

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

First up a piece of good news. The revamped web site is now up and running. You can now get *Emerald City* in Acrobat format. And I've had a lot of fun with the superfluous technology. You can now all write and tell me that you think the results are horrible.

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Adrift on Blue

I blame *Nova Express* for this.

Well, I guess that's a little unfair, but they did publish this excellent and seemingly authoritative article explaining that all Gene Wolfe's books are actually very complex Catholic allegories. I'd certainly never noticed. Heck, I have enough trouble following Wolfe's plots, let alone worrying about deeper subtleties. But now that I know, did I approach his new book differently? Maybe, but maybe not.

I think it fair to say that the new series, which goes by the name of *The Book of the Short Sun*, is somewhat different to what has gone before. In both of the previous series (whose titles I shall abbreviate to *New Sun* and *Long Sun* because I'm lazy) there has always been a substantial air of mystery about the goings on. My thesis is that *Short Sun* is different, and it is different because Wolfe is concentrating more on the message and less on the plot.

By which statement I have done just what he has done. I have stated my conclusion at the beginning, and now need to go on to prove it, rather than let the story develop as you read. Get the idea?

Good. Now we can have a brief pause for scene setting. *Short Sun* is a sequel (yes, a three book series that is a sequel to a four book series) to *Long Sun*. From now on I am going to assume that you have all read *Long Sun*. Those of you who have not should stop reading now and go out

and buy the series because, whilst not quite as brilliant as *New Sun*, it is still fabulous stuff.

So, if you are still with me, *Short Sun* is the tale of those people who left the Long Sun Whorl and set out to colonise the two planets, Blue and Green, which the ailing generation ship had found for them. To be precise, it is the tale of Horn, who was one of Silk's students in *Long Sun* and is now a grown man and the famous author of the history known as *The Book of the Long Sun*.

Horn and his fellow Vironese have founded a city, New Viron, on Blue, but the colony is in trouble. Lawlessness is increasing and the city fathers do not trust each other enough to form a stable government. Horn is dispatched to find Silk, whom they believe still to be on The Whorl, as he is the only person they think is respected enough to rule the city effectively. *Short Sun* is the story of that quest.

Well, more aptly it is the story of the failure of that quest. The book is written by Horn in the first person. He intersperses the history of his journey with reports of his current life, and it is clear from these contemporary comments that he has not only failed to find Silk, but has done many things that he now finds abhorrent long the way. Whereas Silk, and indeed Severian, were often given to self-doubt, Horn spends much of his time wallowing in self-pity and self-recrimination.

The message, at present, seems to be both simple and stark. Man, on his own, is greedy, venal, deceitful, and fundamentally sin-full. As a result, men are incapable of governing themselves. To do so effectively they need God (The Outsider), Jesus (Silk) or in the last resort someone inspired by the example of these divine entities in order to impart moral guidance.

That, of course, may change. Wolfe has lost none of his skill as a writer; he is just doing things a little differently this time. I would not be at all surprised if there were, in fact, a whole host of surprises waiting for us in subsequent volumes. But for now, everything is telegraphed. Horn appears to have pretty much told us what will happen to him, and he makes such a point of belabouring his infidelities and misfortune that it takes all the tension out of the action.

So far, then, not so good. I was surprised at how little I enjoyed this book, especially compared to everything else that Wolfe has written. It seems that things are going to get more and more depressing as the series continues. But you never can tell with Wolfe. I expect to be surprised.

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I wrote the above before reading the final two chapters of the book. Now, like Horn, I find myself looking back over what I have written and wondering at my stupidity. Actually though, I stand by most of what I wrote. *On Blue's Waters* does seem a little aimless and predictable, at least for a master of misdirection like Wolfe. But there is a surprise ending. More than that, I cannot say.

Oh, and if you are wondering what that funny separator is, you'll have to read the book.

On Blue's Waters - Gene Wolfe - Tor - hardcover

Growing Pains

This is only the second Maureen McHugh book that I have read, but already I think I am beginning to discern a pattern. There are some books where you are forever desperate to turn the next page to find

out what will happen next. With a Maureen McHugh novel you live in fear of the next chapter because you know that some new awful disaster is about to befall the lead character.

Nor is this some woman's romance story in which the heroine is beset by a cruel father or stepmother and will be rescued at the end by some tall, dark, handsome stranger. In McHugh's work the villain is life itself. Shit happens, she tells us, and life is all about sitting there and taking that shit until you become comfortable with it. At which point, more shit falls, but because you have learned to be happy in shit you don't care.

On its own, this would be a bleak and unwelcoming basis for a book. But McHugh always has a philosophical edge to her stories as well. In *China Mountain Zhang* it was politics, and the futility of political idealism. In *Mission Child*, the subject is the interaction of cultures at different technology levels.

I suspect that there may be some element of feminist politics in the approach as well. The traditional SF story uses heroic motifs to show how difficulties may be overcome. McHugh shows ordinary people facing the same difficulties and, for the most part, learning to cope. There's no grand conclusion. At times I am reminded of being told by some Australian Rad Fem that plots are intrinsically phallogocentric so a feminist book should not have one.

But to get back to the book, the setting for *Mission Child* is a colony planet on which some of the humans have reverted (willingly or otherwise, we are not told) to a tribal level of technology. Janna's people live on the tundra. They know how to make use of every part of a reindeer [sic] corpse, but have never even seen a bus, let alone known what one is for.

Janna lives in a village based around an Appropriate Technology Mission. Concerned volunteers from Earth help educate the tribesmen in a slow and sustainable way, preserving native culture and avoiding undue disruption of life. But it is all for naught. Other, greedier Earthmen have provided a neighbouring tribe with guns and snowmobiles, with predictable results.

The rest of the book follows Janna's life as she tries to find a home for herself in the world. Meanwhile McHugh muses on what is appropriate for her to learn. Janna is intelligent enough to survive in a city, but will she be happy in one? Should she be kept away from all technology, or are some things (like plague vaccine) OK? As you might expect, she doesn't actually come to a conclusion, she just leaves us to ponder.

Weaving through this story is a counterpoint tale of gender confusion. Janna first starts to dress as a man by accident, they being the only clothes she has. Then she stays that way because it is not safe to be a single woman in a refugee camp. From then on she never quite makes up her mind what she wants to be, she just gets on with being herself.

Now that is fine for fitting in with the McHugh philosophy of the world. But as a treatment of transsexualism, which it purports to be, it is a gross betrayal. Janna never shows any sign of wanting to be a man before she is forced to live as one. Given the option to become fully male she rejects it. The supposed gender councillor she sees makes no attempt to understand her motivations or determine what treatment, if any, is appropriate for her. In other words, McHugh is saying that gender is simply to do with the way we live, dress and behave, and that is all.

That again is consistent with Rad Fem dogma, though it is by no means the sort of vicious denunciation that you get from, for example, Joanna Russ. It is also a cruel

and unnecessary rejection of the problems of a persecuted minority of our society. I can't make up my mind whether McHugh is making a doctrinal point, whether she is simply ill informed about the subject, or whether this is simply a cynical attempt to win a Tiptree.

What I do know, however, is that the gender swap theme adds little to the book. Yes it makes Janna more alienated from her society, which, as we have seen before, is something that McHugh likes. Yes it allows her to have a female character in a low-tech world doing things that only a man would get away with. But it doesn't seem necessary to the central theme of the book, and I suspect that the story would have been just as good without it.

So, what can I say in summary? A Maureen McHugh book is, I think, never going to be fun to read. But it is always going to make you think. And sometimes that can be just as valuable, if not more so.

Mission Child - Maureen McHugh - Avon - softcover

Hail to the New World

I said last issue that I expected the new Severna Park to be something special. I am happy to say that I was right. The latest novel is a big improvement.

The Annunciate is a classic piece of feminist SF. There is a lot of science in there (nanotech, virtual reality, space travel, biology), but it is not rigorous, nor is it the focus of the story. Personal relationships are given equal, if not more space. And there are social commentaries and subtle philosophical questions to spice up the mix. It is well written, and thought provoking.

Yes, yes, I hear you say, but what is it about. Patience, dear readers. I'll get to the plot eventually. It goes like this.

In the planetary system known as ThreeSys (so named for having three planet-bearing stars close enough for regular interaction at achievable flight speeds) social class is defined by information access. At the top of the tree are the Meshed whose nanotech symbionts (propogats) given them permanent high speed access to data systems. Lower down are the Jacked, who have ordinary wire access, and the Jackless, who must struggle along with arcane tools like books and speech. In time, the Meshed become arrogant and careless, and there is revolution.

When the book starts, most of the Meshed have been killed, but a few ruthless individuals are fighting back. Their weapon is a highly addictive drug, Staze, which reduces its users to alternating between placid dreaming and desperate craving for the next fix. Nancy Kress would love it: the lower classes reduced to abject dependency and unable to resist.

Of course the sort of people who could implement such a plan don't dwell much on ethics. Annmarie, the leader, is about as nasty as they come: power-mad, and devoid of almost every other emotion. Corey, her partner, just enjoys hurting and humiliating people on an individual basis. Eve, their companion, is young, naïve, caring, and utterly despised by her elders. They keep her around because they need help, because she is the only other free Meshed person they know of, and because they need breeding stock.

Into this charming little family comes the alien. It is a single, large multi-part organism with some very interesting biological capabilities. In particular, it can interface with the propogats and manifest itself in Mesh. It doesn't know much about humans, but it has vast potential, and it is hungry.

All of this is woven through with strands of religious myth: the story of the first landing in the ThreeSys system and the hopes and dreams of the colonists for a New World, free from want and fear. Annmarie wants to bring mankind to paradise through the dreams of Staze addicts. The alien claims it can do better, for all, and without the debilitating effects of the drug. But will it free mankind, or enslave them? And even if it does enslave them, isn't that better than a world run by Annmarie?

Although I very much enjoyed the book, there are aspects to it that I suspect will irritate others. The science, as I have said, is not rigorous. The alien can do things that are never explained. Also, as with the previous book, this one has a fair amount of enthusiastic lesbian sex. This doesn't bother me, indeed I find it rather more interesting than reading most men describing heterosexual activities. But I can see some people being discomfited by it. Finally, it is not a book for people who like nice characters and happy endings. If you don't like Elizabeth Hand, you probably won't like this either.

But I like it. I think Park still has room for improvement, and given that she has been getting better very fast, I am seriously looking forward to her next book.

The Annunciate - Severna Park - Avon - hardcover

End of the Line

The Day Sarah Kendall's life changed began like any other. She dressed, put on make-up, kissed her husband Michael goodbye, and walked from their house to the Glen Park BART station. As the train pulled into the station she noticed for the first time how the silver cars tapered inwards at the tops, making them look like a string of little coffins.

If you ever happen to catch Kevin or I in transport geek mode you will know that in the realms of Evil Empires there is none more evil than BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transit System. Operationally, BART provides a useful commuter service around parts of the Bay Area. But as public policy it is a disaster.

BART is a completely non-standard railway system. Even the tracks are a different width, ensuring that every part of it, every piece of rolling stock, has to be custom made. This makes it much more expensive than conventional rail, let alone the newly fashionable light rail systems that us Melbourne folk still call trams. In fact I suspect that, mile-for-mile, BART may be more expensive than high speed rail systems such as the French TGV.

But BART has excellent political lobbyists. They are superb at getting money out of city, state and even federal authorities. If you see an article about public transport in the San Francisco Chronicle there's a good bet it was written by a BART PR person. And they have a firm policy of non-cooperation with all other forms of public transport. As far as they are concerned, it is BART Uber Alles or nothing. Which, given their cost structure, is probably their only possible strategy.

Given this situation, it is with little surprise that we discover, from Lisa Goldstein's *Dark Cities Underground*, that BART is actually in the pay of a secret mystical society bent on world domination. The current End of the Line, Bay Area locals will remember, is at Colma, a city noted primarily for its cemeteries...

Jeremy Jerome Gerontius Jones hates his mother. And with good reason too. It isn't just the name that she blessed him with.

She also stole his stories. When Jerry was very small he discovered a doorway in a tree in his back garden. Through that doorway was the magical and rather scary land of NeverWas. Visiting it gave Jerry some pretty unpleasant nightmares. But when he related them to his mother she just wrote them all down and turned them into best-selling children's books.

Ruth Berry, a struggling Bay Area journalist and single mother, has been asked to write a book about the origins of the Jeremy stories. That shouldn't be too hard. Jerry and his mother both still live in Oakland. But they are not exactly speaking. Indeed Jerry won't talk about his mother at all. Then there is this strange little man who is obsessed with the Jeremy stories and seems to think that they might have been based on fact. Furthermore, a bit of library work shows Ruth that the stories don't belong to Jerry or his mother at all, they are a clever re-telling of a tale that is very much older indeed.

Dark Cities Underground is a wonderful romp through underground railways and subconscious archetypes. It has echoes of all sorts of wonderful stuff. *Neverwhere*, I suspect, must have been an influence. But so are many famous children's books, *Mythago Wood*, and of course the myths on which it is based. It reminds me too of Tim Powers and, in particular, Jim Blaylock's steampunk novels. In the sections dealing with the building of the London Underground I kept expecting Ignatio Narbono to make a guest appearance.

Unlike the other books reviewed in this issue, there's not much in the way of political subtext. But the book is feminist in a way. Its heroine is a struggling single mother and it focuses on mother-child relationships. Most importantly, however, it is a book I found impossible to put down. I can't say anything better than that. Recommended.

Dark Cities Underground - Lisa Goldstein - Tor - hardcover

Queen of the Night

Last time I reviewed a book by Nalo Hopkinson I had to apologise for putting a promising young author at the back of the 'zine after books by such luminaries as David Brin, Sheri Tepper and Iain Banks. Nalo has the last novel review again here. She's up against the legendary Wolfe, the much awarded McHugh and the highly touted Park. But this time I'm happy to say that I'm leaving the best until last.

When you get down to it, *Midnight Robber* is just a simple tale of a small girl who is plucked from cosseted luxury to a life of danger and hardship, and who finds love and redemption at the end of many trials. That, of course, tells you everything and nothing.

The first thing to note is that the entire book is written in what I think is Creole, though what I know about black dialects is limited largely to what I could pick up listening to West Indian cricketers. The language does make it hard going at times. To begin with I found it rather like listening to a familiar tune being sung in a different key and tempo. But after a while I got into the rhythm of the words and from then on it was fine. I've now got it lodged in my head and I'm having to consciously refrain from lapsing into a parody of it in this review.

Note two is that there is absolutely nothing tokenistic about this book. *Midnight Robber* is a book by a black person, in a black language, and aimed at black readers. Of course it can be read by people from other cultures as well. Some of its messages also have value to other cultures. But that is not its primary purpose. That's a very brave thing for a

young writer to do in only her second novel. It is also a very valuable thing. We often bemoan the fact that there are very few black people in SF fandom, but we will only get more if more SF is written both by and for blacks.

The book is SF, by the way, but only to provide a setting. Nalo is not asking questions about science. She simply wants to create a world in which black people are as dominant as whites are on Earth, and the simplest way to do that is to give them their own planet. The aliens are there for a purpose as well, and it shouldn't take too much grey matter for you to figure out what that is.

It could also be described as fantasy. The heroine, Tan-Tan, finds the strength to cope with her very difficult life through the aid of the Midnight Robber, a figure from the Trinidad Carnival. More ancient African themes figure too, Anansi the Spider being cleverly used as a metaphor for the Web, or perhaps an AI within it. Whatever did happen to those Voodoo Gods that Gibson let loose in cyberspace anyway?

But above all it is a book about people. The characters are brilliantly drawn and instantly memorable. The first couple of chapters in particular are intensely powerful and would work well as a mainstream novel. After that things get a little more typically genre, which would probably have mainstream readers looking down their noses. But we, not having such refined sensibilities, are able to enjoy the whole thing.

I loved it. And if Nalo is this good on only her second book, goodness only knows where she will end up. I am reminded that Neal Stephenson's second book was the excellent *Snow Crash*. His third, *Diamond Age*, won a Hugo, and his fourth, *Cryptonomicon*, was a massive mainstream best seller. I don't know that, given the path she has chosen, Nalo will get the same degree of popular acclaim.

But I am beginning to think that she might be that good.

Midnight Robber - Nalo Hopkinson - Aspect - softcover

In the Zone

I have picked up a couple of issues of *Interzone* since I have been back. The February one in particular got me thinking, and reminded me of why it is that I don't like reading short stories.

The first one I read was *Dog Years* by Liz Williams. Now Liz is one of the local writers who often turns up at the Brighton pub meet. She's a nice person, and I very much wanted to like the story. The first section was wonderfully atmospheric, and I started to anticipate a rave review. But as the story went on the action moved to much longer time scales and inevitably became less intimate and more expository. Also the ending tried to be a shock but only managed to have me saying, "oh, yes, obviously". Shame.

Next up was *Colours of the Soul* by Sean McMullen. Regular readers will know that Sean is both a good friend and a favourite writer of mine. Again I wanted to like the story. It is based on a good SF idea (what would happen to society if some of us really could read minds?). It has some lovely vignettes, and a very neat way of triggering a biological weapon. But again it was very expository, and it read exactly as if Sean were trying out a bunch of ideas that he would later turn into a novel. It was rather like looking at some material swatches and thinking, "yeah, that would make a good dress".

So what is the moral of all this? Two things, I think. Firstly, writing short fiction is hard. Some people are seriously good at it. I'd have no qualms about picking up a short story by Harlan or by

Terry Dowling. But in a fiction magazine, even a really good one like *Interzone*, you are going to get a mixture. I pick the novels I read fairly carefully, but if I buy a fiction magazine it seems a shame not to read it all.

Second, SF is a literature of ideas. If you have a really good idea you can present it fully and effectively within the confines of a short story. But in most cases a short story ends up not doing the idea justice.

Well, that's my opinion anyway.

Being a proper literary magazine rather than a scummy fanzine like *Emerald City*, *Interzone* likes to get proper authors and literary critics to do its book review sections. Sometimes this works fine. They can, after all, write, and I generally find myself agreeing with everything that Tom Arden says. On the other hand, Paul McAuley's column in the February issue gave every impression that he had just skimmed the books he was given and not taken anything in.

McAuley began with William Gibson's *All Tomorrow's Parties*. I'm pleased to see that he managed to get the bridge right, despite that fact that it appears the UK edition has a picture of the Golden Gate on the cover. However, in comparing the Gibson to Bruce Sterling's *Distraction* he says that Sterling focuses on global issues whereas Gibson sticks to small-scale, personal stuff. I can't comment on the Sterling, but it was pretty obvious to me that the Gibson book was about the ownership of the Internet. Sure the characters were not important, but it was clear from Laney's work on patterns that they were the butterflies who, by flapping or not flapping their wings, could alter the cusp event in the world timeline. All that, apparently, went over McAuley's head.

But the really bad review was the one he did of Stephen Dedman's *Foreign Bodies*.

This wasn't just incompetent; it bordered on the criminally negligent. McAuley claimed that Stephen didn't have a clue what he was talking about, except where science fiction conventions were concerned, and generally set out to paint a picture of the author as some sort of macho, chauvinist, beer-swilling right wing yob. As anyone who has met Stephen knows, nothing could be further from the truth. How anyone can read a book that persistently condemns Heinlein and everything that he stood for and describe it as a rabid Heinleinesque fantasy is quite beyond me.

Let's take some of the criticisms one by one. First, not knowing what he is talking about. As I said before, all credit to McAuley for actually knowing that San Francisco has more than one bridge, but he clearly doesn't know enough about the city to know what a good job someone from Perth, Australia has done of using it as a setting. All that good background, completely over the top of his head.

As for macho, heck, the book is a thriller, what does he expect? Sure the hero is rather braver than one might expect, and a bit sanguine about the messes he finds himself in, but I note that his fighting skills come wholly from the female body in which he finds himself. Compare that to the hero of McAuley's recent *Confluence* series who can easily command everything from massively powerful fighting machines to nanobots with mind power alone because he is the only pure human in the world, all the others characters being artificially evolved animals. I mean, just who is being macho, not to mention speciesist, here?

Now the chauvinist bit. McAuley compares *Foreign Bodies* to Heinlein's classic transvestite fantasy; *I Will Fear No Evil*. I've read both books, and the differences are fairly pointed. Heinlein heroines are always voluptuous, buxom

WASP nymphomaniacs. Dedman gives his hero the body of a malnourished Asian girl whose sexual preferences are largely unknown. Heinlein heroines also manage to behave like dirty old men whenever the writer fancies a quick perv at a couple of girlies at it. In contrast Dedman's hero "becomes" a lesbian because his brain is that of a heterosexual man who isn't too keen on any other form of sexual activity. Also Stephen's descriptions of lesbian sex (on the basis of comparing them to what Severna Park writes) seem pretty good. Heinlein, as I said, just pervs at the girlies' lovely bodies and salivates over them getting horny.

Finally McAuley complains that Stephen knows nothing about life on the street. Pardon me? Stephen and Elaine are not exactly destitute, but I know that they work pretty hard to keep body and soul together. They also know a lot of people who live much closer to the edge, if not well over it. I know much less about McAuley, but I do know that his career record to date is university lecturer followed by science fiction writer. Gee, nothing like middle class, eh?

And here I think is the nub of the problem. McAuley, I think, is one of those concerned, middle-class, left-wing intellectuals who thinks he can gain copious brownie points with his equally clueless and pretentious friends, especially the feminist ones, if over the next round of Ferrero Rocher choccies at some literary dinner party he can brag about how he has slain some evil Neanderthal Aussie thug with his mighty pen. Well bully for you, Mr. McAuley, but next time please try to engage that undoubtedly awesome intellect of yours before reading the books you are asked to review. You might actually learn something.

Web Watch

Having been working on the new web site design I have been more aware than usual of what is going on elsewhere in cyberspace. Here are a few things to look out for.

TipWorld is a classic piece of Webonomics. It is an information service that sends you "good ideas" every few days, along with a bunch of adverts. Most of the stuff you can sign up for is pretty dull: DIY, travel tips, that sort of stuff. But they also do an SF&F column, and it is excellent.

Emily Alward, who writes TipWorld's SF&F column, is an established writer in her own right and a good reviewer. She knows a good book when she sees one, doesn't simply re-hash plots, and has little truck with pseudo-scientific nonsense of the X-Files type. If you like *Emerald City* (and if you don't why are you reading this?) you will like Emily's reviews as well. Visit <http://www.tipworld.com> to sign up.

A rather different type of review service is provided by *Word of Mouth*. This is a book review e-zine edited by Xina Marie Uhl and Cheryl Dyson. It is published twice a month and each issue contains two or three reviews and a bunch of ads.

The first thing to point out is that *Word of Mouth* is a general review magazine. So far most issues I have seen have had one SF or Fantasy book in it, but that isn't guaranteed. Second, the 'zine relies on reader input for its materials so the quality can be rather variable. And finally, in order to try to encourage some reasonable level of standard in the material they get, the editors ask for the reviews in a particular standardised format.

Now personally I happen to believe that a book review is itself a piece of creative writing, and asking people to write reviews by what is essentially filling in a form tends to stifle any creativity. But I can see what Xina Marie and Cheryl have taken this route, and if I were running a service like theirs I might find myself forced to do the same sort of thing. Send a blank email to wordofmouth-on@mail-list.com to subscribe.

Something else I considered subscribing to was the British Fantasy Society Newsletter. However, when I tried to do so I found myself faced by an enormous form with a Microsoft logo asking all sorts of strange questions about me. Mailing list software is not that hard to come by these days. There's no excuse for selling your subscriber's personal details to Microsoft just to get a free mailing list.

Finally, a web site that is worth a look. *At the World's End* is an on-line magazine produced by British writer Mark Chadbourn. It is mostly aimed at the writing community, so much of the content will be either irrelevant, or in some cases downright insulting to ordinary readers. However, it has two absolutely stunning columns. One is by Tom Arden and covers Fantasy fiction, the other is by Justina Robson and is on SF. If it were on paper the magazine would be worth the price for these two columns alone. And of course being on the Web it is free which is even better. Check it out at <http://www.markchadbourn.com/worldsend.cfm> and please don't be put off by the truly awful contents page.

Footnote

I was going to review the rest of the Gormenghast TV series in this issue, but I seem to have run out of time. Besides, it will fit better in the next issue which will be a British Writers special.

That, of course means that I've got the next instalment of *Ash*, which in turn means that I don't want to be spending time writing when I could be reading. But before I go, I mustn't forget to congratulate Jane Routley, who has won an Aurealis Award for her novel *Aramaya*, and David Levine for being the only person to notice the new layout on the Word format versions of the 'zine.

See you next month,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl