

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

This is late. It is in severe danger of being very late. So I'm wrapping it up now, even if that means leaving out some stuff and other bits not being as polished as I would like. And do I have an excuse? Well, maybe...

You will recall that last issue I said that this one would be produced on the road in Scotland. You know that saying about best laid plans? In fact I think it was Robbie Burns who coined it, which is sort of appropriate. In this case what has "gang awry" was that we had about half a million bucks worth of work come in during December, most of it seeming to require me. My boss was kind of keen to get me back in January. No way, I said, I've got holidays booked, people expecting me. So we agreed that I'd re-arrange the work part of the trip (the Scotland visit), fly back here immediately after New Year, and then out again in time to pick up the planned holiday. And if anyone thinks that flying twice round the world, economy class, in the space of two months is a glamorous lifestyle I suggest that they try it sometime. It does the Frequent Flier points a world of good. It wrecks the body.

Of course in the end it turned out to be a Good Thing. When I got to London I learnt that Scotland was under a big heap of snow with night temperatures around -18 C. Also I was back here for the tennis and one of our clients took us to see an evening session. Did I luck out or what? I got to see Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, who is great fun, and Andre Agassi, who is just brilliant. Now that is corporate perks with a vengeance and you have every right to be jealous.

Meanwhile, I'd promised a trip report from California. Guess I'd better get on with it.

If you are going to San Francisco

Well it was hardly the weather or time of year for flowers in my hair, but there are few cities in the world that bring music to mind as readily as San Francisco. Vienna, perhaps, or Liverpool, but both for what was written there rather than what was written about them. Is San Francisco really that wonderful, that romantic, that laid back? Of course not, it is a real city, but it is a pretty special one for all that.

LA is a great big freeway...

My first ever trip to the USA began with a short stopover in Los Angeles to change planes. I did not see Hollywood. I did see an awful lot of cars. Coming in low over the city, the one

thing that stands out is the succession of huge five and seven lane highways scything their way through the suburbs, each one infested with an army of automobiles. And in the airport too, as soon as you step out of the terminal buildings, cars everywhere. Compared to slow, sleepy Melbourne, Los Angeles is hell on wheels.

I must admit the poor city didn't get much of a chance. I didn't leave the airport, but I did spend 2 hours longer there than expected due to air traffic delays. They, of course, were all San Francisco's fault, but I was sat in LA, fed up and starving. Eventually I decided I would just have to start my visit in the most American way possible, and went and bought a McDonalds.

All the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey...

Coming into San Francisco, I could have been forgiven for thinking that the plane had taken a wrong turning and ended up at Heathrow by mistake. The colour of the fog was decidedly London-like. SFO, I gather, suffers a lot from the weather. It even has a bar called *The fog bank*. But we got down OK, and once more I was surprised by America and cars. You want a cab to the city, thirty-five bucks; you want to go cheap, share a stretch limo with half a dozen other folk and you can get there in luxury for ten.

And so you go, up another enormous freeway, on the wrong side of the road, past The Park formerly known as Candlestick (and still so called on all the maps and road signs), and through South San Francisco which, Hollywood-like, proclaims its name on a hillside with the added epithet, *the industrial city*. It is an accurate claim. Here, beautiful, romantic San Francisco looks suspiciously like the sort of place you would find the meanest Shadowrunners.

Such a lovely place...

It doesn't last. Soon you are into the city proper and experiencing a delightful confection of 1930s nostalgia. Is San Francisco a theme park disguised as a city? At times you could be forgiven for thinking so. The restored art deco trolleybuses are the major culprits: haunting Market Street, the ghosts of public transport past are a constant reminder that things are not quite when they should be. But for me the crowning glory is the Marriot hotel. Imagine, if you will, a 39 storey skyscraper with a gently cascading summit. Now switch into art deco mode and apply the classic segmented hemisphere style - the sort of thing you see on the front of old radios. Use it for the windows on the main and subsidiary peaks. Finally, take yourself to the top floor, given over entirely to a bar. On either side, the largest of those windows give a panoramic vista over the city. To one side, on a good day, the Golden Gate in the distance; to the other, a magnificent view of the equally stunning Oakland bridge. Spectacular.

Down in the crowded bars, out for a good time...

Of course one of the things that San Francisco is most famous for is restaurants. With only a few days to explore, and poor Kevin having a nasty stomach bug, I had no chance of making a thorough survey. In particular I was sorry to miss out on the Stinking Rose, a garlic lover's restaurant where the few dishes on the menu marked with a V are those deemed safe for vampires. But what I tried I very much enjoyed, both for the settings and the food. I went to John's Grill, famous for having been featured in *The Maltese Falcon*, and Max's Diner, a classic American café with a soda fountain and juke box terminals on every table. I also had one of the best Chinese meals I have ever eaten, and have discovered real Mexican food, as

opposed to the tepid stuff you get outside California. If I have any complaint at all it concerns the mountainous quantities that US restaurants serve you. No wonder so many Americans are horizontally challenged.

Don't you remember, we built this city...

On the San Andreas fault.

It was so easy to forget. In amongst those magnificent, arrogant buildings, it is hard to believe that the whole edifice could come crashing down at any moment. Of course it could. The client I was working for had their staff spread through a number of temporary homes whilst their main office, damaged in an earthquake two years ago, was completely refurbished and strengthened. But I now understand why people continue to live there, despite the obvious dangers. I've had the good fortune to visit two of the world's most beautiful cities: San Francisco and Sydney. One has earthquakes, the other has poisonous spiders. Give me the earthquakes any day.

Reflections on Australia: Christmas

School's out, and hordes of kids swarm into the town centre to see the window displays. Their noses press against the glass. Inside is a winter wonderland. Friendly elves lead docile reindeer, a jolly fat man dressed in red rides in a sleigh, and artificial snow falls on artificial pine trees. Outside the temperatures are in the mid thirties, Celsius. It is the height of summer.

I find it hard to take Christmas in Australia seriously, and from what I can see the Australians do too. I'm told that it was not too many years ago that every Australian family sat down on Christmas day and tucked into roast turkey and plum pudding, even if they were on the beach at the time. At least being half a day ahead they were spared the Queen's Christmas broadcast. Nowadays the turkey is cold and served with salad, but the rest of the trappings are still resolutely wintry.

There is some attempt at traditional festivity: the mere fact of the shop window displays proves that. But everything is low key compared to England. A few shops sport decorations, or spray paint their windows with holly leaves and snowflakes, but it is easy to ignore. Contrast my arrival at Heathrow where my ears were immediately assaulted by the dulcet tones of Cliff Richard and Bing Crosby in full festive mode.

I spent Christmas day in Perth where the weather was significantly better than contrary old Melbourne. I was in the pool by 9:00 am, and it wasn't cold. Even more surprisingly, two days earlier I had been to a beach less than 100 km south of the city and close a major tourist resort. It was so quiet it might almost have been in the north of Scotland. But then Western Australia is just empty.

As far as holidays go I am very happy to spend my Christmases in Australia. I am, after all, a sun-loving feline, even if I do have to smother myself in sun screen. But I think I will just forget that it is Christmas. The non sequiturs are just too hard to swallow.

Movie Miscellany: Babe, Tank Girl & Waterworld

With all the travelling I've been doing, even the worst of airline programming has given me a few interesting films to view. Sadly, few of them proved worth the effort.

Babe is a film I was quite looking forward to. It promised cute animals and a sappy story, and the critics are going crazy about it. Probably it delivers, but I didn't manage to stick with it long enough to find out. The problem? The voices. Imagine a flock of sheep sounding like a cross between Larry the Lamb and a bunch of Tennessee farm wives, or a duck like Joan Rivers with nitrogen narcosis. The pig itself had obviously had a previous career in *The Chipmunks*. Five minutes was quite enough.

Waterworld, on the other hand, had no critical acclaim to recommend it. The most expensive film ever, and saved only by the extent of its own hype from being the worst financial disaster since *Heaven's Gate*. The critics, I'm sorry to say, are right. It is *Mad Max* on the water, and the plot has about as much consistency as its thematic element. What a waste.

Ask most film buffs, however, about the very worst film of 1995 and the majority of them will probably finger *Tank Girl*. It is certainly true that the plot is complete nonsense, and even the most competent of make-up artists is doomed to failure when faced with the prospect of disguising actors as giant mutant kangaroos. Add this to being based on a comic that seems to me to be largely a schoolboy wet dream, and there doesn't seem to be much hope. The only person I knew who professed to have liked it also suffered from a chronic case of Lori Petty fetish.

Nevertheless, I was pleasantly surprised. Admittedly watching it in a group of friends which included a number of lesbians threw a whole new light on the subject. Clearly there was an area of appeal here that I had not previously considered. And the film did come over as having been made by women, not by adolescent males. It was sassy, it had Attitude.

OK, so it was a bad film. So was *Rocky Horror*, and as in *Rocky* the cast hammed it up something wonderful. Malcolm McDowell had a whale of a time as the chief baddie, having been given far more latitude that he was in *Generations*. I can see it becoming a cult movie, and deservedly so.

Lost children: lost dreams

“Greetings mortals. My name is Morpheus or Oneiros, sometimes called The Sandman, always, The Lord of Dreams. It has come to my attention recently that some of you humans are getting ideas above your stations. You’ve started thinking that you can create your own dreams. That man Disney has a lot of answer for, and I can assure you that he will be doing so for the rest of Eternity. But I think it is time I showed you how it should be done. I’ve decided to dream a movie.”

It is early dawn, or twilight, in a nameless port in a timeless part of the steampunk milieu. Golden light drifts languorously through green fog, casting an ethereal glow on the city. Impoverished sailors spend their meagre wages to see freaks in a market side-show whilst teams of orphans move expertly through the crowd, plying the trade of the Artful Dodger. The sailors probably have little else to spend their money on except women and beer, so

maybe it is day as the pubs are not yet open. Maybe it is always day. With the fog and the gas lamps it is hard to tell.

“To do dreams properly requires knowledge and the ability to create resonance. Your Mr. Lucas did quite well, enlisting, as he did, the aid of Joseph Campbell who, along with Jung, has been one of the more diligent explorers of my domain. I treat them both well, now that they are permanent guests. My movie is a fairy tale, spiced with mythic reference, marinated in childhood fears.”

The little boy stirs in his cot, a sudden noise from the fireplace having woken him. Yes, it IS him! Santa has come down the chimney, sack in hand. He smiles, withdraws a trinket, and moves aside. He is followed by another Santa, and another, and another. The boy watches with mounting horror as they move through his bedroom, stuffing their sacks with his toys. They take the soldiers, the trains, even tear the teddy bear from his desperate grasp. He screams, he tries to escape, but the dream will not let him go.

“Ah, the stuff of nightmare: it twists, it distorts, it corrupts. Mine is not a safe world. Tread carefully, ye who enter here.”

Far out to sea, deep in a field of ancient mines, shrouded by the swirling, green fog, stands an old, abandoned oil rig. Abandoned, that is, apart from the twisted progeny of a mad inventor. There is a dwarf woman, a sextet of idiot clones, a disembodied brain, and miles and miles of gleaming brass levers and glass dials on polished wooden machines. Oh, yes, and an evil genius, tortured by the knowledge that he alone in the world is unable to dream; determined to steal the happy childhood memories he believes he has missed.

“But how did he get there? What path did he follow? What MADE him? Mine is an expansive domain, and in it are a multitude of possibilities. Can it be that you choose your own paths? How long have you hidden? How long have you repressed the knowledge that it is your own choices that create the nightmares of your lives? Isn't it about time you did something about it?”

So the children disappear. For a long time no one does anything about it. No one cares. No one even knows. Then, the cyclopes make the mistake of stealing someone who is loved. Perhaps there is hope, even for this world of shadows.

“So you want a hero to save you? Forget it, heroes are mortal too. Unless, of course, you are willing to help; to put your own self on the line. But be warned, you repressed what you have done. Being forced to confront it might not be a pleasant experience. Are you ready to accept Judgement?”

A Terry Gilliam cartoon, with real actors, in Jean-Paul Gaultier costumes, beautiful lighting, and probably the best morphing sequence yet developed. *City of Lost Children*: see it.

“Dream it.”

Tim Powers: urban sorcery

Once upon a time in California there was a funny old man called Phil. He was funny for a number of reasons: he took a lot of drugs, he was obsessed with Linda Ronstadt, he was convinced he had been spoken to by an alien intelligence through the medium of a beam of pink light, and he had a habit of calling himself Horselover Fat. But he also wrote some very wonderful books.

Now you can't write the way that he did without attracting a few fans, and despite the excesses of his life he was soon surrounded by young acolytes keen to learn his trade. Many of them did. Keith Jetter and Jim Blaylock should be well known to any SF fan. But chief among them was a lad called Tim Powers and he, best beloved, is the hero of our story today.

As a unit the Dickian coterie has shown a fair degree of cohesion. Powers and Blaylock in particular feed off each other regularly and share in each other's hoaxes. They have the same (Lovecraftian?) obsession with the sea, the same bizarre imagination, the same admiration for that great unsung hero of English poetry, William Ashbless. But Powers is a big name, and Blaylock is not. Powers has produced much better books.

Novels such as *The Anubis Gates* and *Diner at Deviant's Palace* launched Tim Powers towards what seemed to be a glorious career. Since then he has been fairly prolific. At least one book a year has hit the bookshelves, but it is clear that something has gone wrong. To start with, the tomes are now thudding into those bookshelves rather than dropping gently. The curse of the word count has struck. *The Stress of Her Regard*, which in many ways had some wonderfully bizarre ideas, was also painfully long. Since then, things have got worse.

I have just finished wading my way through Powers last two books: *The Last Call* and *Expiration Date*. Both of them are in many ways classic Powers novels. The first is about chaos theory, gambling and the Arthurian legend of the King of the Wasteland. The second assumes that you can catch and bottle ghosts and that people can get a "hit" of past lives by ingesting the trapped spirit. I mean, where does the guy get his ideas from? If I knew, I would go there.

Where the books are different is in that they are no longer set in the 18th or 19th century, but firmly in 20th Century America, specifically the twin horrors of Los Angeles and Las Vegas. This, and the supernatural content, has lead Alan Stewart to compare Powers to Stephen King. But Powers books are not horrific. You could write something really unpleasant about the black market trade in ghosts in LA, but Powers manages a jolly tale spiced up with a comical rendering of a young kid called Kootie (short for Koot Hoomie - his parents wanted him to be a guru when he grew up) and the cantankerous ghost of Thomas Edison. Both books have horrible moments, but they simply leave you feeling sorry for the characters rather than setting your hair on end.

Both books are too long, but I think it is the new setting that is getting to me. You can imagine Bryon and Shelly getting uptight about Lamia. You can imagine bizarre things happening in Georgian or Victorian England. Having the same magical insanity in contemporary California doesn't seem quite the same. Sorcery, cars and TV sets don't mix.

I'll still keep buying Power's books, and I'd even recommend reading the new ones as they are well written and contain some wonderful ideas. But I picked up both of them in remainder bins. I think Tim will need to change his style a bit soon or the publishers might get nasty.

Foot Note

Phew, got there at last. What wrap up is required?

Firstly, apologies to Neil Gaiman for the City of Lost Children review. Hope it wasn't too bad.

Second, just in case anyone is interested, here is the list of sources for the section headings in the San Francisco reports:

If you are going - is, of course, from Scott McKenzie's summer of love anthem, *San Francisco*;

LA is great big freeway - from *Do you know the way to San Jose?*, Frankie goes to Hollywood (amongst others);

All the leaves are brown - from *California dreaming* by The Mamas and The Papas;

Such a lovely place - from the title track of *Hotel California* by The Eagles;

Down in the crowded bars - also from *Hotel California*, the wonderful finale: *The Last Resort*;

and finally, from the ultimate paean to San Francisco as the capital city of popular music, Jefferson Starship remember that *We built this city on Rock and Roll*.

Sorry they were not more imaginative, not much time for research.

Finally, what's next. This time I really am off to Scotland, via San Francisco. I won't, however, promise that I will get there. Next issue should feature my holiday in Northern California (thank you, Kevin) and Endymion, Dan Simmons' long awaited sequel to the Hyperion books. See you in February.

Cheryl