Tammy the moth, who has a penchant for abusive boyfriends (the last two were a light bulb and a box of matches).

OK, so it is the funniest cartoon strip I've seen since Calvin and Hobbes. But it is also very clever. For example, the artist and writer, Bill Holbrook, makes a point of drawing Kevin as a large, muscular chap apparently well suited to playing Gridiron whereas Kell is drawn as sweet, petite and elegant. Furthermore, it has some wonderfully poignant moments. It is a strip that can make you laugh one day, cry the next, and smile wryly the day after.

Quite a lot of background information is available on the web site, so it is fairly easy to pick up on what is happening without having been with the strip since it started (a feature that Doonesbury desperately needs). If you have the bandwidth, go check it out. New strips are posted every weekday. You'll soon find yourself giggling and sniffing along with me.

My thanks to the other Kevin (the bear, not the rabbit) for recommending this to me.

Footnote

Yes, I know I promised the new George R.R. Martin for this issue. It was published this month, but I haven't been able to get a copy because, despite George being an American writer, it was only released in the UK. Strange? Well, yes, but with good reason, all to do with the idiocy of the publishers. In the UK and Australia the book was a massive success (and deservedly so). In the US it was a comparative failure. The main reason appears to be the cover. US books are notorious for their bad cover art, but this time the marketing people went to far. The US version of *A Game of Kings* was released, not with the traditional picture of knights and dragons on the cover, but in plain silver with the title in big letters. They were trying, George told me, to make it look like a Danielle Steele book in order to try to capture more of the romance market. The US version should be out in February, but hopefully I will have got a copy before then.

My thanks this issue to Jay Freeman for the excellent review of Stephen Hawking's lecture, and to Michael Siladi for suggesting the piece to me. I wish I'd been able to attend the lecture myself.

Next issue, Silicon, SMOFcon, more books, and quite possibly the new Star Trek film.

And remember, if you happen to have to stay in central Seattle, use the Marriott or the Hilton. The local Starwood hotels do not want your business.

Ciao, Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl