

# EMERALD CITY

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An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at 100610.3413@compuserve.com

## Introduction

Oh dear, there's nothing quite like making a pathetic mistake for enticing reader feedback, is there. That little list of song titles out of the San Francisco travelogue was written at about 1:30 in the morning in a tearing hurry. It showed. Still, one the advantages of an electronic 'zine is that you can correct things. The really embarrassing mistake only got as far as the Melbourne SF Club: thanks to Terry Frost for pointing it out without too much laughter. The other one, confusing Jefferson Airplane and Starship, went to most people, although I was able to correct it before handing out sample issues in the US. And I confess that I had no idea who did the original of *Do you know the way to San Jose*. I've had Dionne Warwick back from several people and consider myself educated.

The mis-spelling of San Francisco in the heading, of course, went unnoticed until I was actually there. Sigh.

Actually, however, quite a few people did mention artists they would have liked to see in the list. Terry wanted The Doors, Marc Ortlieb would like some real Jefferson Airplane, and others marvelled at the absence of that quintessential San Francisco band, the Grateful Dead. I spent a long time playing Steely Dan tracks looking in vain for a suitable line, which was the main reason a lot of stuff got rejected. But, assuming you don't have to provide a heading for a paragraph, what is your favourite California song? If I get some good ones I'll compile them for next issue.

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## On the road again

Ever since I have been knee-high to a gorse bush I have been fascinated by trees. Australia is spectacular, especially some of the giant tree ferns which give you the impression that you are going to bump into an Iguanodon round the next corner. But for serious trees there is only one place on Earth to go: the redwood forests of Northern California. Having found a dear friend in San Francisco willing to take me there, I was not about to miss the opportunity. OK, it was winter, the weather was not going to be at its best. But they are evergreens, and who knows when I would get another chance. And so it was that, on Australia Day, Kevin and I drove north across the Golden Gate and headed out through Marin County into the wild.

First stop was Muir Woods, a national park only a few miles north of the city and well worth a visit. It being rather hilly, its Sequoia are not the biggest in the state, but they are quite

impressive enough. The salmon were running too. I sat and watched, licked my lips, and tried not to mew too loudly.

This being a Dan Simmons issue, a few words on trees are not inappropriate. It is easy to see, staring up at a towering redwood, where the idea for the Templars and God's Grove came from. John Muir himself was not a prophet or founder of any religion. He was a naturalist and poet, and expert on the Californian countryside, and the man who popularised Yosemite as a tourist destination. He was also the first president of the Sierra Club. I think he would have approved of God's Grove, and have been totally boggled by the idea of treeships.

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North of the city, the San Andreas fault heads slowly out to sea, cutting a fjord-like bay before leaving the land forever. This is a haven for seabirds and shellfish, the richness of the wildlife being evidenced by the number of very large birds of prey I saw. Oyster bars are a standard feature of every beach-side hamlet, and I continued to be stunned by the size of American food portions. In a small town café I ordered a "chilli dog" for \$4, expecting a large hot dog with chilli sauce. What I got was a huge hot dog smothered in a large helping of chilli con carne. Good job I'd walked 3 miles round Muir Woods earlier.

Travelling on, Highway 1 hugs the cliffs of the Pacific coast, switch-backing through river valleys here, narrowing where parts of it have fallen into the sea there. Anyone who has read Jim Blaylock's *The Paper Grail* will have a very good picture of what it is like. I'm glad we didn't have to drive much of it in the dark. Eventually we pulled into Fort Bragg, an unmistakably fishing port town, and I was able to indulge my passion for clam chowder. I'd seen sequoia, salmon, a plethora of birds, seals and deer. Only the migrating grey whales stayed hidden. I was in love with Northern California already.

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Saturday was the embarrassing part of the trip. How I will be able to hold my head up in female company again once it becomes known that I've been hanging round with a guy who gets passionate about trains I do not know. All I can say is that the UK trainspotter is a unique phenomenon and regarded with almost as much bewilderment by foreign train buffs as he is by the rest of the Brits.

Actually I have to admit that the train trip from Fort Bragg to Willits was an ideal way to see the redwoods. We got to sit up front with the driver, which pleased Kevin no end, and gave me the best view possible. The route passed through forest for its entire length, following the path of the Noyo river and serving a selection of isolated houses and camp sites, none of which warranted more than a small shelter for its request stop station. Two of them were complete ghost towns, having falling victim to forest fires and not been rebuilt. Only the station markers remained. Again the wildlife was good. I saw a blue-headed heron, a blue jay (quite the most colourful bird I've seen outside Australia), numerous red-tailed hawks and a large number of deer who seemed completely unfazed by the train. The driver said that there were beaver in the river, but I saw no sign of them or their activity, unless they too have moved into the modern world and started using chainsaws.

That evening we had a meal in a posh restaurant (it came in with the package deal we had) and I was interested to note that the food portions were of normal size. Obviously there is something going on here, a new social phenomenon. Poor Americans who can't afford to look

after their health have to eat in cheap places where the food is served by the mountain. Only the rich, who can afford to go to exclusive eateries, are able to eat sensibly. Compare this with Tonga where a man's girth (and that of his wives) is a sign of his wealth. Fascinating.

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Beyond Fort Bragg there is a 22 mile stretch of Highway 1 that is all switchbacks. It cuts in from the coast and heads up and down the mountains several times before hitting the valley of the Eel and relative flatness. I think I would have rather tackled central San Francisco, wrong side of the road and all, than that stretch of road. Fortunately it wasn't raining or icy and no substantial parts of it had been washed away.

We stopped half way through where a small patch of grass allowed me to get out and snap the view. It was so quiet you could hear the stream gurgling away in the valley bottom several hundred feet below. A humming bird swooped and chirped in front of us. Absolutely magical.

Northern California is very much a country region. Standard uniform for the men is a lumberjack shirt and jeans. Only the baseball caps and sneakers, plus the hordes of pick-ups (utes to you Aussies) marked the passage of time from the previous century. A few hundred miles from San Francisco, but we might have been half a world away.

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By the Sunday afternoon we were steaming up Highway 101, the newer, wider route north, and able to take a small detour through the Avenue of the Giants. This is serious redwoods, not little ones like I'd seen before. The bigger ones topped 350 feet high and were over 2000 years old.

Of course I should point out that these are only Coast Redwoods (*Sequoia Sempervirens*), not the Giant Redwood (*Sequoiadendron Giganteum*) which prefers more inland habitat such as Yosemite. They don't grow quite so tall, but they are much more massive, some being over 3000 years old. There are very few Coast Redwoods wide enough to drive through. Being tourists, we did one.

Trekking through some of the groves, I was struck by the image left by a fallen redwood at its base. The trees' roots are very shallow, going no more than 6 feet deep. So how, you will ask, does a tree 300 foot tall stand up with only a 6 foot root? Because they spread out wide until they are entangled with those of every other tree in the grove. Underground, each tree is holding roots with its neighbours, supporting each other against the wind. I was reminded of the fungal intelligence in Sherri Tepper's *Raising the Stones*. These trees are all in contact with each other: a community.

Once fallen, however, the splayed roots of the tree resemble nothing less than the exhaust flames at the tail of a great rocket. With the vast trunk stretching away into the distance, it is easy to imagine it soaring through space. Suddenly the idea of a treeship is not so daft after all.

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Those of you who are on the ball will have realised that this was not just any old Sunday, it was Super Sunday, the date of the greatest cultural festival in America. What, you may ask,

was the silly girl doing looking at trees when there was a Superbowl on TV? Well, you know, a football game is a football game, neither the Redskins nor the 49ers were featured, and all the pundits reckoned it was a foregone conclusion. Once we got out of the trees, we could hear the match on the radio, and by half time, when we arrived at our hotel in Eureka, it sounded like the pundits were right.

Then, in the third quarter, the Steelers started to get their act together. As a conscientious reporter, I figured I ought to go check out what watching a (rare) competitive Superbowl was like. The hotel had a party on in the lounge. Boy it was feral. I didn't think it was possible to get drunk on American beer, so they must have been at the bourbon. Sadly a few dumb plays cost the Steelers their chance, but it was good fun cheering them on.

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That evening Kevin took me to a place called the Samoa Cookhouse. Samoa is a suburb of Eureka (there is also a Manila, no one knows why), and the Cookhouse bit comes from the fact that it is a surviving lumbermen's eatery. Inside it is all trestle benches with red and white check tablecloths and plain china. The cooking is plain fare too, and you don't have to worry about choice because everyone gets what is on the menu for the night. In our case it was soup, followed by roast beef or fried chicken.

I thought you said there was no choice?

Sorry, you must have misheard. That was roast beef and fried chicken. Plus mashed potato and sweetcorn, in enormous portions. And guess what? Yes, you could go back as often as you wanted. Seconds? Thirds? No problem. Apple pie for afters, as much tea or soda as you can drink, and all for around \$13 a head. People, you could die of overeating in a place like that.

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On Monday we took the freeway back to San Francisco and I realised that I had missed the opportunity to visit lots of wineries that lined the route inland through the Napa and Sonoma valleys. Oops, better come back soon.

We got home just in time to head off for the weekly meeting of the Bay Area SF Association, a splendid bunch of folks who very kindly admitted me to their ranks and appointed me their ambassador to Australia. They have their meetings in a pizza parlour, which struck me as a very civilised idea, especially as they were pretty good pizzas. I made several new friends, and garnered a few more votes for the very wonderful Australia in 99 Worldcon bid. Roll up folks, pre-supports only \$10. I can take your money now.

Sorry, this bidding lark gets to you.

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The rest of the week we both had to work, but we did manage to get out some evenings. In particular Kevin took me to San Jose to watch the Sharks ice hockey team play the Hartford Whalers. This was quite an event. The stadium only held 20,000, but it was fully enclosed, and with a loud and enthusiastic audio system, and most of the crowd being locals, it promised to be pretty cacophonous. Kevin had warned me beforehand that the Sharks were one of the worst teams in the league, and this was certainly borne out in the first period as only the

brilliance of their goalkeeper prevented a healthy Hartford lead. By some miracle, the Sharks went into the intermission 1-0 ahead.

In the second quarter everything went crazy. Without seeming to have to try, the Sharks suddenly got another 6 goals. Our seats were right behind the goal they were attacking, and the excitement amongst the crowd was palpable. Ice hockey matches are normally fairly low scoring. To give you some idea of the magnitude of the event, a local pizza chain has a promotion whereby ticket holders get a free pizza if the Sharks score four or more goals in the entire match.

The final period was an anti-climax. The result was not in doubt, and most of the crowd were too stunned, and possibly too hoarse, to cheer any more. We all went home happy, and the Sharks had gained a new fan. I mean, what a show to put on for a visitor.

That just about wraps up the travelogue bit. The report on Potlach will be in a separate section, but I've got a lot more impressions of America I'd like to share with you. How's about we talk about...

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## **Great American Myths**

### **Everything is bigger in America**

Well some things are. The food portions are bigger. Consequentially the people are bigger too. The trees are hugely, enormously bigger. Cars, on the other hand, are not. There is the usual fashion for 4x4s, but most street cars are of European proportions. The oil crises of the 70s put an end to the great, gas-guzzling Cadillacs.

The same does not hold true, however, for other forms of road transport. In Europe you will often see that big 4x4 put to good use towing the caravan. In the States you will often see a 25 or 30 foot "recreational vehicle" towing a Land Cruiser or Range Rover. I mean, a lot of people in London don't have a flat that big.

### **America is a motorised society**

Too darn right. These days people are fairly used to the idea of drive in fast food restaurants. Drive in banks are little more unusual, though they make an awful lot of sense if you have ever sat and watched the chaos caused by people stopping to use auto teller machines in Lygon Street. The drive in laundromat caused me a little more thought. I presume that there are humans inside who take your washing, get it done, and give it back next time your drive through. However, the one which really bemused me was the drive in playground. I guess you just drive up, shove your kids though the window, and drive off. Convenient, huh?

### **There are McDonalds everywhere**

No so. Kevin and I drove about 200 miles from San Francisco to Fort Bragg on Highway 1 without passing a single McDonalds. Try doing that in England.

It is also noticeable that there are a lot more fast food chains in the US than there are in other countries. None of them seem to be any better, but at least you get some choice.

## **San Francisco is full of spaced out hippies**

Negative. San Francisco is full of smart people in business suits, most of whom have just started a software company. I'm told that all of the hippies have moved to Seattle, though I have no proof of this.

## **There is a vast gulf between rich and poor**

Hard to say. You see more beggars on the streets of London than you do in San Francisco, but I've not seen a real American slum. One thing I will say is that anyone who starves in America is being really creative. Getting a healthy diet may be difficult, but you can eat really well on very little money.

## **The Indians are leading the country back to nature**

Well they might be, but I've seen no evidence of it. There are a few gifts marked "Cherokee made" in some of the gift shops, but the most obvious signs of Indian presence were the big signs by the highways. You see, many American states have very restrictive laws about gambling and alcohol. Indian reservations, on the other hand, are to a large extent self-governing. It didn't take them long to work out that the most cost-effective thing to do with their land was to build an enormous casino. Sad.

## **All American beer is awful**

Having been used to dire tales of stuff like Budweiser and Coors, I was surprised to arrive in Portland to find the city swarming with small, local breweries and a passion for ale amongst local fans matched only in the UK. Not being a beer drinker, I can't comment on the quality of the stuff, but the sheer level of competition would suggest that something good should come of it.

## **American is the land of the free**

The hell it is. When I was asked for an official government-issued photo ID before being allowed to board an internal flight from San Jose to Portland I accepted the excuse of airline security. When I discovered the same policy in the hotel in Portland I started to think that the US is fast on the way to the sort of level of control normally associated with the totalitarian regimes it professes to oppose. People of America, you have a right to go places without having to show a government ID card, stand up and protect it!

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## **Endymion: Dying Earth II**

*Dan Simmons slouched into the large office and slumped down in the deliberately uncomfortable chair put aside for him.*

*"But Hyperion is finished", he said, "complete, requiring no more work. Two books, end of story. It would ruin it if I wrote another."*

*Tyreena Wingreen-Feif looked up from the mirror in which she was studying a mis-placed hair in the castellated confection that adorned her head.*

*“Dan, Dan, Dan”, she sighed, “have you read your contract?”*

Actually, of course, I have no idea why *Endymion* came into being. Perhaps, like Martin Silenus, Simmons just needed the money. Perhaps he wanted to use it to finance other work. Perhaps he got fed up of the demands of legions of fans. But I am absolutely certain that he didn't do it because he felt that the *Hyperion* saga needed a third volume.

*But write for us a trilogy, a sword and sorcery trilogy, write for us a trilogy, we'll publish it, next month.*

You see, *Hyperion* was complete. Sure there were loose ends, but the fates of most of the major characters were known, there was a satisfactory ending (happy for some, sad for others), it felt a good place to stop. Besides, Simmons had gone just about as far as he could in introducing ultra-powerful beings but maintaining a human face. A small opening had been left for free will and mankind, irritating to the last, had spotted it and pushed through. To take things any further would be to have to watch those “divine” plans unfold.

These days, however, a good book, a Hugo winning book, can't just be left on the shelf, unsequed. I mean, if people are writing sequels to *The Time Machine* and *Gone with the Wind*, what right has poor little *Hyperion* to avoid the plague? I'm sure that Simmons realised this. He satirised publishers so viscosly and accurately in the character of Wingreen-Fief that he must have known what was coming. There is a sense of irony that Silenus is the only one of the pilgrims to survive (a few more hundred years!) into the new book. Given the number of in-jokes that filled the original novels, I at least looked forward to some fun.

*But write for us a trilogy, a thousand page long trilogy, write for us a trilogy, we'll publish it, next week.*

The first thing that struck me about *Endymion* was that it bears all the hallmarks of a sequel published many years after an original famous novel which, inevitably, attracted much fannish comment. It reminded me in many ways of *The Ringworld Engineers*. Simmons had clearly taken to heart the comments of his readers, and subtle corrections and re-writes of original concepts abounded. Personally I find people who nit-pick novels and films highly annoying. I read books for the story and the writing, not to find holes in the logic. But I guess they have their place in the world too, and maybe it is even good to know that authors do listen.

Simmons has been creative too. Things have not stood still. Aided by the crucifix, Leynar Holt has been Pope for centuries, condemning the heretical doctrines of the anti-pope, Teilhard I, and, after a little scientific research to cure the Bikura problem, spreading the beneficence of the resurrection parasite to the rest of the galaxy. In *Endymion*, everyone can be born again, literally.

There are interesting characters too. Brawne and Johnny's daughter, the great Messiah, is inevitably a washout, but the book is narrated by her Hyperion-born guardian and lover, Raul Endymion. Or rather, written by him, as he awaits death, sentenced to execution by enclosure in a Schrodinger's Cat box. And then there is the Vatican officer sent to pursue them in a faster-than-light ship which relies on the crucifix to ensure that its crew is alive and well on

reaching their destination. Simmons writes horror novels, and he has always had an eye for the gruesome idea.

Finally there are the jokes, the best of which is that Silenus' *Cantos* has been published, banned by the Vatican, and passed into mythology. Therefore, instead of referring back to the previous books, Simmons has his characters quote passages from the *Cantos* and ponder as to whether the events really happened, or if the old sot just made them up. Cute.

But the plot is totally naff. It is just a travelogue through some of the more interesting worlds of the Web, heroes pursued by anti-hero and villains, with occasional Deus-ex-Machinas from the Powerful Ones to move things along when the heroes look like getting caught. It ends in a manner typical of the most cynical of continuing series. Here is a cliff, let's go hang.

I guess it is a living. Even Gene Wolfe has done it (his *Long Sun* series is clearly derivative of the *New Sun* books, and even more cynically hung than *Endymion* - look for a full review when I get hold of the final volume). And, of course, Simmons writes very well. It just makes me so sad that he had to ruin a brilliant story by producing a sub-standard, tack-on soap opera sequel. I think Tyrenea fully deserved her fate.

*But write us a decalogy, a posthumous decalogy, write us a decalogy, we'll publish it, today.*

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## **Potlach**

For my last weekend in the US, Kevin and I headed up to Portland for a convention. I mean, what else is one supposed to do when visiting a foreign country.

Portland is about 550 miles north of San Francisco. With most of the eastern US buried deep under the worst snow in living memory, I was a little nervous of such a journey. I did, however, have the encouraging words of David Levine, the con chairman, from progress report 3 to reassure me. "Even in February", he wrote, cheerily, "Portland's climate is mild". No worries.

Well, it was a little worrying that we left San Jose airport on an Alaskan Airlines service. I mean, how far north were we going? The pilot was quick to reassure us. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm pleased to inform you that the temperature in Portland when we arrive will be in the high teens."

Farenheight.

Fortunately the hotel was very warm, and we didn't need to venture out into the freezing rain very often. There was, however, considerable concern from people who had to head home northwards or eastwards after a particularly unpleasant Saturday night. All of the folk from Oregon and Washington states were at pains to assure me that this was most unusual weather. And, of course, it was nothing compared to poor Minnesota, suffocating under tons of snow with temperatures down to -60.

Potlach is a very small scale do for a North American convention. There were just over 100 people there. The theory was that it should be a fairly serious literary convention: no masquerade, no games, no filking. For a small convention that's fine by me, I like books, and I

can hear the nods of approval emanating from Sydney. Tough luck Eric, the first panel item on Saturday morning was about fantasy literature.

Guest of honour, such as there was one, was Ursula Le Guin, though she only came for Friday night when a session on her film, *The Lathe of Heaven*, was scheduled. According to the guest list, Ellen Kushner was there as well, although I didn't manage to find her. Shame, because the one book of hers I've read (*Swordspoint*) was really good.

Probably by far the best programme item was the Trial of Lionel Fanthorpe (for crimes against the English Language, of course). Unfortunately our flight got in too late for us to attend, though I'm sure Lionel will have survived to be tried another day. If anyone ever lets me loose on programming we'll have something like this in Australia sometime soon.

I went to the fantasy panel, which was excellent, but the rest of Saturday was given over largely to preparations for and running the Australia in '99 bid party. Enormous thanks are due to Janice Murray for her help, to the convention hospitality suite for the loan of the bowls and stuff, and of course to everyone who contributed to the bid.

We did, however, take time off to visit Powells, a store which bills itself as the largest bookstore in the world. I guess it may be, but it reminded me very much of Foyles - rambling and messy. Give me Blackwells or Dillons any day.

Another major tourist attraction in Portland is the 24 hour Church of Elvis. I'm not entirely sure what their beliefs are, but should you happen to need a wedding, baptism or confession they are open and ready to help, any time. Isn't America wonderful?

It being my first North American convention, I made a lot of new friends. In particular I was delighted to meet Art Widner, the guy whose fanzine, *YHOS*, is eligible for both a Hugo and a Retro-Hugo. Forty-five years in fandom, even with a few breaks, is enough to make anyone bitter and twisted, but Art was a really nice guy. Go on, nominate him.

All in all it was a good, fun convention. I met lots of lovely people, had a great time, and wish I could afford to go back again next year when the convention is in Seattle. Of course, that is even further north....

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## **A History of God**

by Karen Armstrong, Ballantine, US\$14.

No, seriously folks, there are some sad people in the world who actually enjoy theology, and I happen to be one of them. This really is a review of a theology book. Stick with me, it is interesting.

To start with, Karen Armstrong is a fascinating person. Anyone who has been a nun but gave it up because she found it was destroying her belief in God has something going for her. And I loved her TV series about Saint Paul: an excellent history of early Christianity, wars, misogyny and all. Kevin, bless him, picked this book up to occupy his time whilst waiting for me at the airport. Hardly light reading, dear, but I just had to borrow it.

The main objective of the book is to study how our image of God has changed through the centuries, from His origins in Mesopotamian mythology, through our first record of Him in the Pentateuch, to His final flowering in the Roman and Greek versions of Christianity, modern Judaism, and Islam, and apparent death at the hands of science.

(By the way, I wonder how many Westerners know that Muslims revere the Bible and count Abraham, Moses and Jesus amongst their foremost prophets. You didn't? Maybe you ought to read this stuff too.)

The thing that strikes you most about the first half of the book is just how sophisticated early theologians were. It is a sobering thought that when Europe was barely clambering out of the Dark Ages, men with wonderful names such as Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakaria ar-Razi and Denys the Areopagite were putting forward theories that make idiots of most modern religious leaders. They understood religion in a way that we don't. They knew how to make it work for them, they knew the dangers, and they tried to evolve ways of thinking about God that would not allow megalomaniacs like Bernard of Clairvaux turn Him into an instrument of bigotry, terror and genocide.

Of course much of the book revolves around obscure theological points. It is very hard to see the difference between the Greek and Roman ideas of the Trinity, but the essence behind them is obvious. As Armstrong puts it:

*"..many Western Christians are not Trinitarians. They complain that the doctrine of Three Persons in One God is incomprehensible, not realising that for the Greeks that was the whole point."*

This is because what many of the early theologians were trying to do was to depersonalise God, by which I mean not that they wanted to separate him from people, but that they wanted to make him less of a person, more ineffable. To quote Thomas Aquinas,

*"..in the last resort, all that man knows of God is to know that he does not know him, since he knows that what God is surpasses all that we can understand."*

Viewing God as an old man on a cloud with some neat powers and human thoughts and motivations leads to all sorts of muddled thinking, yet it is exactly the sort of approach used by fundamentalists of all creeds today. Sadly, along with an over-reliance on a logical approach, it is also a rut that Western theology became stuck in.

Originally, all four branches of the God religion (and here I'm counting Roman and Greek Christianity as separate) viewed their scripture as at least in part mythological. But the more the West came to concentrate on a rational approach, the more it was forced towards a more literal view of the hodge podge handed down to it. Initially this led to a view of God as totally omnipotent and omniscient and thence, quite logically, to Calvin's appallingly cruel doctrine of predestination. Yet even Calvin viewed the Bible as part metaphor. He described the creation story as "baby talk" designed to help less intelligent believers with difficult concepts. Indeed, up until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, no one took the Bible literally: fundamentalism as we know it today was impossible.

Yet as Newton, Lyell and Darwin continued to push back the frontiers of our actual knowledge about the world it became increasingly obvious that there was nowhere for God to hide. Either He was simply a name for one of Newton's mechanical processes, and thus not

worthy of our attention let alone worship, or He was not necessary at all. And it became plain that large parts of the Bible were not literal truth.

And so, because the West turned it's back on mystical views of God all those centuries ago, we end up in a situation where people who want or need to believe in God have to do so in the face of all the evidence. They can't accept that God is a myth, so they have to accept the literal truth of things their rational minds tell them are impossible. That way lies intellectual suicide and submission to mindless dogma.

The sad fact is that this is not the only way. A thousand years ago people knew it was not the only way and accepted other approaches. And regardless of what Marx thought, religion is not an irrelevance. For all our atheism, our image of what God was before we did away with him still colours how we view the world. And in his absence we find it necessary to invent something else. I'll leave the last words to Armstrong:

*“Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.”*

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I guess some of you are saying to yourselves, “what is a self-avowed pagan like Cheryl doing rambling on about God like this”. That, I'm afraid, is a whole new article, and I promised, in issue one, that I would not proselytise. Ask me if you are interested, otherwise end of subject.

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## **Things that go BANG in the night**

There are times when it is good to go back somewhere and discover that things are just the same as you remember them; but to return to the UK and discover that the IRA is resuming its purposeful campaign to push up the cost of London office space and insurance premiums is not a pleasant experience. I guess the end of the cease fire made the main news in many countries, and yet I know from talking to people that many folk in Australia and the US have very little understanding of what is going on here. I thought I would take the opportunity to try to explain.

To start with you need to know that the British government insists on treating the IRA as criminals rather than nationalist insurgents as they view themselves, and as they are often seen abroad, particularly in the US. It is true that their clandestine operations and need for cash have brought them to a mafia-like dominance of the criminal underworld of Northern Ireland, but viewing them this way doesn't help.

Look at it this way. Suppose that the UN said to the Bosnians that before peace talks could start they would have to disarm and promise never to attack Serbia again, but that the Serbs could keep their guns and armies. Would they have got to the table? No way. De Clerk did not insist that the ANC disarm, nor did Rabin refuse to talk to Arafat until he renounced

violence. But in Britain the peace process broke down because the British refused to talk to Sinn Fein.

Sadly, most of the British people have taken this IRA = criminals idea hook, line and sinker, even though, morally, their habit of blowing up innocent Britons has little except scale to distinguish it from Dresden or Hiroshima.

The next thing to remember is that Northern Ireland was created to provide a safe haven for the Protestant minority of Ireland, who felt that they would be disadvantaged in a united country. Unfortunately, many Catholics living in the north were either unwilling to leave their homes, or stubbornly clung to the idea of a united country. Since partition, those Catholics have been systematically oppressed and discriminated against by the Protestant majority. Yet they are so few that there is no hope of them achieving justice through any democratic process within Northern Ireland itself. In any election, the Protestants win nearly all the seats. It is not surprising that many Catholics saw the IRA as their only option, or that most Protestants were scared stiff of becoming a minority in a united Ireland.

Decades later, many of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland are sick to death of violence and are happy to put aside their prejudices for the sake of peace. But that cannot happen without a political solution that allows all sides to save face.

And so we come to the final nail in the sorry coffin. The Ulster Unionists are the traditional and philosophical allies of the Conservatives. Not that long ago they were the same party. With a faltering economy, PR disasters and by-election losses cutting away at their confidence and majority, and a general election due very shortly, the government finds itself forced to fall back on the old friendship. John Major is not refusing to talk to Gerry Adams because he doesn't know the right thing to do, he is doing it because he is scared stiff of offending the Unionists (not to mention a few lunatics in his own party). No Conservative Prime Minister has ever sacrificed his job for the sake of Ireland's Catholics, and none ever will. If Northern Ireland wants peace, it had better hope for a Conservative majority in the next election.

Please note that all of the above does not mean that I am a "supporter" of the IRA. I do not approve of using violence to solve political problems. And anyone in the US who sends them money should be aware that it is probably being used to buy arms from the Russians or Cubans which are then used to kill British civilians. But, as experience in South Africa and Israel has shown, the way to stop such people is not to throw more money into "security" operations, it is to talk to them.

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## Footnote

Since I went to Potlach, Dick Smith has pointed out to me that there is someone who has been publishing a fanzine continuously for over 45 years. What is more, *Stefantasy* is produced by Letterpress. Yes, seriously folks, bits of lead type, just like Caxton. I'm tempted to say that Bill Danner needs a straight-jacket more than a Hugo, but such dedication should not go unrewarded. Another one for my nominations list.

I'm now snowbound in Scotland with little to do except work, read theology books and write this nonsense. Scotland is a wonderful place, but once again I find myself with little to tell about it. Ach well, this issue is long enough as it is.

Next issue I return to Australia, closely followed by the Formula One Grand Prix circus. Will Melbourne survive the invasion? Will Schumacher turn the Ferrari into a winning car? Will I be able to afford a ticket? Find out in next month's exciting episode.

This issue's playlist:

Rock 'n' Roll Part II - Gary Glitter and the San Jose Sharks;

Publish and be damned - Phil Alcock;

Two Tribes - Frankie goes to Hollywood (just for the line, "only in America..."); and

I still call Australia home - QANTAS Airways.

Enough, I'm getting silly.