

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

It is confusing living in America at this time of year. You are not entirely sure whether you are meant to be celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Ramadan, Winter Solstice, New Year, Yule, Saturnalia or what. Even the atheist society wants to have a special (unholi)day. No wonder people just wish each other "Happy Holidays".

The good part, however, is that with so many special days about, if you happen to be late with your wishes, you can always claim you were celebrating a different holiday. So the fact that this issue of *Emerald City* is being sent out on December 24th (local time) is nothing to do with Christmas per se, except that I happen to have some free time right now and I didn't want to spend my religious holidays producing a fanzine. If this issue happens to plop into your email box just on the right day to wish you the very best on your religious holiday, that is merely proof that the Great God Murphy is not as omnipotent as he thinks he is. OK?

It occurs to me that with this level of cultural multiplicity it may be appropriate for us to invent a fannish celebration. That, of course, is more of a job for the Plokta Cabal than for me. But then again, maybe we already have one. After all, SMOFcon does take place around the right time of the year. Doubtless the fan historians amongst you will all be writing expressing your disgust at my ignorance of a whole range of other suitable celebratory dates.

Meanwhile, back with right now, if you happen to have your web browser handy, might I recommend that you check out www.noradsanta.org at which site you should find details of the US Airforce's annual Santa tracking operation. Yes, the big guy is on his way, and with some classy modern radar technology, plus a fix on a certain bright red nose, you can follow his progress across the skies. Isn't science wonderful!

Not so Silly

In the annals of Bay Area Science Fiction Conventions, there is BayCon, and then there is SiliCon. BayCon is large, successful and thriving. Silicon is, well, a bit of an embarrassment. It wasn't always this way. I've been told that early incarnations of the convention were very well attended and just as big an event for local fans as BayCon. Not any more. The con has stumbled from one bad hotel to another with attendance falling all the time. Last year was a particular disaster. It was held in the Clarion, a medium-sized hotel just off Highway 101 near San Francisco airport. The hotel had managed to sell all of its parking space to airport

users for the weekend. You can't get to it except by car, but having got there fans found nowhere to park. Many people simply turned round and went home.

Publicity is a problem too. The web site is hard to find. The progress report, when it finally arrived, looked as if the convention was devoted almost entirely to gaming, despite the fact that there were four tracks of programming. When Kevin and I tried to book hotel rooms for this year we were told that the con did not exist. Fortunately Kevin spoke to a bookings clerk with some initiative and we discovered that the con was listed under the name of *A Wrinkle in Time*, the Santa Clara SF shop which sponsors the event.

And if all that wasn't enough, SiliCon is traditionally held on Thanksgiving weekend which is a) the time when American fans are most likely to be spending time with their families, and b) the traditional date of LosCon, the largest annual convention in the Los Angeles area. Thanksgiving is such a family event in the US that hotels are generally empty that weekend, making it easy for cheapskates like SF fans to get a booking.

With all that in our minds, we were not expecting much from the convention. Kevin and I went largely because it was a local con and someone had to represent SF2002 whilst most of our people were off enjoying themselves in LA. There was also the matter of Kevin's status as two time champion of the convention's trivia quiz to defend.

Surprise! We rather enjoyed ourselves. This year SiliCon had moved to the Santa Clara Westin, a large and rather posh hotel opposite the Great America theme park and next door to the Santa Clara Convention Center. Unlike Disneyland, Great America is not large enough to have people staying there for days on end. It survives mainly on day trippers from around the Bay Area. The convention centre specialises in conferences for the many top notch IT companies around Silicon Valley. It is a measure of how desperate the Westin is over thanksgiving that they were prepared to lower their normal \$259 room rate to \$72 for the convention.

In the event the facilities were a little large. The final attendance figure was probably around the 300 mark. We had the whole of the meetings area on the second floor and a few rooms in the convention centre for the gamers, and we rattled. The con could easily double in size without stretching the available facilities. Transit-wise the venue is excellent, being right on Highway 101 and having a light rail station almost at the front door. Food-wise it is a desert. The restaurant looked OK but was very expensive. If they had had a coffee lounge like the one in BayCon's hotel they would have done excellent business because there is nowhere else to eat within easy walking distance. The dealers were particularly distressed and many of them ended up bringing packed lunches. Kevin and I did a food run for friends in the dealers' room on Sunday.

Food apart, however, the convention went very smoothly. I didn't spot any problems, not even a rescheduled panel. The art show (which I got to!) was small but interesting. The dealers' room was also small but with both Dave Clark and Tom Whitmore having book stalls I ran out of money so quick I didn't have anything to spend at Spring's jewellery stall. Having friends who are dealers is dangerous.

I hadn't been asked to participate in any panels, but I wangled my way onto some. I think maybe I should have volunteered in advance because some panellists were clearly overworked. Barbara Johnson-Haddad did twelve altogether, including four-hour stints on Friday and Saturday. She says she enjoyed it, but even so you should not work people that hard.

The panel I most enjoyed was the one on European SF. It was designed to showcase Brad Lyau who had written his thesis on French pulp SF of the 50s and 60s. He was fascinating. I

wheedled my way in to give plugs to a bunch of my friends such as Kim Newman and Ken MacLeod. Hopefully people enjoyed that too. I also went along to a couple of Kevin's panels, one on our Worldcon bid and one convention horror stories, both of which I seemed to end up saying rather a lot on.

I spent most of the rest of the weekend sitting on the SF2002 table and talking myself into buying more books. Meanwhile Kevin was in training. The SiliCon trivia quiz is run using a computer game called *You Don't Know Jack*. It brings a definite game show atmosphere to the proceedings, but you have to have grown up in America to be able to answer many of the questions. I'm hopeless at the standard edition. Or at least I thought I was until I watched Kevin annihilating other people as comprehensively as he beats me.

The bad news for Kevin is that they now have a number of specialist editions. I think he knows the answer to every question in the Sports pack, but on Movies I can give him a reasonable game (stop laughing Terry, I know you'd lap that one up) and on TV he is poor and I can't answer a single question. For the tournament the referee had decided to allocate question packs at random for each game. Guess what Kevin drew in the first round. Yup, TV. Crash and burn time. Congratulations are due to Bob Daverin who got to the final (and lost) for the second year running. Commiserations to the defending champion. I guess he'll be back next year. I will, because it was a great little con.

Taking the Mountain Air

The weekend after SiliCon, Kevin and I were scheduled to fly out to Colorado Springs for SMOFcon, the annual gathering of convention-running fandom. From our point of view it is a very important convention. Only around 100 people attend, but every single one of those is likely to vote in the Worldcon site selection, and many of them are important influencers of fannish opinion. A bad performance at SMOFcon can break a Worldcon bid, and this would be the last SMOFcon before our vote. All we had to do was get there, and therein lies a very long tale indeed.

The Law is an Ass

Our story begins several weeks before the convention. I am checking out air fares on the Travelocity site and discover some very cheap fares to Colorado Springs on Reno Air. This is important. Colorado Springs is a major skiing resort, and getting there in December is expensive. OK, so we had to fly via LAX, which is not exactly a direct route, but these fares are a lifesaver for us. I check with Kevin, and I book them. I chose to use my Royal Bank of Scotland Mastercard because it is an American Airlines affinity card and AA are in the process of buying Reno Air. This was my first mistake.

That weekend I got a mysterious email from Travelocity saying that they had been unable to validate my credit card and asking me to call them. That in itself was an adventure because there was something wrong with their phone system. Twice I spent over 10 minutes on hold only to have the line go dead on me shortly after I got to speak to someone. However, perseverance paid off and in the end I found out what the problem was. RBS had refused to authorise the payment! Naturally I was furious. I had plenty of credit. I gave the Travelocity guy the RBS customer service number and suggested he try

again. Unfortunately he wasn't allowed to make an international call immediately so I left him to it and went off to a book fair in the City.

Next morning I checked my email again. RBS was still refusing to authorise payment. Apparently they claimed that the address on my statements did not match what I had given Travelocity. I checked. On the statement California is mis-spelled. I have awful visions of idiotic electronic checks. I also check my ticket prices. As my purchase hasn't been guaranteed that good price hasn't been kept for me. The price has gone up from \$248 to \$325 per person. This is not good.

I phone Travelocity again. No, it turns out that the check is not electronic. What actually happened is that RBS refused to make the check. I am spitting furious, but there is nothing I can do except have hysterics. Fortunately it worked. The Travelocity agent was trying hard to help me and persuaded her supervisor to give me the tickets without the check, at the original price. That sort of customer service is all too rare, and I gratefully nominated the lady for Travelocity's Employee of the Month award. Excellence deserves rewards.

Of course bad service deserves just rewards as well. I called RBS fully prepared to have people hung, drawn and quartered. I hadn't reckoned on their having the ultimate alibi. It would have been illegal for them to do as Travelocity asked.

Sound crazy? It is. Britain has this nonsensical law called the Data Protection Act which is designed to prevent people from selling databases, but actually prevents almost any sensible use of electronic data between companies. In America it is standard procedure in large transactions, or for Web purchases, for retailers to ask for an address with a credit card transaction and compare that with the address held on record by the bank. In the UK it is illegal for a bank to give out the address of a client if it is held on a database.

Of course with any law that is that stupid there is a work around. What Travelocity should have done is say "the address we have been given is xxxxx". The bank can then say "yes, that is correct", because the other party already has the address and the bank cannot be accused of giving it away. Naturally RBS neglected to inform Travelocity of this procedure. Sigh. They know now. And if any of you have a credit card drawn on a UK bank, don't use it outside the country if you are asked for an address.

Playing musical planes

'Twas the Friday before SMOFcon. Our flight was not until 12:50, so Kevin and I stirred but slowly. Given that we probably wouldn't get any decent food again before 6:00, we trotted across the road to Ken's 24 Hour Restaurant, our local eaterie of last resort, for a big American breakfast. On the way over I worked out that driving down to San Jose and paying for long term parking would only cost us a few dollars more than catching the train there and a taxi back late on Sunday when we would have missed the last train. I suggested to Kevin that we take the car. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

12:45 at San Jose airport. We are checked in and waiting at the gate, but there is no plane. Kevin has checked the inbound flights and there is nothing due in from Reno Air. Perhaps we should not have been surprised. The city of Reno in Nevada is famous for two things, casinos and skiing. We were quickly to come to the conclusion that their airline took the city's reputation very much to heart. Booking with them seems to be very much a gamble, and their customer service is going downhill fast. If this sounds horrible to you, well what should you expect from a State that celebrates its admission into the Union on Halloween? If I were asked to summarise the message of this article I would do so thus:

NEVER, EVER FLY RENO AIR.

Goodness only knows what happened to our original plane, but the Reno gate staff told us they were fetching one that had been in storage. All we had to do was wait a few minutes whilst their maintenance guys looked it over. And lo, the plane did arrive, and we all got on board, and we sat there. Part of the problem was that the maintenance guys had not finished. Then they discovered that they had accidentally let a passenger from Seattle onto the plane for LAX. Much time was wasted getting him off again. Eventually the announcement that we had been dreading arrived. We would be unable to make our connection in LA. Would we please get off the plane?

Whenever you get an announcement like that the thing you have to do is rush to the gate counter as quickly as you can. Don't ask questions; don't argue with the cabin staff, just go line up. The gate staff will deal with everyone eventually, but the closer you are to the front of that line the quicker something gets done for you. We were at the head of the queue.

This did not exactly get us served quickly. The two Reno staff at the gate counter studiously avoided us for several minutes until their supervisor arrived to take over. We were beginning to get a very bad feeling about this. When we finally got served, it turned out that we had two options. We could wait for tomorrow morning's flight to LAX, or we could wait 4 hours, fly to Las Vegas, wait 4 hours there, and finally arrive in Colorado Springs at 12:30 Saturday morning. As compensation we were offered a \$10 meal voucher each, good only within Las Vegas airport, and a free shuttle bus trip to and from the Strip.

Now it so happened that Kevin was due to chair the major event at SMOFcon, scheduled to start at 9:00pm Friday. Not only that, but the panel was to be a session of recreational parliamentary practice. Kevin had been looking forward to it for ages. Somehow, we had to get there faster. The Reno supervisor said he would try to get us on a United flight. No luck, all their flights from San Jose that day were overbooked. "How about from SFO?" asked Kevin. "Not worth even trying", said the supervisor. We accepted a place on the Vegas flight and sat down to wait.

Of course we have to phone the convention to let them know Kevin won't be there. The hotel can't find con chair Kent Bloom for us, so Kevin leaves a message. Unbeknownst to us, the law of Chinese Whispers soon takes effect. Janice Gelb tells us later that a rumour was circulating that our flight had been delayed by an earthquake. Other Bay Area residents are quietly panicking about their homes.

Meanwhile, back in San Jose, Kevin demonstrated that bears are tenacious animals who hate to be beaten. He went off to a payphone and called United. Yes, they did have seats on a flight from SFO to Denver at 4:15, connecting to Colorado Springs and due in at 9:30. It wasn't perfect, but it was a lot better than 12:30. Back we went to the Reno gate.

By now the supervisor had cleared most of the other 9 passengers. Only two remained, but they were not going to give up. It was plain that there was nothing more that could be done for them, but they were determined to make the supervisor's life hell. We waited, and fumed, until finally he managed to get rid of them.

Next comes the hard bit. We need to get our luggage taken off the plane to Vegas, pick it up, drive to SFO, check in and get on the flight to Denver. It is around 2:45. We do not have much time. By a series of miracles, everything works well to begin with. We head down to baggage claim and our luggage is there. We go outside and the shuttle bus to the parking lot pulls up. By 3:00 we are on Highway 101 and the car pool lanes have just opened. Traffic is a little heavy, and Kevin's car, which is not at all well, makes some strange noises along

the way, but we arrive at SFO around 3:35. Kevin dumps me and the bags at the kerb and heads off to park.

United has kerb-side check in and it doesn't take me long to get served. At this point, Murphy takes a hand. I am selected at random to have my luggage x-rayed and get escorted off to a Very Large Machine. I try hard to conceal my panic. I have no idea what Kevin has packed. He might have a camera in there, and the film would be ruined. We have the SFSFC credit card swiper which may show up as dangerous electronics. The luggage is locked and Kevin has the keys.

Fortunately the bags are passed OK. In the meantime I have been looking at my ticket. I have one for me from SFO to Denver. Stapled on the back is a ticket from Denver to Colorado Springs, in Kevin's name. Kevin, presumably, has the other two tickets. I arrive at check in again with some trepidation, but I luck out again. The check in clerk does not read the second ticket and I get two boarding passes in my name.

Meanwhile Kevin has been parking the car. He doesn't have time to get to long term parking and get a shuttle bus back, so he goes to short term and spends the time it takes to run from there to the gate thinking about the \$35 a day we are being charged.

At the gate it takes us several minutes to get the ticket mess straightened out. Fortunately there is a big queue and we are not a serious problem. We get on board and are stunned. We have a shiny new Boeing 777 for our journey. The seats are big and comfortable, and there are plenty of spaces. Compared to the Reno plane, this is luxury.

United were a little late leaving, but they got us to Denver on time. There we went from the sublime to the ridiculous. The trip to Colorado Springs is a 17 minute hop on board a twin prop, 30 seater Dornier 328. I've never flown on a plane that small before, but fortunately my stomach stays where it should and we land on time. We go outside to wait for the hotel shuttle bus. Not long after we get there someone behind us yells, "hi Kevin". It is Bobbi Armbruster from LA. She too is fuming about her journey. The plane was over four hours late taking off. Which airline? Reno, of course. Yes, Bobbi was booked on the flight we were due to connect with. Had we stayed on the Reno plane in San Jose, which left about an hour late, we would have had 3 hours in LA to make our connection.

Con report, what con report?

And so we arrived at SMOFcon not long after 10:30pm. We checked in and went straight to the program room. "Hi Kevin", chimes a chorus of voices, "glad you got here OK, we've just finished". After all our efforts to get to that panel, you could have knocked us down with a feather.

Fortunately most of the rest of the con went very well. We had to make a few executive decisions about SFSFC's bid to hold the 1999 SMOFcon. Sadly Crickett Fox who is chairing that bid had been unable to attend and we had to change a few things without her, but all was well in the end. The convention will be held in New Orleans on the weekend December 11th-12th. We expect it to be a great convention, and memberships are currently on sale at \$40.

Oh, and if you are wondering why New Orleans, why not? It is a great city, and we've already run a World Fantasy Con in Monterey and have won a bid for a Westercon in Hawaii. Our definition of the Bay Area is fairly broad.

The programming for the convention was light on panels but intense on subject matter. Kevin headed off for sessions on hotel negotiations and budgeting whilst I concentrated on personnel issues such as recruiting volunteers and improving communication in geographically dispersed committees. Considering that the delegates were the sort of people who are always too busy running the con to attend panels at a Worldcon, we spent an awful lot of time in panels. It was, as always, a very educational experience. (Although I still think the panel that is most needed is one on how to moderate a panel. SMOFs are very opinionated folk, and unless you keep a close eye on them they never let anyone else get a word in.)

The hotel had a rather strange layout and our two program rooms were at opposite ends of it, but with 2 hour panel sessions we didn't need to do much walking around. This was probably just as well because Colorado Springs is about 6000 feet above sea level and the effects of altitude are very noticeable. The con program book warned us to drink lots and not exercise. It need not have bothered. Very soon people were complaining of headaches and tiredness. That was a shame, because we worked a lot less effectively as a result.

Whilst the altitude might have been a problem, the food was not. The free hotel breakfasts were worth somewhat less than what we paid for them, but with Denny's, IHOP and Wendy's just over the road, and a well stocked con suite, no one went hungry. In the evenings there was a multitude of restaurants within reasonable driving distance, and on Saturday night Kevin and I, in the company of around 25 other delegates, had an excellent Italian meal.

Emerging from the restaurant, we discovered that large quantities of strange white stuff was falling from the sky. We Californians were a bit confused. Some of the Angelenos thought it might be cocaine and tried snorting it, but all they got were cold noses. Fortunately Craige Howlett had indulged in that strange skiing thing when he was in the army and he knew what to do. A large snowball landed smack on Michael Siladi's back.

Sadly we could not stay and play. The evening session included the site selection for 1999, and even though we were unopposed we had to turn up. Kevin and I got in more or less on time, but Kent announced that there would be some delay. A large group had gone off into town and got caught up in the Christmas parade. They would be late back.

It being SMOFcon, the ribald commentary soon began to flow. "I didn't know SMOFcon had a float in the parade." "Sure we do, it is in the shape of a Reno Air aircraft!" We were not, however, as funny as the actual parade. Janice Gelb reported later that she had seen a woman with a large Dalmatian decked out in a bright red dog coat and lots of fairy lights. Yes Obelix, these Americans are crazy.

We got our SMOFcon, and Kevin and I went into commerce mode, eventually taking 51 memberships. Given that there were only 83 people at the convention, that is a phenomenal take-up rate. If you are interested in coming to New Orleans next year, check out the SFSFC web site (www.sfsfc.org). Details should be posted shortly.

Having dealt with SMOFcon, the panel went on to look at other conventions, of which Worldcon obviously takes pride of place. Remember what I said at the start about it being really important to look good here? The Cancun bid for 2003 looked properly professional for the first time in their lives. Toronto, who have been making all of the running up until now, were conspicuous by their absence. Cancun had always seemed like a nice idea to me, primarily because I've always wanted to visit some Mayan Ruins, but I'd always considered the bid too lightweight. They almost managed to win my vote that evening, but

their hotel liaison made the fatal mistake of proudly proclaiming that their facilities were a smoke anywhere zone.

Being well into smoffing by this time, we also took a look at forthcoming Westercon bids. Kevin has for some time now been running a bid for the 2001 Westercon to be held in Chico, his old college town. He is opposed by a group, including John Lorentz and Ruth Sachter, who want to hold it in Portland. But, given that Kevin is good friends with John & Ruth, and that July 4th 2001 happens to be on a Wednesday, giving no clear date for the con, there is also a "Both" bid. We'll start the weekend before the 4th in Chico, take a train to Portland on the Wednesday, and continue the con the following weekend. Yes, of course it is a silly idea. That is the whole point. Whoever said that SMOFs were stuffy.

I got a little caught out here. I wasn't expecting the Westercon presentation. If I had been, I would have asked Kevin to let me present my movie project. It goes like this. Chico, in case you didn't know, provided the park in which much of Errol Flynn's Robin Hood movie was filmed. In honour of this, and in association with the Chico Westercon, should it take place, I will be proposing that SFSFC does a remake of the film. It will star Tom Whitmore as Robin and Kevin as Little John. Crickett Fox will take the part of Maid Marian, Michael Siladi will play Friar Tuck, Dave Gallaher will portray the suave, elegant minstrel, Will Scarlet, and Dave Clark will be the cheerful prankster, Much the Miller's Son. In addition we have a number of very special guest stars from outside the Bay Area. Ben Yalow has been asked to play the part of King Richard the Lionheart, and we are delighted to announce Mike Resnick as Prince John and Robert Sacks as the Sheriff of Nottingham.

Anyone who took that seriously is hereby granted a job on the production crew.

And on a more serious note, if I manage to make it to next year's Westercon in Spokane, where the 2001 site selection will be held, there will be a Chico bid party. The theme will be "Robin Hood: Fen in Tights". I have my costume. I trust you will have yours.

Reno Reprise

Sunday evening. Kevin, Bobbi and I are at the Reno Air gate in Colorado Springs airport. We are past time for boarding. There is no aircraft. The incoming flight listed for our gate is shown as on time, but it isn't here. We are not surprised. Eventually the announcement we have been waiting for arrives.

This time we were not quite quick enough and had to spend some 10 or 15 minutes in line before we got served. It was time we were to need badly later on. The delay did, however, leave us time to plan our strategy. We explained how we had been re-routed on our way out, and how our car was at SFO, and how we'd really love to be sent over to United. The official story was that we were being put on a later plane via Vegas, but given the huge line of people it was unlikely that we'd all get seats. The gate clerk looked at her supervisor who just shrugged. Yes, there was a United flight via Denver, yes there were seats available. As the gate clerk started to check us in, the airport muzak started up a familiar tune. Yes, we were going to San Francisco. Now where the hell were we going to find flowers for our hair?

The rest of the passengers must have thought we were mad. All Kevin and I cared about was that we were off Reno and were going to pick up the car. We sauntered back down the terminal with silly grins on our faces, slapping high fives, and singing along with the muzak. We had got exactly the outcome we had been hoping for. Now all we had to do was make the flight.

Getting checked in was easy. I left Kevin to go wait for the luggage and threw myself on the mercy of United's check in counter. They were fine, giving us seats and boarding passes on my say so, and in the absence of luggage. All they asked was that "my husband" come and show them some ID. I was too tired and stressed to bother to correct them.

Down at baggage claim there was still no sign of our bags, one of which was the SFSFC convention kit containing all the memberships, checks, credit card slips and so on that we had taken at SMOFcon. Kevin, or "Mr. Morgan", as the United staff insisted on calling him, went to show his ID whilst I waited.

He came back. Still no luggage. I went up to the Reno gate to see if I could hurry things along. And guess who were in front of me haggling with the gate clerk? The same couple that had caused us all the delay in San Jose. I don't have Kevin's patience, and tried to butt in. The gate clerk, very professionally, fobbed me off. Goodness knows what would have happened if United's baggage handlers hadn't chosen that precise moment to phone up and enquire about our luggage. Reno, it appeared, had no idea where it was. I went back to tell Kevin the bad news.

Just as I was coming down the escalator, I noticed a roller door open next to the Reno carousel and Kevin dashing over to it. A baggage handler and her cart were outside. We could see our bags on the cart. I handed over the receipts, we got our bags, and the race was on. We had about 10 minutes.

Kevin took the larger bag with our clothes and stuff off to United where they told him they'd do their best but that they could not guarantee to get it on the plane. I took the con kit containing all the valuables and went back through security for the third time that day. What had I forgotten? The con kit contained our large metal cash box, the bag was locked, and Kevin had the keys. Fortunately he had to come back through security as well and the guards, having seen the cash box, elected not to delay us any further.

What was it Kent said about not taking any exercise at altitude? I bet he didn't have running through an airport terminal in mind. We did it anyway, and arrived, gasping on the plane some 5 minutes before take off. Janice Gelb waved. Gary Louie, who had spoken to Bobbi at the Reno gate and told the others what we were up to, led the applause. The United cabin staff were completely bemused.

Take off was a little delayed, partly due to a few more refugees from Reno struggling in, but mainly due to the need to de-ice the wings and tip-toe out across the snow to the runway. Once in the air, we discovered that a 757 cannot make the hop to Denver any faster than the little Dornier. It took us 26 minutes to get from gate to runway, and 17 to get from there to Denver.

In DIA even United were having trouble. Janice's connection to San Jose was 2 hours late, but so was the flight before that and she got on it immediately. Gary was expecting to stay on the same plane, but got bumped off and told to wait. The San Francisco flight, however, was on time, almost empty, and a welcome sight. We only had about 10 minutes to make the connection, and if our big bag had got on the first flight its chances of staying with us were not good, but at least we were going home.

I slept all the way to SFO, and was still out of it when we got off the plane. I staggered off to the restroom to freshen up, and on my return found Kevin dancing a jig and hugging a familiar looking piece of luggage. We had made it, bags and all, and it seemed little short of miraculous. In a state approaching hysteria, we trotted off to the car, paid the \$85 dollars for 2.5 days parking, and drove home. Seeing as we hadn't eaten since about 11:00 am, and it was now midnight, we went to Ken's for supper. It seemed only appropriate. On the way

over there, Kevin turned to me and said, "let's not do this again, OK". Sometimes he is a master of understatement.

Afterword

And is that the end of the story? Not quite. You see, shortly before we left I had got a statement from my credit card company. I had ordered two tickets from Travelocity, but the statement showed four. My trip to Colorado Springs, instead of costing me \$248, was going to set me back \$744. I'd phoned the credit card company immediately, and called Travelocity during the long wait in San Jose. I've since received a mysterious letter from RBS which probably means I have got the money back, but I won't know for sure until I get my next statement.

I think that has detailed all of the problems with that trip. It isn't an experience I would care to repeat. I have booked my membership for next year's SMOFcon. After all, New Orleans is not a destination to miss. But you can bet anything you like that I won't be flying there on Reno Air.

Deathly Games

Imagine, if you will, the smoke and grime of Victorian London. The streets are full of horse-drawn carriages filled with smart businessmen in top hats and fine ladies in extravagant gowns. Alongside them in the gutters run the street urchins, beggars and whores that we know and love from Dickens. Follow a carriage through the twisty streets until it stops outside an office in a tidy but not quite affluent part of the city. A gentleman gets out and enters the building. He could be visiting his lawyer or accountant. Perhaps even a private investigator such as Mr. Holmes. He is not. He is visiting his sorcerer.

This, pretty much, is the setting for *The Death of the Necromancer* by Martha Wells. A few names have been changed, though what innocents, or copyrights, she is protecting is a mystery to me. Britain has become Ile-Rien, and the names of the characters all have a French ring to them. Holmes and Watson are working for the yard under the pseudonyms of Inspector Ronsarde and Dr. Halle. The Queen is unmistakably Elizabeth 1st, not Victoria. Other than that, and the existence of magic, little has changed.

The hero of our tale is one Nicholas Valiarde, minor nobleman, art dealer and master thief. His beloved foster father was unjustly convicted of necromancy and executed some years ago, thanks to the nefarious machinations of the evil Count De Montesq. Young Nicholas has taken to crime as a means of financing his campaign of revenge against the Count, and has shown an aptitude for deceit and deception that would easily gain him a place on the Mission Impossible team.

The supporting cast is made up largely of Nicholas's associates. The main figures are Madeline, an actress with a taste for adventure, Reynard, a foppish ex-cavalry officer and master duellist, Arisilde, a dissolute, drug-taking magician, and Crack, the enforcer, who has substantially more muscle than words. They remind me strongly of a team of role-playing characters, and if you set a Shadowrun adventure in Victorian England this book would make for an excellent scenario.

The novel has the two essential ingredients of a good role-playing adventure. It has a mystery but, unlike one of Poirot's adventures, it is solved as much by daring action as by brainpower. And it is thoroughly riveting all the way through. Not many readers will fail to anticipate the denouement, but the action is fast paced and the characters well drawn and you don't want to put it down.

Having been so impressed with Tom Arden last month, I figured I should try some more of Roz Kaveney's recommendations. Martha Wells was top of the list. She has written two other novels, *City of Bones* and *Element of Fire*. I would have bought both of them from Tom Whitmore over the weekend, except that the latter book is out of print. I don't do that sort of thing for just any author. Please take note.

The Death of the Necromancer - Martha Wells - Avon - hardcover

An American Tale

It has taken me a long time to get round to this one. Many moons ago, Caroline Mullan had read one of my musings on feminist SF (probably a Tepper review) and recommended that I read *The Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler. I bought the book at Wiscon this year, but it has taken me until now to get around to reviewing it. The eventual impetus turned out to be finding a copy of the sequel, *The Parable of the Talents*, on sale on Tom Whitmore's stand at Silicon. Caroline was right; these are certainly books that I ought to have read.

Heck, I should read Butler anyway. She is one of the few Black Americans currently writing SF. Given that much science fiction is sociological in nature, getting the perspective from a Black writer is important. Butler doesn't fail to deliver. She is well aware of her place in the world, and of the history of Black Americans. The same goes for the fact that she is female. Understandably she is angry. Don't read these books if you prefer your fiction politics-free.

It doesn't stop there, however. Butler is also an ex-Baptist. A lot of Black Americans are Baptists. Take one who is already angry, and who is an ex-Baptist, and you can expect religion to feature in her writing. There's no reticence here. Butler doesn't just criticise Christianity. She goes all out and invents her own religion. And L. Ron Hubbard she most definitely is not.

The central character of *The Parable of the Sower* is Lauren Olamina, a black teenager with some big ideas. Lauren has the impressive competence of the eldest child in a large family, and the certainty of purpose that only teenagers can possess. Whilst her world collapses around her, she creates Earthseed, a religion designed to save mankind from itself. The book is a sort of left wing survivalist fantasy.

Lauren's world is a mildly exaggerated version of today's inner city decay. Crime and violence are rampant, drugs and guns easy to obtain, the police impotent and out for what they can get. Eventually the fabric of society more or less breaks down and Lauren finds herself without home, family or help, save from a couple of fellow survivors from the sack of her neighbourhood. The book plumbs the depths of mankind's capacity for cruelty, and comes up with a full net.

A lesser person would have gone under. Lauren, however, saw it all coming and had prepared. Furthermore, she had identified much of the problem as being a result of mankind's desire for stability and our reliance on outside agencies (the police, government,

God) for help. In response she creates her own religion, Earthseed, the central tenet of which is:

God is Change

She is right, of course. Movement and change are basic properties of the universe and it is foolish of us to try to pretend otherwise. What we build will be cast down, what we know will fade away. Lauren (and therefore Butler) says many times that Earthseed is not invented, it is simply a collection of truths which have been discovered. Reading some of the verses from Lauren's supposed writings, I find this hard to disagree with.

Earthseed is not a religion in the traditional sense. There is no mythology, no anthropomorphism, and no promise of salvation except through out own hard work. "*The destiny of Earthseed*", writes Lauren, "*is to take root among the stars*". But how we get there is entirely up to us. It isn't going to make converts easily.

The trouble with the book, at least for me, is that Lauren's philosophy never gets seriously tested. Once she has been forced to leave her family home, everything just falls into place. She meets people who take to her beliefs, she forges them into a community, and eventually she obtains land on which to settle. Nothing much ever seems to threaten this process. Which is a shame, because other than that the book is entertaining (if a little disturbing) and very thought provoking.

The sequel tells of the growth of the Earthseed faith and attempts to redress some of the faults of the earlier work. It pits Earthseed fairly and squarely against fundamentalist Christianity, and it tries to examine what happens when members of the community come to doubt or disbelieve. Butler attempts to provide an effective opposition by having the book narrated by Lauren's daughter, a non-believer.

As a diatribe against Christianity, *The Parable of the Talents* is an absolute triumph. If you were not possessed of a fanatical desire to kill Christians before, you will be by the time you are half way through this book. What is more, the behaviour of the bad guys is entirely believable given what we already know about the fundamentalist cults that are around today. All they need is to feel free to act on their beliefs. And when it comes down to it, what they do is little different from what was done in Cambodia not long ago, or what was done to Australian Aborigines, also in this century.

Unfortunately painting your opponents as crazed sadists is not a very effective way of winning an argument. Sheri Tepper is always careful to paint her patriarchal monotheist bad guys as separate cults. She attacks an attitude, not a particular faith. Butler is attacking Christianity head on, and it is painfully obvious that a) not all Christians are that bad, and b) the same unpleasant traits are exhibited by just about every other religion on the planet.

What I would have liked to see in this book is a bit of theological debate. It is perfectly set up for it, but it just doesn't happen. Butler's argument seems to be that Christianity is inherently evil and that that evil will be the root of its eventual failure. If only it were that simple.

Don't let that put you off reading these books, however. They are well written, and Butler does have good points to make. Above all, Earthseed has interesting things to say. We should all consider them.

*All that you touch
You Change.*

*All that you Change
Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth
Is Change.*

*God
is Change.*

Earthseed: The Books of the Living

The Parable of the Sower - Octavia E. Butler - Aspect - softcover

The Parable of the Talents - Octavia E. Butler - Seven Stories - hardcover

Strange Scenes inside a Troubled Mind

Six books on, and Patricia Kennealy shows no sign of tiring of her Keltiad series. Twenty-eight years on and she shows no sign of having come to terms with the death of Jim Morrison. The two are by no means unrelated. Whilst Keltia as a project had been brewing in Patricia's mind since before she met Jim, its execution has been deeply bound up with Morrison's life and, most importantly, his death. In the seventh book of the series, *Blackmantle*, Kennealy finally lets go all pretence and allegory and lets us hear it as she wishes it could have been. The result is by turns dull, harrowing and glorious. I find it hard to imagine a book in which the author pours more of her soul into the lead character. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a fantasy.

The worrying bit

"Athyn absolutely is me. She not only does what I have done, she does what I have endlessly and desperately longed to do" - Patricia Kennealy

The book starts off innocently enough with a tale of an orphan girl and her love for horses. I don't know how much of Kennealy is bound up in this, though the horses are certainly an authorial touch. As fiction it drags rather. There is no developed story. Rather there is a succession of images from the young life of Athyn nic Archill - her birth on a battlefield, her rescue by a kind-hearted soldier, and her upbringing as his adopted daughter. Some of the scenes are important to our understanding of Athyn's character. Much of it, it seems, is not, or at least if it was I missed the importance of it. For the most part I found myself waiting for the action to happen.

When it does get started, I almost wished it had not. *Blackmantle* is set in the far past of Keltia, before even the Arthurian saga. At that time the planets of the Keltic system have been extensively settled by Firvolgi people from a neighbouring star system. The Firvolgi are humanoid and able to interbreed with the Kelts, but they have a different culture and, importantly, are much more adept at commerce than their hosts. The Kelts, as so often happens, are too busy quarrelling amongst themselves to produce any effective political leadership and, as a result, the Firvolgi are gradually taking over.

It would be unfair to accuse Kennealy of out and out racism. She makes a point of stating that many of the Firvolgi are better people than some Kelts, and even has Athyn's foster mother marry a friendly Firvolgian after her husband's death. What is clear, however, is that Kennealy is in favour of cultural separatism. The Firvolgi, she says, do not belong on Keltia, and must go. Given that they are happily settled, not to mention running much of the planetary system, there are only two ways to get rid of them: force them out, or kill them. If they won't go, they all have to die.

How Athyn gets to become the leader of the Keltic resistance, the fearsome war leader known as Blackmantle, is a tale for Kennealy to tell. Suffice it to say that by half way through the book she has become a character of such implacable purpose that she makes Benjamin Netanyahu seem positively dove-like in comparison.

What relationship the driving out of the Firvolgi has to the lives of Jim and Patricia I am not entirely certain. My suspicion is that the aliens represent the forces of commerce whereas the Kelts are the forces of art and creation. It isn't exactly unusual for artists to resent the people that they rely upon to bring their works to market, to feel controlled and dominated by the publishers, producers and A&R men. Goodness only knows, however, what they would do without them.

Some facts, as best as I can tell

"Some have said to scorn me that I am too much in love with darkness" - Morric Douglas

Patricia Kennealy met Jim Morrison in 1969. He was a famous rock musician, she the editor of a leading rock trade magazine. They became lovers, and in June 1970 were married in a Celtic handfasting ceremony. That ceremony had no basis in law. By mid 1971 Morrison was living in Paris with Pamela Courson, though he was apparently still writing love letters to Kennealy. Whilst Morrison and Courson had considered marriage, no legal ceremony had been performed. Courson claimed status as Morrison's common law wife. On July 3rd Morrison died, apparently of a heroin overdose. It has been alleged that Courson supplied the drug to him. She was the sole beneficiary in his will.

The scary bit

"Blackmantle is the REAL fantasy fulfilment of Jim and Patricia, and I am absolutely unashamed to say so." - Patricia Kennealy

In the process of kicking out the Firvolgi and becoming High Queen of Keltia, Athyn meets and falls in love with a handsome young bard called Morric Douglas. Their life together is marred only by the presence of a pretty Firvolgi girl, Amzalsunëa Dalgarno, with whom Morric once had an affair. She refuses to give him up and eventually, sensing defeat, she tricks him into taking a drug overdose and he dies.

Do you see where this is headed?

Yes, they are all there. The treacherous members of Morric's band, his abusive parents, music promoters, even Oliver Stone, who made a film of Morrison's life that Kennealy found deeply offensive. And every one of them dies horribly, either at Athyn's hand, or at the hands of her companions. Amzalsunëa is the last to go, though by that time she is so much a slave to drugs that it seems a mercy to kill her.

As I said, it is a fantasy, and a rather gory one at that. You might have thought that by this time she would have got over it, but if you had you are probably not a Celt.

Consider this: you have met an absolutely wonderful man and have begun what seems a perfect relationship. Certainly the two of you seem made for each other, and you'd give your life, and more, for him if you had to. Unfortunately he retains an attachment to another woman whom everyone says is prettier than you are. She claims to love him, but as far as you can see she is sponging off him like crazy and giving little except pain in return. Eventually her selfishness gets him into such trouble that he dies. Would you want vengeance? Would you kill her? I would.

How much harder must it be if that man happens to be one of the best rock musicians the world has ever produced?

After the storm, the rainbow

For most people, the vengeance would have been enough. Most people, however, are not Celts, and Athyn is by no means finished. One person remains un-confronted. One person is still keeping her beloved from her against her will. That person is Arawn, Lord of Anwnn, King of the Underworld. Like Ishtar before her, and heedless of the fact that she is no goddess, Athyn descends into Hell to fetch her man back.

Here at last, Kennealy is free to do what she does best. She is, we are told in the back cover biography, a High Priestess in a Celtic pagan tradition. It shows. With the pain and vengeance behind her, her prose takes flight and a fine mythological saga is generated. Nor does it stop there. Having brought Morric back to life, she is forced to consider how he reacts, and the price that the Gods exact for her temerity in flouting their laws. This, I admit, is done sketchily, and I have a far better penance in mind than the one that Kennealy imposed, but it would have been so easy to just stop at the exit to the underworld. It is to Kennealy's credit that she did not.

Afterthoughts

As something of a myth-weaver myself, I was struck by some of the interpretations that Kennealy placed upon the Celtic godscape. In particular the stories feature a character called Mâlen who is wife to Arawn and seems to be an amalgam of Ishtar and Ereshkigal. I can find no reference to this goddess elsewhere, but I like the concept.

As to Kennealy's state of mind, you only have to look at her web site (www.lizardqueen.com) to know that whatever catharsis she obtained from writing *Blackmantle* lasted no longer than it took to complete the final chapters. Her anger and anguish are undiminished. I suspect that after all this time there is little that can be done. Perhaps in another life things will be different.

*Unhappy girl
Left all alone
Playing solitaire
Playing warden to your soul
You are locked in a prison
Of your own devise
And you can't believe
What it does to me
To see you
Crying*

Blackmantle - Patricia Kennealy Morrison - Harper Prism - softcover

Fan Scene

Whilst I was at Silicon I picked up a flier for a new web site called *Phantastes*. What caught my eye about it was the subtitle: The Online Journal of Fantasy Criticism. There are lots of fantasy sites on the web. Most of them are devoted to either unthinking adulation of the likes of Eddings and Jordan, or to publishing vast screeds of amateur fantasy writing. Finding a site which claimed to approach fantasy literature with a serious critical eye seemed almost too good to be true.

Checking the site, I discovered that its editor, Staci Ann Dumoski, lives in Santa Clara, just a few miles down the road from me. I emailed her, we met up for lunch, and somehow I found myself volunteering to contribute material. For the most part this will probably be just re-posting reviews of really good fantasy books from *Emerald City* in the hope that the message will reach a wider audience. There will, however, be some original stuff. Believe it or not, there are things which I think are too serious for *Emerald City*. I don't think I could stand the strictures of putting out a semi-pro magazine each month, but I like to do that sort of writing every so often.

Phantastes has put out two issues so far, the publication schedule being quarterly. Some of it has been a bit lightweight, but the majority of the material is interesting and thoughtful. Hopefully it will improve with time as people with the right sort of interests discover it. If you would like to check it out yourself, point your browser at www.nocture.org/phantastes.

If you are looking for an SF equivalent of *Phantastes*, one obvious candidate is the online version of *Nova Express*. The current issue (not yet on line) has some interesting thoughts on Gene Wolfe, Dan Simmons and Peter F. Hamilton. What caught my eye, however, was a long and incendiary rant by John Clute on the subject of the *Encyclopaedia of Australian SF*.

Clute, of course, is uniquely qualified to make such a criticism, having been the driving force behind two massive and authoritative encyclopaedias himself. Also, for the most part, he is right. The Australian book is a poor product in comparison to his own works. It is hard to find things in it, the cross-referencing is almost non-existent, and the space given to different authors seems to bear no relation to their importance to the field. In particular, the entry on Terry Dowling is an absolute disgrace. But...

I guess firstly it doesn't surprise me. Those of you who read the reports of my Antipodean tour earlier this year may remember Justin Ackroyd being seriously embarrassed by a cock-up over the pricing of the book. Last time I spoke to Tracy Oliphant she wanted to kill someone over her entry. There was a lot that went wrong.

Yet there is a more fundamental reason for lack of surprise. Clute finally touches on this when he opines that "*the Australian sf/fantasy community is far too small, and lives too much in a belljar of fratricidal consanguinity, for the writing of an encyclopaedia of this sort to have been a*

very safe enterprise". The fact is that the book is the product of a very different culture to the strictured halls of British academia to which Clute seemingly belongs. To a certain extent, its style tells us as much about Australia, and Australian SF, as does its content.

Having lived in Australia for a couple of years, and knowing some of the people involved personally, I am arrogant enough to think that I have a better perspective on this than Mr. Clute. I don't disagree with his charges, but I sure wish he had expressed them differently. Australians, I suspect, will take his overly excitable ravings and a gross slur on their national character. They will, possibly with good reason, feel that anyone who uses phrases such as "*belljar of fratricidal consanguinity*" is a pompous prat whose opinions are not worthy of consideration. And they will probably mutter darkly about the poisonous jealousy of faded former colonial overlords who are now unable to put together a decent cricket team to save their lives.

They might even comment that if Clute cannot get Lucy Sussex's name right he should not be editing encyclopaedias. Being a stickler for accuracy is a dangerous game.

Most importantly, they will not hear the valid criticisms that he has to make, and they will not learn. This is a shame.

The copy of *Nova Express* that I was reading is Kevin's. Or, more accurately, it was sent to Kevin as part of yet another shameless attempt by Lawrence Person to buy a Hugo for his 'zine. I find the whole thing very sad. *Nova Express* has better content than most fanzines I see. It has the style of a professional publication. I would like to give it an award of some sort. But a fanzine Hugo? No way.

First of all, Person claims that he loses around \$1000 on each issue he publishes. I most certainly do not want anyone to get the impression that it is necessary to put that sort of money into a fanzine in order to make it good enough to win awards. Ignoring the cost of my time (which I assume Person does as well), an issue of *Emerald City* costs me less than \$10. It is about half the size of *Nova Express*, but it is much more frequent. The content is not that dissimilar. All I'm missing is the pile of quality contributors and the posh production standards. If I'm not intending to make a business out of the 'zine, that is the way it should be. And if I were I should be in the semi-prozine category.

The other problem is that Person's penchant for shameless self-promotion sits badly with the fannish ethic. I'm the last person who would claim that he should conform to fannish behaviour norms. I get enough flak from purist fanzine fans myself. But the attitude goes with the territory. If he ran for semi-prozine, no one would mind. I don't think he has a chance of knocking *Locus* off its perch, but he'd probably get nominated on a regular basis, and that would be good publicity for him.

Footnote

Some of you may already have noticed that I have done some radical restructuring of my web site. Others will doubtless have found out when they came looking for this issue. The reason for this is very simple. It has occurred to me that most of the people who visit my site do so because of *Emerald City*. Personal home pages are a cute pretension, but really

there are very few people who give a damn about me and my life. What I've done is make it easier for people to find the 'zine and related material. The unavoidable consequence is that it is now harder to find the pages about me. It seemed a sensible thing to do, but your feedback would be appreciated.

In a couple of weeks time I shall be jetting back to the UK for a few more months confinement. I will probably be staying until the Eastercon (which is the first weekend of April). Kevin is planning to come over for the con and I'm looking forward to showing him around the country, introducing him to my British friends and feeding him large quantities of excellent British cheeses. He will also get dragged into Marks and Spencer because he can't understand why I have such a low opinion of American clothes shops.

I seem to be set up with places to stay through January but, as usual, if there is anyone over there with a spare room who would not mind renting it out for a month or two, please let me know. I end up spending a fortune on accommodation every time I come back to the UK and I'd prefer that money to go to a friend than to a hotel or B&B.

And that's it for another issue. Meanwhile, back to Christmas, or Kwanzaa, or Yule...

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl