

EMERALD CITY

Issue 46

June 1999

An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com or on line at <http://www.emcit.com>

Introduction

Hello once again, and a special welcome to those of you who pick up this issue at EmpireCon, the 52nd Westercon in Spokane, Washington. This fanzine supports the Both bid for the 2001 Westercon (or failing that, VelveetaCon in Chico) and the Roswell bid for the 2002 Worldcon (of which more later). Aside from a short visit to a feminist utopia in Wisconsin, this particular issue seems to be devoted to hard(ish) SF and features an international cast. We have one Canadian, two Americans, one Australian and one Brit. All of them are men, but we also have a lady who manages to combine her hard SF with space opera and romance (I kid you not). First, however, convention time. Next stop: Madison.

Wild Women of Wisconsin

Wiscon is one of my favourite conventions. There are many reasons for this. It concentrates largely on books, which is where my main interest lies; it has superb programming; it is held in a wonderful city; it has a feminist bent; and best of all the organisation is almost flawless. That is a lot of praise. Can I justify it? You betcha!

Cabals do run bake sales

Let us start with the feminist bit, as that is the thing most likely to scare people off. Yes, there are a few hard line people there. Yes, there are quite a few lesbians. But it isn't a prerequisite. Heck, if the convention were genuinely run by Rad Fems I'd be one of the first people to get thrown out. But I haven't been. Nor have any of the substantial number of men who turn up every year, despite the fact that one or two of them are every bit as badly behaved as feminist mythology would have you believe. It is, in fact, the friendliest, most supportive convention I know.

It is also the home of the Secret Feminist Cabal, a not-so-clandestine organisation which exists primarily to raise money for the Tiptree Award and to give David Brin some justification for believing that people are Out To Get Him. The story of Brin and the Cabal is too lengthy to go into now. All I want to say here is that David has taken it far too seriously and the rest of us are probably taking it far too frivolously. If you want to know more, check out the L.A.Con III review in *Emerald City* #13.

Whilst the Cabal is an exceptionally good fannish joke, it does occasionally overreach itself in pursuit of advancing the cause regardless of the practicalities of politics. This year we

have a case in point. They have, quite admirably, been encouraging people to get involved in nominating and voting for the Hugos. The results have been impressive. I suspect that Connie Willis and Mary Doria Russell might have got Best Novel nominations without any help. Ellen Klages (Novelette) and Nalo Hopkinson (Campbell) might not have been noticed without the Cabal vote, but they are certainly worth their nominations. So where is the problem? It goes like this.

The other nomination that is clearly associated with the Cabal is that of San Francisco fan artist, Freddie Baer. Now Freddie is a lovely person, a fine artist, and thoroughly deserving of a Hugo. Indeed, come 2002 when the Worldcon comes to her home territory you can almost consider it a done deal. This year, however, for the best of reasons, everyone is expecting the rocket to go to Ian Gunn. If he doesn't win, there will be a lot of very disappointed people. And, because fanzine fans tend to regard the fannish Hugos as a private fiefdom and resent anyone else voting in them, a lot of very annoyed people too.

Besides being a fine artist, Freddie happens to be a shy and modest person. Whilst I applaud the Cabal's desire to win her a Hugo, pushing hard for it in a year in which her victory would result in a huge fuss and a whole heap of unpleasant shit falling on poor Freddie's head seems to me like a serious case of putting the cause before common sense. Winning that Hugo could turn out to be a poisoned chalice for Freddie, and pushing hard to win it for her this year, when we could clearly do so any other year, is not an act of friendship.

The Berkeley of the Mid West

Madison is a perfect town for a convention. In most cities, the fans are easily distinguishable because they are weirder than everyone else. In San Francisco, the fans are the normal-looking people. But walking through downtown Madison you are struck by the fact that almost everyone you pass looks like they are probably at the convention. It is that sort of place.

Most of the action takes place on State Street which runs almost right past the convention hotel. It is a road that is packed with restaurants, coffee houses, bookshops, game shops, perfumeries, New Age emporia and other interesting little establishments. Aside from the Lands End factory shop, most of the clothes outlets are either too modern or too sixties for my taste, but I did pick up a gorgeous swimsuit whilst I was there. Shopping is definitely part of the Wiscon experience.

So is eating. I can heartily recommend the food at the Angelic brew pub. The beer is pretty good too, though a little heavy on the bitters for my taste. A better bet for drinkers is Dotty Dumpling's Dowry, a student hang out which has 18 beers on tap and some excellent burgers to boot. There is even a good sushi bar, which is quite an achievement for somewhere so far from the sea. And the cheesecake at Michelangelo's coffee shop is just divine. Thank goodness the hotel has a gym and swimming pool.

Clockwork Precision

It is, I should point out, far easier to run a convention efficiently when you have been doing it in the same hotel for years. You get used to what facilities are available, and the hotel gets used to the bunch of weirdoes that invades it once a year. Nevertheless, Wiscon is an impressively efficient operation. Registration, in particular, is an almost flawless operation, especially if you bought your membership in advance. It is also famous for two Russells:

Richard, the fan, whose mighty database and tireless dedication to detail makes the whole thing work, and Mary D., the author, who insists on doing her stint even when Guest of Honour.

Another example of Wiscon's effectiveness is the party floor. The 6th floor of the Concourse Hotel in Madison contains a number of suites. A couple of these are set aside for the con suite and green room. The others are all used for daytime programming, ranging from kids programme through to the writers' workshop. The convention pays for all of these rooms, and in the evening makes them available for free to anyone wanting to run a party.

The real test of a con committee, however, is their relations with the hotel, and here again Wiscon shines. We do not take over the entire hotel. There is, for example, a large ballroom that we have no specific use for in the evenings. Memorial Day weekend is a popular time for weddings, and the hotel always has a party in the ballroom on the Saturday night. It is worth around \$10,000 to them. Most concons would see this as a recipe for disaster with the con getting into trouble for offending the wedding guests. Not at Wiscon. The hotel knows that the wedding folks can get a bit drunk and obnoxious, and goes to great pains to ensure that their valuable convention guests are not inconvenienced.

One of the most frequent areas of friction between mundane guests and con goers is the Governor's Club, the exclusive rooms on the top few floors of the hotel. These are served by a special express elevator. One day at this year's convention my friend Linda Shore was getting into said elevator and was greeted by an older lady who looked down her nose and said, "this is a private elevator". Linda flashed her room key and responded, "actually I have a room up here". Then, as the doors opened on her floor, she turned and whispered conspiratorially, "we get everywhere, you know". Nice one, Linda.

Most years, however, the wedding guests are the real pains. This time they excelled themselves. They were, I am reliably informed, handing out free cans of Bud to all and sundry when they first arrived. Anyone with such bad taste in beer was bound to be trouble, and so it proved. Come late evening a few of them were still sober enough to read the party notices and decided to go check out the scene. Normally we don't check badges and stuff, but the vampire party was having door prizes so someone had to be on hand to get names. Leah Cutter, who was on duty, spotted these suspicious looking blokes and asked for their convention badges. One of them unzipped his fly and proffered a piece of limp, floppy flesh.

Leah, to her credit, didn't flinch, and needless to say, hotel security were on hand immediately and kept the wedding guests penned up thereafter. However, three things occur to me:

1. It takes a very brave (or very drunk) bloke to flash his cock at a feminist convention;
2. We would have been pretty poor feminists if we had been phased by such a display; and
3. If anyone tells you that Leah's response was "come here, I need to stamp it", let me know. Actually that was my idea, which I came up with in the green room the following morning, but it seems that I may have started an urban legend.

Spoilt for Choice

And so to the panels. As usual I was working too hard to get to many of them. But, unlike most conventions, this was a matter for considerable regret. There are only around 600

people at Wiscon. They have 11 programming rooms, but they are never all in use at the same time. Typically there will be 3 or 4 programme items that I want to attend in each slot, and in one slot on Sunday afternoon there were 7 panels of interest to me. At most other conventions I'm surprised if I have any clashes at all.

What can I say? It is a great weekend. If you have any interest in SF books, politics and feminism you should be there. Next year's GoH will be Charles De Lint and there will be a special emphasis on fantasy in the programme. Here's hoping I can go.

Runaway Evolution

Occasionally books get too weird, even for me.

We should know by now that books by Robert Charles Wilson will be weird. His previous novel, *Mysterium*, was a winner of the Philip K. Dick Award, a sure sign of strangeness. However, few novels start much more bizarrely than *Darwinia*. To put it bluntly, one night in March 1912, the whole of Europe vanishes, to be replaced by a continent of similar geography but with no humans and utterly alien flora and fauna. No more Britain, no more Germany, no more France, Austria-Hungary or Russia: just a dense jungle and some very strange insect-like creatures.

The book reads as if it was originally conceived as a short story examining the religious and philosophical implications for the world of such a change. The first part of the novel deals with this rather well, highlighting the rise of fundamentalist religion in the light of proof that God does indeed plant new species on the planet willy-nilly. There seem to be a few evolutionary in-jokes, and I have a sneaking suspicion that the new life forms are based on the long-extinct creatures that Stephen Jay Gould found in the Burgess Shales. All very amusing, and so far so good.

Part two moves on to consider some of the political implications of the change. Many former colonies throw off their European masters. Only Britain survives, having Canada and Australia to hole up in. America and Japan move into expansionist mode. The politics is used as a backdrop to an adventure story about an expedition into the forbidding jungles of the new old world. It works largely because the actions of the expedition are contrasted with the life of the hero's wife, left behind in New London, though she is a selfish cow who I spent much of the book wanting to strangle.

After that, things get very crazy indeed. Wilson feels the need to explain everything that has happened, and in lieu of it being actual magic he has to invoke Clarke's Law and postulate sufficiently advanced technology. This is a shame, because it totally changes the character of the book. What had originally looked like a rather strange dark fantasy turns into a very lame piece of unconvincing hard SF.

I can see why this book has got a Hugo nomination, and I very much enjoyed reading it, but the ending lets it down badly. Connie still has my vote.

Darwinia - Robert Charles Wilson - Tor - hardcover

Webs of Deceit

From one of this year's Hugo contenders we go to a book that has a good chance of making the list for next year. Vernor Vinge won the rocket for *A Fire on the Deep*, his previous novel. Deservedly so too. Vinge is my sort of hard SF writer. He uses interesting scientific ideas, but isn't obsessive about explaining them or ensuring that everything he writes is defensible in front of an audience of physics PhDs. His ideas are plausible, and carried through with sufficient aplomb to make suspension of disbelief a snap for all but the most anal science nut.

There is too one area in which Vinge is very good. He is a lecturer in computer science at the University of California in San Diego (and therefore works in a department whose name brings tears to the eyes of all us former p-System hackers). His computer stuff is very good. *A Fire on the Deep* was a fascinating read for programmers. The new book, *A Deepness in the Sky*, is set earlier in time in the same universe. The computer stuff isn't so prevalent, though good programming skills are essential to the plot. Rather this book is Vinge's attempt at a classic SF theme, First Contact.

The Heroes of Vinge's universe are the Qeng Ho, a race of interstellar traders loosely based, I think, on the junk captains of the South China Seas. The Qeng Ho travel from star to star, picking up interesting tech as they go, and trading it for other interesting tech at their next destination. The vast distances of interstellar space and the huge time scales required to navigate it help to make such trading an important part of the galactic economy. So far, however, the only worlds that the Qeng Ho have to trade between are those settled by humans. The holy grail for every fleet captain is to find an alien civilisation, because the chances are that their sciences and technologies are going to be so different from ours that they will be worth a star system or two.

The Spiders are totally unaware of their value on the galactic market. Heck, they have only just invented the automobile. Space, to them, is a cold and forbidding place, especially because they live in the orbit of a star that turns itself on and off on a regular cycle, forcing them to hibernate deep in the planet's crust for long periods. But they are smart, they learn fast, they are going to hit upon nuclear power and digital computers pretty soon. Then they might actually notice the camouflaged starships sitting in LaGrange orbit.

Spiders, as many of you know, are not exactly my favourite animals. It took a bit of an effort to get into this book. But Vinge has done an impressive job of portraying his alien species. The best thing about it is that it is all so understated. When he writes from the point of view of the Spider characters, he treats everything they do as perfectly normal. And most of the time it is, except that every so often they do something that reminds you they are not human at all. A good example of this understatement is how Vinge gives a nod to the well known belligerence of female spiders.

The Spider hero is a brilliant scientist. He is an engaging chap, with the usual male fondness for fast cars and neat tech. He also works from home because, as a male spider, raising the kids is his responsibility. His wife is a general in his country's military intelligence service. The kids complain that she never reads them stories or plays with them because she is always too busy at work. Best of all, it is the eldest daughter that is given her mother's name and is called "Junior".

All of this is done completely matter of fact. Some readers, I suspect, won't even notice it is there. The Spiders very quickly become part of the fabric of the narrative, both alien and at the same time intimately familiar. Which leaves me with a problem. Next time some eight-legged interloper decides to crawl up the drainpipe into my bath, what am I going to do? After all, Spiders are people now.

But what of that Qeng Ho expedition? Why hasn't it contacted the Spider race yet? Well to start with they were a bit early. As we have seen, the Spiders are just on the cusp of some really impressive scientific achievements. But until they have got there, there won't be much worth selling. The Qeng Ho need to give them time. After all, what is a decade or two compared to the time they have spent in stasis getting there?

But they have another problem. To be precise, they have an Emergency. The Emergents are a rival star-faring civilisation, recently bringing itself back from the brink of collapse. They are, they say to themselves, re-Emerging into galactic society. When you think of it that way, which is how Vinge presents it, it takes a while before you realise just what an awful pun has been pulled on you.

For the Qeng Ho fleet, the Emergents are indeed an emergency. They are a nasty bunch, and they too are after the riches of Spider technology. The two fleets arrived in Spider space at pretty much the same time, and promptly set about trying to blow each other to pieces (fortunately the Spiders were in hibernation at the time and missed the light show). Now both fleets are crippled. Neither has enough resources to make it home. They need the help of the Spiders. Worse, neither has enough resources to survive on its own long enough for the Spiders to develop the tech needed for building spacecraft. They need each other.

And there we must leave them. A nice little plot, an excellently realised alien race, and some very neat ideas. *A Deepness in the Sky* is a long book, but well worth reading. As I said when I last reviewed a Vinge novel, there should be more SF like this.

A Deepness in the Sky - Vernor Vinge - Tor - hardcover

The Book of Secret Names

In the first ever issue of *Emerald City* I reviewed Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*. It was an impressive book on just about every level, and it too won a Hugo. That was four years ago, and nothing has been heard of Stephenson since: until now. He had to have been busy on something. What wasn't clear was whether he was busy sitting back enjoying his new found popularity and, hopefully, wealth, or whether he was working on something spectacular. I'm pleased to say that it is the latter. It was something very spectacular indeed.

Cryptonomicon is a large book. It is over 900 pages long. It is, according to the cover blurb, the first volume in a series. Industry gossip has it that Stephenson has finished the whole massive opus. No wonder he has been quiet for a while.

Cryptonomicon is two books that dovetail into one. The first is a tale of code crackers and the evolution of the digital computer during World War Two. It treats of the Enigma machine, of Bletchley Park, and of a real smart guy called Alan Turing. The other is a tale of

California computer geeks making it big in South East Asia and a very large pile of Nazi and Nipponese gold.

Something pokes at his ankle: a wild raspberry cane, furious with thorns. It supports an uncannily small and tidy spider-web whose geodesic strands gleam in the beam of low afternoon light. The spider in the center is an imperturbable British sort, perfectly unruffled by Waterhouse's clumsy Yank antics.

Cryptonomicon is not about spiders. It is about cryptography. The two halves of the novel are tied together, in part by a familial relationship between some of the major characters, but largely through an interest in ciphers. You see one of the most pressing concerns in today's electronic world is data security, or lack thereof. You and I, as individuals, want our data to be safe from the prying eyes of thieves. Law enforcement and taxation agencies want data to be accessible. If it isn't, how can they do their jobs?

Our policies concerning free speech, telecommunications and cryptography have evolved from a series of simple, rational decisions. But they are today so complex that no one can understand them, even in one single country, to say nothing of all countries taken together.

In other words, computer technology is evolving faster than governments are able to keep up with it. Vernor Vinge would like that. And it is demonstrably true. The politics, however, worry me a little. Stephenson seems to be of the school of thought that believes in strong cryptography. Such people have the charming but naïve view that private individuals will always be one jump ahead of government, big business and criminals when it comes to code making and breaking. Worse they have the equally dubious notion that those private individuals will almost all be moved by the desire to use their cryptographic skills for the good of society (and to the detriment of government). It is a very American view. It is also dangerous romantic nonsense.

But *Cryptonomicon* is not all serious. As we have already seen, it makes fun of the British and Americans. It also makes fun of the Nipponese.

[Admiral] Isoroku Yamamoto spent a lot of time playing poker with Yanks during his years in the States, smoking like a chimney to deaden the scent of their appalling aftershave. The Yanks are laughably rude and uncultured, of course; this hardly constitutes a sharp observation. Yamamoto, by contrast, attained some genuine insight as a side-effect of being robbed blind by Yanks at the poker table, realizing that the big freckled louts could be dreadfully cunning. Crude and stupid would be okay - perfectly understandable, in fact. But crude and clever is intolerable.

In fact, *Cryptonomicon* makes fun of just about everything. It makes fun of the military, of modern business life, of the infamous Electric Till Corporation, of nerds and geeks. It even, at the risk of charges of serious political incorrectness, makes fun of the interactions between males and females.

"You know what this is? It is one of those men-are-from-Mars, women-are-from-Venus things."

"I have not heard of this phrase but I understand immediately what you are saying."

"It's one of those American books where once you have heard the title you don't ever need to read it", Randy says.

"Then I won't."

"You and I see just that someone is trying to fuck me over and that I need to get out of jail. Very simple and clean. But to her, it is much more than that - it is an opportunity to have a conversation!"

Cryptonomicon is more than 900 pages long, but it felt a lot more than that. Not because it dragged, but because every sentence was exquisitely crafted. I kept finding myself going back and re-reading sections, not, as is usually the case, because I rushed past them, but simply to see how Stephenson had constructed such a wonderful set of phrases.

My friend Dave Clark tells me that *Cryptonomicon* is already into its fourth printing. The first edition was published in May. It has been on the *New York Times* best seller list for ages. Dave said, gloomily, "that's another one lost to us". He may be right. Stephenson is a very good writer indeed. He may decide that he doesn't need to write SF any more. Perhaps he has stopped already, because it is hard to find the SF elements in *Cryptonomicon*. Half of it is ever so slightly alternate history; the other half is very close to a modern business thriller.

What makes it SF is the attention to detail that Stephenson has for the science in the book. He doesn't just put in a code or two; he explains how they work. He doesn't just mention that you can use radio waves to eavesdrop on the images displayed on computer monitors, he goes into precise detail. Heck, one of the ciphers used even has its algorithm quoted, as a piece of Perl code! Quite how the mainstream folks have taken to this I do not know, but it is clearly the work of a man who is fascinated by computers and mathematics. Personally I can't see Stephenson giving up on that. Besides, we've got another volume or two of *Cryptonomicon* to come yet. I think we will have Mr. Stephenson around for quite a while, and I would not be surprised to see him on the stage at the Hugo ceremony in Chicago.

Cryptonomicon - Neal Stephenson - Avon - hardcover

Gloomy Down Under

You should all know by now that George Turner is dead. Not that this has stopped the Aussiecon Three committee from having him as their Guest of Honour, and nor should it. Few Australian SF writers have made it big on the world stage, but George did, and deservedly so. So what is he doing publishing a new book?

Well of course there had to be something to publish in the run-up to the convention. Fortunately George had left one complete novel unpublished. It has, so Bruce Gillespie tells me, a curious history. George was well into writing it in 1992 when he suffered his first stroke. On recovering, he could not remember how the book was going to end, and he spent the next few years painstakingly recreating what he hoped was his original plan, and trying to get back his writing technique. The result is a rather disjointed book, but nevertheless an important one.

The first part of the book, written before the stroke, is well up to George's excellent standard. It features Detective Harry Ostrov from the earlier novel, *The Destiny Makers*, and is essentially a murder mystery surrounding a scientific experiment. For reasons I should not explain Harry and his mate, Gus Kostakis, are put into cryogenic suspension and awoken decades later in a very different world. The second and third sections of the book are rather stodgy and full of exposition as to how the world came to be the way it is. Finally we have a resolution to Harry's story which picks up a bit of pace but is still, sadly but understandably, below George's best.

But I said that this book is an important one, and I meant it. It is so sad that George was not able to complete his original conception because I know of no other writer who has had the courage to attempt what this book dares. In the *Destiny Makers*, George thinks the unthinkable. He postulates a world ruined by overpopulation and pollution and considers how the plague of humanity might be put down. It is a theme often addressed by Sheri Tepper, and she, unlike George, is callous enough to pull the trigger.

Genetic Soldier shows us a post-apocalyptic Australia populated by specially bred tribes who live at one with the land. It is a typical pastoral, utopian fantasy which George insists on testing by pitting his new world against a returning star ship crewed by men and women who left Earth before the fall of civilisation.

What is missing is the story of the fall. *Down there in Darkness* fills that gap. It tells how the trigger was pulled, then dumps Ostrov and Kostakis into the dawn of the new age to confront the man and woman responsible for the massacre and re-shaping of mankind. Ostrov, the policeman, represents the forces of moral outrage, whereas Kostakis, the ordinary bloke, is given the role of the jury. The issues that George is grappling with here are monstrous and would have taxed him even at the height of his powers. Most other SF writers are afraid of them. The ending is not as good as it might have been, but it sure asks the questions. Everyone who has an interest in the future of the planet should read this book and ponder their own reactions to the situation.

And will someone please send a copy to Sheri Tepper?

Down there in Darkness - George Turner - Tor - hardcover

Undying Prose

Entirely by coincidence, the very next book I read was *Inherit the Earth* by Brian Stableford. This had nothing to do with my reading George's novel, I had attended a panel on the economics of immortality at Wiscon and Jim Minz of Tor had raved about this book. Little did I know that one of the other issues that Stableford covers is overpopulation.

I would like to say that this is more the book George would like to have written, but it isn't. The writing is better: Stableford, after all, is not struggling with recovery from a stroke. Certainly there are big issues to be addressed. But Stableford is almost as dismissive of the consequences of his solutions as Tepper. Not only does he seem to think it unquestionably right that clever scientists should be able to determine the future for the rest of mankind, he actually thinks we would welcome it. From somewhere he has got the idea that most women would be pathetically grateful if they were no longer able to bear children. He does

allow some opposition, but has it come from a crazy and bloodthirsty terrorist group to show just how stupid it is.

All of which is a bit of a shame because other than the politics it is a darn good book. There's good science, good characters and good suspense and mystery. Stableford has been around a while and he certainly knows what he is doing with the genre. It all comes so easily that it feels like he could crank out a good quality SF book in a couple of weeks. I'm sure it took longer than that, but it seems effortless. If it were not for the politics, it would be a fine piece of action adventure that would be lapped up by a large audience. Alternatively if the politics were better it would be a Hugo contender for next year. As it is, I was left with a vague sense of "he can't possibly have meant that, can he?"

Inherit the Earth - Brian Stableford - Tor - hardcover

Sex in Space

So, I promised hard SF, space opera and romance, can I deliver? Well, I must admit, I didn't believe it at first, but I took away the book because I'm always willing to give something strange a chance. And guess what, it is true, this is genre-bending with a vengeance. The question is, does it work?

Well, yes and no. As light reading goes, Catherine Asaro's work is excellent stuff. The first book, *Primary Inversion*, I romped through in two days. I was sufficiently intrigued to go out and buy the next one in the series, *Catch the Lightning*, which took me just over a day. The plots are engaging, though they don't so much require suspension of disbelief as propelling it into high orbit. The sex is, well it is a very personal thing, erotica, but it worked for me. And the physics and biology are, as far as my limited knowledge allows me to tell, unimpeachable. So far, so good, but do they mix?

In the past in *Emerald City* I have reviewed books by my Australian friend, Jane Routley (new novel, *Aramaya*, out now, rush and buy!). Jazza produces an excellent mix of romance and sorcery. The two fit very well together. The likes of Anne McCaffrey and Maggie Furey are not above jerking the odd sentimental tear either. Fantasy and romance are a good mix. Romance and space opera are, I suspect, equally well matched. Especially if, as in this case, the space opera is centred around a royal family of powerful telepaths. But romance and hard SF?

And it is hard SF, folks. Serious discussions of quantum physics, relativity, complex numbers and genetics. Heck, there's even a brief guest appearance by Robert L. Forward. Now part of me wants to say how good it is to find some serious science mixed in with all this slushy stuff. I have visions of schoolgirls being inspired to study physics in case they too get abducted by a handsome cyborg prince from another universe and need to know how to fly his starfighter in case of emergencies. But part of me says this just isn't the sort of thing I want in the middle of an otherwise light reading book.

You know what it reminds me of? Jean Auel. You remember the formula: first chapter, the plot advances, second chapter, Ayla makes a discovery that significantly enhances Palaeolithic technology, third chapter, Ayla has sex with someone, and repeat ad infinitum. In the end you start skipping the theoretical chapters, and the sex ones if you were not in

the right mood. I found the same happening with Asaro. I would skim page after page without actually registering what she had written.

And maybe that is why I am so confused. The books are supposedly part of a series about the Skolian Empire. This is exactly the sort of book that is desperately in need of a glossary and a *dramatis personae*, preferably with family trees. The second book, much to my surprise and delight, is not a sequel to the first. It is set in the same universe, but features a different character from the Skolian Royal Family. I think. Because I am sure that Asaro has changed some of the characters, or at least their relationship to each other, between the two books. There I was, all ready to praise her for not doing the obvious of following one book on from the next, and I find she hasn't even done the necessary of making the two consistent. Shame, because I liked all the Maya stuff.

Anyway, if you are looking for something to while away the odd hour or two on a plane, and you are female, and you are not completely allergic to scientific expositions, this books are good fun. Otherwise, there is better stuff around.

Primary Inversion - Catherine Asaro - Tor - softcover

Catch the Lightning - Catherine Asaro - Tor - softcover

Abduct that Worldcon

As many of you will know, there have been all sorts of goings on surrounding the 2002 Worldcon bids. Seattle had to pull out completely, and at San Francisco we lost not one but two hotels, and are now at our back up site in San Jose. There is a whole long story behind this, and I'm not going to go into it now. I am sorely tempted to write a history of the bid once the whole thing is over, if only to get something on the record before Mike Resnick cooks up a whole bunch of lies about this one as well. But not just yet. After all, we might lose.

We have opposition? Oh yes we do. Those nice folks from LA have decided that a bid for Roswell, New Mexico would be an amusing thing to do. It is a hoax, of course. There's nothing at Roswell except for a lot of desert and all those funny aliens. How they found a hotel there I do not know. But they did, and they filed bid papers. This means that if enough people vote for them they can win.

And that is what I want you all to do: vote for them. Why? Well to start with we need a bit of fun. Uncontested bids are boring. What will we have to celebrate in Melbourne if there is no credible opposition? Besides, the Roswell people have promised to make Kevin their fan guest of honour if they win (goodness only knows who they'll have for their writer, probably Whitley Strieber). It will save poor Tom Whitmore from having to run a Worldcon. And most importantly I want to see Elayne Pelz's face when she finds out we've suckered her with a Worldcon.

Vote Roswell, you know it makes sense!

Footnote

Well, it is back to the UK for me immediately after Westercon. I appear to have sufficient work there in July to be able to afford accommodation, although that isn't yet certain. August I'm not sure. I may end up in Australia. After that, who knows? If someone offered me a job parking cars at a restaurant for a few million years I might just take them up on it because it would give me a bit of stability.

Next issue, Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* saga, plus some other stuff. In August, as much Australian stuff as I can find, including new novels by Jane Routley and Sean McMullen.

And that's all for now,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl