

# EMERALD CITY

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## Introduction

Hello again folks. Here's hoping I am in a better mood for this issue, although from the number of people who commented that the "edge" in the last issue made for better reading I am almost tempted to ensure I write in a bad temper. Fortunately I also heard from a few folks who were less than pleased with my witterings, which helped keep things in perspective. In particular I would like to apologise to the tech crew of LA.con III whom, I discovered, were largely press ganged on arriving at the convention. No wonder they were a bit raw for the first big outing. My criticism of the organisation or the Retro ceremony stays, of course. And my opinion of a concom that starts a Worldcon with no tech crew in place is not high.

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## La Morte d'Arthur

Poor Arthur, it must be tough being so much a part of mythic heritage that everyone and her aunt (including myself) seems to have had a go at re-writing your life. He has died in so many different ways in so many different stories that he must be starting to wonder what people will do to him next. Enter Patricia Kenealey and her Keltic novels.

It all started out innocently enough, a charming fantasy in which Saint Brendan the Astrogator took the survivors of the Celtic races so far over the Western Sea that they ended up on the far side of the galaxy with their own star systems to settle. The evil Atlanteans followed them to the stars, and slowly but surely Earth caught up in the technology stakes. The scene was set for a climactic re-union of the species.

That was The Keltiad, a three volume (naturally) space fantasy that was unique in its conception and finely detailed in much of its recreation. There was much in it that was politically suspect, as any celebration of a nationalistic warrior culture must be, and much which was carefully left unexplained (if the Celts were so smart, why did they have to flee in the first place?). But there was also much good derived from the often highly egalitarian Celtic legal system. In any case, it was a good yarn, and I rather enjoyed it. It is rather a shame that the books are not better known, because then I could have explained to people at the Costume Ball that I had gone attired as the Ard-Rian Aeron Aoibhell without worrying that they would look at me as if I was stupid.

But, as with all such things, there came the need for the sequel. Kenealey, somewhat bravely, wrote a prequel instead. Indeed, so much of a prequel that Aeron is barely mentioned in it. What she did was recast the legend of Arthur in Keltic terms.

The first two volumes were stodgy but innovative. I have always believed that Arthur's early years are far easier to chronicle than the later ones. The story is so much happier then, and you have much more freedom to chronicle events. In some ways I was glad that my Pendragon campaign folded long before the natural end point. The stodginess came from the forced archaic style in which most of the books is written. It wears after a while. Other than that, young Arthur tripped heroically through a traumatic childhood to the realisation that he had as good a claim to the throne as Princess Gweniver and his eventual overthrow of the evil tyrant who has enslaved all Keltia. Standard Arthurian characters are interpreted in new and interesting ways, and Kenealey follows the standard pagan line of making Morgan a heroine. So far, so good.

The final volume, *The Hedge of Mist*, was a long time in coming, and it was not worth the wait. The trouble with the end of Arthur's life is that it is so well detailed, so tragic, and so dependent on the emotions of the leading characters that it takes a fine writer indeed to make you believe that people could be so stupid. Note that Shakespeare, an expert on tragedy, didn't even try, though the stories must have been familiar to him.

There is also the question of the Grail Quest, a tale so bizarre and deeply mythic that it is hard enough to fit it into an historical saga, let alone a space opera one. Many authors avoid it entirely. Kenealey deals with many of these problems by the cowardly artifice of invoking fate. Characters do not act as much as move their limbs in response to string pulling by the Sidhe and their own visions. It is a cop-out, and it is unconvincing.

It is a shame. Arthurian re-tellings are a passion of mine and I had high hopes for this one because it was so unusual. The first two volumes, *The Hawk's Gray Feather* and *The Oak Above the Kings*, are probably worth trying, unless you are the sort of person for whom maps, genealogies and unpronounceable names are anathema. The third one is not. It was never an easy ask, but this attempt has failed more deeply than others have. I'm sure it is possible, and one day I hope to understand the characters well enough to do it myself. Here's hoping no one gets it right before then.

There, and all without a single reference to Jim Morrison.

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## **Kind Hearts & Coronets**

Mid September, Tullamarine airport, Melbourne - I had been back from the Worldcon trip less than a week and already I was heading for another plane. OK, so I'm a lunatic, but I'm cute with it. Besides, it was going to be a good weekend. I was going to see a bunch of guys fight for the right to rule Australia.

Yes, it was SCA time again and, as one friend recently put it, we were off to roll around in the mud and hit each other with wooden sticks. This was to be a Coronet Revel.

For those of you who don't know, the SCA is organised on feudal lines. This means that groups need rulers, and what more authentic way to choose them than by combat? Australia, not having enough members to qualify as a full kingdom, has only a Prince and Princess, but there is no less keenness in the contest because of it. The tourneys are always hard fought.

Now before any of you get on feminist soapboxes and complain about men fighting for a crown and women getting one by association, I should point out that ladies are perfectly entitled to enter the lists themselves and become Princess by force of arms. Should they do so, their male consort becomes Prince. As it turned out, the new Princess took the field herself. She didn't win, but she could have done. Her consort won anyway, so it was academic.

(Having said that, there were a couple of lesbians at the revel muttering darkly about this male-female thing.)

In practice, however, it is usually the man who wins. Tourneys, I have noticed, seem to favour big, bulky fighters. A smart, nimble guy has most of his advantages negated by his armour. Given that the qualities required to become Prince are not exactly administrative, this leads to some interesting pairings. Being Prince and Princess is a bit like being co-chairs of a Worldcon, and involves a lot more travel, especially in Australia where the subjects you have to visit are so widely spread. Those couples who have tried it have often broken apart under the strain. A common occurrence, therefore, is for a good fighter to find himself a smart, organised and diplomatic lady who can do all the hard work for him once the title is won. The system seems to work, and I'm available for consideration once the Worldcon is over (who said I'm not diplomatic?).

But enough of this digression, I haven't set the scene yet. Where was I? Ah yes, Tullamarine, and southward bound.

South, from Melbourne? Yes, I was off to Tasmania. This was possibly the main reason I set myself such a punishing schedule. I'm determined to visit as many Australian states as I can now, just in case I can't get my visa renewed. Tasmania had not been ticked off, so I had to go. It wasn't long before I was having second thoughts.

Look guys, I had only recently come back from Southern California where the temperature was almost high enough to melt the sidewalk. Even London was not cold. But Tasmania was. When I arrived, it was dull, dismal, damp, and thoroughly depressing. Then, on the way to the revel site, something totally awful happened. It snowed.

This wasn't fair. I came to Australia to escape that sort of thing. But Tasmania is often quoted as being Australia's Scotland and it shows. It has splendid mountains: a stunning, pine-covered, lake-dotted landscape. There are tiny harbours chock full of fishing fleets. Hobart even has a whisky distillery. And it has snow.

The revel site was a sports club in Bellerive. Cricket fans will remember that as being where the Hobart test ground is located, the one that Dickie Bird, an expert on such desolate places as the Yorkshire Moors, said was the coldest cricket ground he had ever umpired at. Fortunately we were not camping. There were shared cabins on the site. Rough, but they served. I wore thermal undies, tights and leggings under my velvet dress the whole weekend. Had a kind lady not lent me a spare cloak, I think I would have died of hypothermia. Well I did admit to being crazy.

As it happened, the weather improved gradually through the weekend so that by the time the tourney came round it was almost pleasant. Thanks to the hole in the ozone layer, even in that thin, watery sunlight, people were plastering sun screen on exposed faces and arms. And it was a splendid weekend. The food was excellent (and in vast quantity as usual, including two roast swans), the hosts were friendly and congenial, those of us who were not as jet-lagged as me partied late into the night. Come Sunday night, no one much wanted to go home.

For me, one of the best parts of the weekend was not directly associated with the revel. Hobart has a famous craft market called Salamanca, and on Sunday morning we organised an expedition. Many of us went in costume, much to the delight of the shoppers. I chickened out only because I was carefully husbanding my one warm gown - I did not wish to become authentically mediaevally smelly. Fortunately this in no way impaired my enjoyment. I spent lots.

All in all, I'd say Hobart was a lovely place. The people seemed much more open and friendly than Melbourne, the scenery was great, and I was deeply disappointed that I didn't get a chance to sample the local seafood which looked wonderful. I'd choose a slightly warmer part of the year to go back, but I'd love to go. Robin Johnson is talking about Thylacon II for 1998. Let's go for it.

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## Culture clash

*"Far out amongst the heaving grey waves, beneath the drifting banks of mist, the great slow bodies of some of the sea's larger inhabitants humped and slid. Jets of vapour issued from the animals' breathing holes in exhaled blasts that rose like ghostly, insubstantial geysers amongst the flock of birds accompanying the school, causing them to climb and wheel and scream, side-slipping and fluttering in the cool air. High above, slipping in and out of pink-rubbed layers of cloud like small slow clouds themselves, other creatures moved, dirigibles and kites cruising the upper atmosphere with wings and canopies extended, warming in the watery light of a new day."*

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Iain M. Banks in full flow, and splendid stuff it is too. It is hardly surprising that, under the cunning pseudonym of Iain Banks, he has managed to make a name for himself as a mainstream writer. But this is a science fiction fanzine, and it is his SF work that I enjoy most. So that is what you get reviewed.

People have been nagging Banks to write another Culture novel for some time. Eventually he gave in and did one. It is called *Excession*, and it looks like he decided that, as this was being forced upon him, he would at least have a bit of fun whilst he did it. Oh, it is still a beautifully written book, but if you are expecting something serious and intellectual, forget it.

Let's start with the characters. The leading man, Byr Genar-Hofoen, is laid back, laconic and massively addicted to sex and all forms of substance abuse. In many ways, he reminds you of a certain Mr. I. M. Banks. The leading lady, Ulver Seich, is pure wet dream: ferociously intelligent, fabulously gorgeous and a complete and unrepentant nymphomaniac. You begin to get the idea?

And then there are the Minds, that wonderful collection of Culture spacecraft with interesting names such as *Shoot Them Later, Not Invented Here, The Anticipation of a New Lover's Arrival*, and *Fate Amenable to Change*. These are the major players in the game. After all, they are a billion times smarter than the average human. They just happen to need the stupid fleshy things to go do stuff for them occasionally, especially in the line of work carried out by Contact section, or it's clandestine offshoot, Special Circumstances.

Finally we have the Affront. They were not originally called the Affront - they started out being called after their home world of Issorile. The Padressahl used the word to describe them in complaining about their diplomatic mission being eaten, and the Issorillians liked it so much they adopted it. The Affront are large, beaked and tentacled beings which float around on gas sacs (or in space craft) hunting, tormenting and killing lesser lifeforms (i.e. everyone) and having a whale of a time doing it. They are the black sheep of the galaxy. Many races and Minds think it is time they were taught a lesson.

Into this melange of biology and technology comes the Excession.

It is a Contact word, Excession, and is intended to imply something which is so excessively awesome that something serious might have to be done. Normally it is applied to an Outside Context Problem (a Contact term meaning new contact with a powerful alien race). In this particular case, the object in question is a ship, or star, or planetary body, apparently more aged than the universe itself, that sits casually amongst the energy grids of space-time like a crouched tiger: waiting, watching, ready at the slightest excuse to spring off in any of the four dimensions, and possibly a few others that only astrophysicists care about. It is the sort of thing that makes the mighty Minds that are the Culture starships send messages to each other that just say "*Gulp!*".

The trouble is that much of the Culture has grown fat and lazy. Since the Iridian war, most beings, Minds included, have longed for distractions of a less urgent, or at least less potentially catastrophic, nature. Warships have been demobilised, and many of the finest Minds have left Culture service altogether to pursue their own eccentric hobbies. The text I quoted above was describing, not a planet, but a scene inside one of the cargo holds of *Sleeper Service*, an eccentric Mind best known for his habit of creating works of art, primarily mass battle scenes, from the bodies of its cryogenically preserved customers. It is a scene from the recreated world that *Sleeper Service* has built for a very special woman, 40 years pregnant, whom it has taken under its multi-kilometre-long wings. This is not, it would seem, the sort of society that would stand much of a chance against a powerful invader, or even stand up to the Affront.

So there we have it. The Excession, the Affront, a bunch of eccentric Minds, and a small group of humans with more personal problems than any single group of beings has a right to possess. Will Banks do a Mary Gentle and destroy the Culture so that he never has to write about it again? Will the Affront get to the Excession first and conquer the galaxy? To find out, dear friends, you must read the book. It is not Banks' best work, but even his worst stands head and shoulders above the mediocre crowd of tie-in and trilogy writers. Enjoy.

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## Reflections on Australia - Racism

One of the things I noticed on my arrival in Australia was the degree of racial tolerance was perhaps not quite what it could be. On mentioning this to Australian friends I found them to be deeply offended. "We have the most multi-cultural society in the world", they would say, "look at all the Greeks, Italians, Germans, Croats and Spaniards you can see". Well maybe, but actually the US is at least as multi-cultural and better integrated. And besides, do you notice something in common with all the above? Spot on, they are all white. Asians and Aboriginals are another matter entirely.

I sometimes think that Australia would have ended up with some sort of apartheid system had they not shot so many of the Aboriginals in times past that it was hardly necessary. Since then other interesting methods have been tried to deal with the "problem". The most barbaric was the "Australianisation" programme, in which Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their parents at a young age and fostered with white families so that they could be brought up in a civilised manner. Thankfully this cruel practice has now ceased, but there are still some Australians, including the current minister for Aboriginal affairs, who seem to think it was a good idea.

These days most Aboriginals live far from the major cities, trying their best to preserve the shattered remnants of their culture and find a place for it in the modern world. Sadly, most of their attempts to do so seem to necessarily involve prostituting it to materialism: art galleries, dance troupes and folk music bands. Inevitably the end result is corrupted traditions and exploitation. It also leads the rest of Australia to see Aboriginals as a commercial product, just like koalas. And even as that they are not always accepted. In the discussions that followed the appalling Olympic closing ceremonies, I was stunned to hear one of my friends say of the Aboriginal dancers, "what right to **they** have to represent Australia".

These days the Aboriginal question seems to revolve largely around land rights. Having forced the Aboriginals out into the marginal areas of the continent, the whites were a little perturbed to discover that they'd left them sat right on top of a lot of juicy uranium deposits and such like. Given that most Australians seem to see Aboriginals as drunken, good-for-nothing layabouts, they rather resent all this sudden inherited wealth. Must introduce them to some of the British nobility sometime.

The current political hot potato, however, has little to do with Aboriginals. Immigration is the question on everyone's lips. Now bear in mind at this point that Australia has a land mass similar to the USA (excluding Alaska) and a population similar to that of Los Angeles. Would you believe that this is a country in which 71% of the population believe they are being swamped by immigrants? OK, so much of the land is uninhabitable, but Melbourne covers a land area similar that of Greater London, has a population a quarter of the size, and its immigrant population is, in comparison, trivial.

It is, of course, the usual problem of economic difficulties leading to a search for a scapegoat. Asian settlers are being blamed for everything from unemployment to foreign debt, and probably to the test match we just lost against India as well. This is, of course, economic nonsense. If your economy is in trouble, one of the best ways out of it is to recruit a whole host of eager, hard-working people to help your grow it. The immigration policy is already stupid. People with good skills and a promise of a job are turned away because that job is being

“taken from a native Australian”, whilst people who have no skills and no chance of a job are admitted because their family has said it will support them. Clamping down further is not going to get Australians back to work because the problem is structural - the same disappearance of blue collar work that is seen all over the Western world. It might avoid a further rise in health and social security costs, but that is all.

The trouble is that, other than a few broadsides in the media, this nonsense is hardly being challenged. In particular, the Prime Minister has refused to condemn the leading racist MP on the grounds that she is an independent, not one of his party. He was quick enough to expel her from the party when the election was on, but perhaps her subsequent victory at the polls changed his mind. Certainly the noises John Howard is making are disturbingly similar to those made by John Major when asked to condemn the Euro-sceptics. As all watchers of UK politics will know, that is the noise of a Prime Minister afraid to condemn outlandish and idiotic statements because he knows they have widespread support within his own party.

Of course, as my Australian readers will point out, this country has no equivalent of the National Front or Ku Klux Klan (\*), it has nothing like the riots in Tottenham or Los Angeles. But the reason it doesn't have them is not because Australians are more tolerant than the British or Americans, it is because the economic problems and level of immigration are not bad enough to give rise to such things. The attitudes that fuel racial violence are all there. Australia has been very open in the past, but what is happening here now is ugly. Racist politicians are openly active and seem to have widespread support. Hong Kong newspapers are reporting Asians being spat on in Australian streets. Last week a man walked into a school yard in Cairns, poured petrol over a 6-year-old black boy, and set him alight. There is a problem growing here, and Australia would do well to recognise it before it is too late.

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(\*) This is not a proper footnote because last time I had to re-do them all for the text version and the HTML version. Ho hum.

Anyway, the point of this not footnote is that the day after I wrote the above I got a leaflet in my mail box. It was from something called the National Republican Movement, and it advocated, amongst other things, and end to all immigration, massive import tariffs to stop all foreign trade, substantial increases in defence spending and the arming of all adult Australians. It also spoke to maintaining the purity of Australia's European heritage, and then listed Serbs, Croats, Greeks and Macedonians as examples of undesirable aliens. Heard all this before? It didn't quite get round to annexing New Zealand, but I'm sure they'll think of that soon. The really weird thing about it, though, was that they claimed to be supporters of the Anti Nazi League of Australia.

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## On the Throne

OK, that was rude (though those of you not steeped in British humour will probably not understand). Heck, Larry Niven is a nice guy, and he has produced some great books. He has even managed to coax Jerry Pournelle into writing readable stuff. But this? Well, really.

Look, *Ringworld* was a fascinating idea and was, for its time, an excellent, ground-breaking book. *Ringworld Engineers* was, in the opinion of most fans I know, unfortunate, and unnecessary. *Ringworld Throne* is starting to turn a once famous novel into as big a mockery as was made of *Dune* by its appalling sequels.

Half of the problem is that the Ringworld itself does not lend itself to a Niven sequel. Much of the joy of the original book came from the startling concept and sheer joy that Niven took in making it all work. *Engineers*, so it seemed, was written largely to plug the holes that nit-picking fans had gnawed in the impressive edifice. From the SF point of view, there was nothing left to say. But there had to be a story and that had to come from the Ringworld and its inhabitants. Sadly, Larry has chosen to populate the place with a poorly constructed collection of fantasy races: giants, ghouls and vampires. Of *Ringworld*, *The Observer* said "one is impressed most by Mr. Niven's universe and the way he exploits vast spaces, dizzying mathematics, and huge units of time and matter". There is little of that in *Throne*, though the bits where it does creep in are the only ones worth reading. One is most certainly not impressed by the Ringworld population or the excesses of Known Space's history. Mention Pak breeders or Protectors to me and my mind turns off immediately.

But what else was there to talk about? We know that people on Ringworld can become Protectors, we know that Protectors fight each other to the death. So there's a story. So what? Yawn.

Of course you might not have known that. It had certainly become a little fuzzy in my memory. It must be 10 years since I read *Engineers*, and almost 20 since *Ringworld*. Both books are somewhere in London and there's no way I could remember all the detail. As a result, much of what happened in *Throne* may have passed me by. It should be a maxim of all sequel writers, especially when they do them so far apart, that you do not have to know the earlier books off by heart to enjoy the later ones. This was not the case with *Throne*.

I guess you shouldn't blame the author entirely. Larry has probably done exactly what his publishers asked for, though I wonder whether he really needs the money. And I guess many fans have been after him to write a third book for years as well. Sometimes, I think, it is better to leave well alone.

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## **Emerald City on the Web**

Those of you who are inveterate web browsers may have noticed that the LA.con III web page (<http://lacon3.worldcon.org/home.html>) is still up and is now featuring a collection of comments and reviews about the con. Chief arachnid, Chaz Baden, asked me if I would be willing to have *Emerald City* #13 added to his collection. I was a bit reluctant as portions of it are rather personal, but Kevin said he didn't mind and I was itching to try an HTML version so I decided to go for it.

The result is probably not what a web version of the 'zine will finally look like. It is the first major HTML document I've composed, I've not got the best tools, and I have a lot to learn about formatting tricks. However, it doesn't look that bad. I'd be grateful if those of you with the ability to do so could have a quick peek and let me know what you think, especially if you have web design skills and can tell me how to make it better.

At this point I would imagine that some of you who do not have web access are starting to wonder whether you are about to be cut off the circulation list because I'm moving to a new publication method. That certainly will not happen. I would like the 'zine to be on the web, and I'm currently investigating options for getting it there cheaply, but my distribution methods are exclusive enough as it is and I do not want to make things worse.

I am, however, interested in HTML as a distribution medium. Being a text mark-up language, it is entirely ASCII and can therefore be sent through the Internet with no encoding problems. It is, of course, fairly unreadable in its raw form, but HTML browsers are available for most platforms and in most cases can be obtained for free. If I could distribute in HTML, this would enable me to give you all something which was much better formatted (and therefore more readable). It would also mean that, rather than Word, ASCII and HTML versions, I would only need the HTML. Given the amount of effort involved in re-formatting for different platforms, this has a lot of attractions.

So you can see what is coming. How many of you out there do not have an HTML browser? How many of you did not know that you didn't need to be on line to use one? Is there any chance of a consensus here? (And yes, you can get browsers that work in DOS on a 286.) Let me know, please.

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## **Rescue mission**

As most Australian readers will know, the Melbourne Science Fiction Club has been going through the doldrums recently. Membership has been declining rapidly, and nothing ever seems to happen at meetings. Even when people do try to organise something, no one ever wants to participate. This is not healthy. With a Worldcon coming up, we need a bright, busy, active fandom in Melbourne. Sure we have a number of very active specialist clubs. Enterprise, a Star Trek club, and the Costumers' Guild are good examples. But a Worldcon needs everyone working together, and that needs a generalist club to form a neutral meeting ground. The Worldcon is in bad enough shape as it is, without there not being anyone here to run it. Something, as they say, needs to be done.

Now you know me, never one to go for an easy option. When I noticed that the club had a Mexican food evening coming up, I decided to show them to what ridiculous lengths one can go in order to raise money. I organised a sponsored green chili eating competition.

Yes, seriously, raw green chilies. See how many you can eat. Person who eats most wins. Sponsorship by number of chilies eaten. It is an old Mexican tradition, believe me.

We had a lot of interesting Mexican food as well. Different types of chili (the dish, not the vegetable), authentically made; a salsa tasting. You get the idea. And it worked. For the first time in ages, people seemed to really enjoy themselves. I can't claim all the credit for this: Karen Pender-Gunn and Sharon Tapner did sterling work in the kitchen, and I didn't make a fool of myself alone. The point is, we proved it can be done. Congratulations are due to Justin Semmel who ate the most chilies and won himself a free membership to Basicon 2 and a free pre-support for the San Francisco in 2002 Worldcon bid.

You can tell the sort of problem that the club has by looking at what various committee members did that night. Sharon and Justin (Treasurer and Activator) both worked hard. Alan Stewart, the Secretary (and, incidentally, the Worldcon chair), refused to sponsor me, even at 1c per chili. Apollo Zammit, the President, was supposed to be in the competition and provide one of the dishes. He didn't even turn up. With commitment like that, it is hardly surprising the club is in a mess.

So where now? At the last meeting we elected a new committee. For once this wasn't a matter of press-ganging people on the night, but a fairly well organised slate most of whom share a common vision for the club's future. This includes, not only reaching out to all other clubs in Melbourne, but also setting up relationships with clubs around Australia and overseas. Fandom is a wonderful family once you get into it, and Australia has been isolationist for too long. A full manifesto should be forthcoming in the December issue of the club magazine, Ethel the Aardvark. In the meantime, watch out for action.

Oh, it won't be easy. I know that. In the past week or so, most of us have been assailed by well-meaning Jonahs who are convinced that nothing will ever work because nothing ever has in the past. But the Mexican night did work. Besides, we have something to work towards. None of us can guarantee success, but we wouldn't have offered to do the job if we didn't think we had a chance, and didn't believe that Melbourne fandom desperately needs an injection of enthusiasm. Here's hoping.

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## Footnote

Well, that's it for another month. Now I can start work on the MSFC web page, and ANZAPA contribution and the column Ian Gunn wants for Ethel. Might be a good idea to finish my new gown before the next revel too. No rest for the wicked, huh?

Darn, almost forgot to mention Mr. Frost. Happy now, Terry?

Thought for the day:

It's not always true  
That time heals all wounds.  
There are some wounds that you don't want to heal;  
The memories of something really good,  
Something truly real,  
That you'll never find again.

*Philip Oakey*

Ciao,

Cheryl