

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

I think, guys, that this might be a short one. We are more than half way through November already, and I haven't started writing anything. Heck, I've only read two books. I'm not going to accept quite all of the blame here. The first one I rather struggled through, and the second was a collection of short stories. I'm not a great fan of short form fiction. It can be very beautifully constructed, but that means it requires an awful lot of attention when reading it. And then it is over. It takes me at least twice as long to read a book of short stories as I take to read a novel, purely because it lacks the momentum. I'm thinking back now to the way that *Metal Fatigue* grabbed me by the imagination and propelled me forward through it at such a pace I found myself reading it whilst cooking. Short story collections just don't do that for me.

But enough of the excuses. This issue is, in many ways, harking back to last Easter and Swancon. Why? Because the people are the same: Jack Dann and Neil Gaiman. Neil is actually only here in spirit, but that is not entirely inappropriate. I have a copy of Storm's latest novel, *Stalking Tender Prey*, around here somewhere, and it would be fitting if I could race through that as well before publication, but it is a portly tome and life is kind of busy right now. I'll see what I can do.

Meantime, let us wind back the clock....

Memory Lapse

To Renaissance Italy. Florence, the almost fiefdom of Lorenzo de Medici, and home of some of the finest artists the world has ever known.

When I met Jack Dann in Perth he was full of this book. Historical fiction was a new departure for him, and he was clearly very excited by the idea. There was no doubt that it was a book he had enjoyed writing. Now I happen to love history, and the book was set in a period I knew very little about. It also had a fascinating premise: what if Leonardo da Vinci actually got the chance to build some of those amazing machines he invented? Justin Ackroyd happened to be conveniently on hand in Perth, and I ordered a copy forthwith.

Some months later, when Justin had finally managed to track down Jack and get the books signed, a copy of *The Memory Cathedral* joined the masses of the great unread on my living

room floor. It sat there for a while, like one of Leonardo's commissions, waiting patiently for my over-active mind to find time for it. Worldcons and things got in the way a little, but I have finally got my act together. And I must say that I was deeply disappointed.

Stay with me here, dear reader, because you are about to witness a phenomenon which I hope is rare and unusual - the sight of Cheryl being a complete and utter hypocrite. It isn't something I'm proud of, but it happened all the same. The ugly detail follows shortly, but first, the good bits.

Probably the thing that Jack Dann does best is descriptive stuff. He particularly relishes the grime and squalor of a mediaeval city. Here he is setting the scene for a torchlight parade through the city streets:

Huge shadows leaped and crawled up the jagged surfaces of building walls and broidered doors and overhanging arches to the coffered roofs as if they were spirits and demons from the dark realms made manifest. A myriad of smells delicious and noxious permeated the air: Roasting meats, honeysuckle, the odour of candle wax heavy as if with childhood memories, offal and piss, cattle and horses, the tang of wine and cider, and everywhere sweat and the sour, ripe scent of perfumes applied to unclean bodies.

Juicy stuff, isn't it. And there were purple patches like that scattered throughout the book like flavoursome truffles found hiding in the depths of an overcooked casserole. They were the good bits.

If there is one hard and fast rule that any writer of historical fiction should abide by, it is not to overdo it on the famous people. Now granted that is kind of hard in Medici Florence. There were a lot of people around at the time whose names are now legend. But even so, it can be overdone. In the first chapter we meet not only Leonardo, Lorenzo, and Lorenzo's brother, Guiliano, but also Sandro Botticelli, Benedetto Dei, Amerigo Vespucci and a whole host of other persons who I am sure would be known to me if only I read things like Italian poetry. OK, so perhaps Botticelli was a close friend of Leonardo's, but that does not excuse dragging Dei and Vespucci half way round the Middle East with them so that you have a few more Italians to write about. It does to excuse writing Christopher Columbus into a few chapters to no apparent benefit to the plot. And it most certainly does not excuse bending history to allow a young Niccolo Machiavelli to become Leonardo's apprentice.

It did, I will admit, give me more of a taste for the history of the period. I would like to know, for example, if Botticelli's Venus really was based on a woman called Simonetta Vespucci who was Lorenzo's mistress, if he really did use her as a model for almost all his paintings because he was madly in love with her, if she really did disguise herself as a man and produce well regarded paintings herself, and if she really did die of consumption at an early age. It sounded too good to be made up.

Another problem that Jack ran into is that he really doesn't have the plotting skills for the book he was trying to write. I know this, because I have seen it done by an expert. If anyone wants to read about the intrigue of mediaeval courts, and in particular in regions such as Islam and Ivan the Terrible's Russia, they can do no better than to seek out the works of Dorothy Dunnett. Her Lymond and Niccolo series are masterpieces of research and plotting.

The fact that she writes detective novels as well (under a pseudonym because a crime writer called Dunnnett would be a bit much to swallow) should suggest the level of deviousness that she brings to her work. Jack knows what he is supposed to do, and at times he almost pulls it off, but he needs a lot more practice yet.

But, and I did promise I would get to it in the end, the thing that really killed the book for me was the howlers. You may have heard me in the past sounding off about the killjoy nit-pickers who slag off science fiction novels on the grounds that the science in them was flawed. The sort of person, for example, who decried Ringworld as a failure because poor Larry had accidentally got the ring spinning in the wrong direction. These people irritate me something rotten. I might have a science degree, but my astrophysics is nowhere near good enough to spot errors like this. I'm happy to take the book as written.

History, however, is another matter entirely. This I do know a little about, and when I spot an anachronism it is not a mere pimple of an error, it is a huge great stone wall that rushes at me with frightening speed and knocks my suspension of disbelief for six. I would have forgiven Jack if I could have said that he was using modern terms in order not to confuse the reader, but in other places he has gone to some lengths to take on board the proper usage of terms such as brigand. If he has worked hard in some areas it looks even worse when he falls down in others.

You think I am being too harsh? Try out your own historical knowledge. For example, would Leonardo have used the term "centre of gravity"? Given that Newton hadn't been born, I suspect not. Or "armoured cars": granted Leonardo designed vehicles that looked just like what we would call armoured cars, but "armoured carriages" might have been a better choice. How about "tobacco"? Oh, it is true that the moslems did smoke hassish, but they called it hassish. With the young Vespucci and Columbus in the story, this was a particularly crass error. And as if to prove that being married to an Australian does not preclude US authors from the traps caused by a common language, the big, shaggy ox-like creature is a "bison", Jack, not a "buffalo".

See, quite shameless, am I not. There must be people out there who would not spot any of those (his editors for a start) and who would not have had their enjoyment of the book spoiled by them. Me, I'm just a nit-picker. Should have been born a baboon.

Before I close off and leave poor Jack alone, one final word of warning. The final third of the book is largely a description of military campaigns: troop movements, battle plans, carnage and blood. This has about as much interest for me as an SF novel by Jerry Pournelle or David Feintuch, i.e. none what so ever. At least it had the saving grace that I was able to speed read vast chunks of it and thereby get to the end quicker.

I can't help feeling that I am the wrong person to have reviewed this book. I like Jack, and it is quite clear that he has put a lot of effort into writing it. It is his misfortune that it happened to fall into the hands of someone temperamentally suited to savaging it. I'd be sorry if I caused other people to avoid it, because they may see it completely differently. Is there someone out there that liked it (other than Julian May, Morgan Llewellyn - who should have known better - and Brian Aldiss who raved about it on the cover blurb)? If so I'd like to hear from you.

The Memory Cathedral, Jack Dann, Bantam, hardcover.

The Anatomy of Dream

Bias warning: Neil Gaiman is a wonderful person. I've known him since before he was famous, I thoroughly enjoy his conversation, and I have the greatest respect for him as an artist. The book reviewed here, *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*, was not written by Neil, but the stories in it were commissioned by him, they are about characters created by him, and they were edited by him. I think it is a great book, but then I'm biased. Read it for yourselves and make up your own minds.

You will have noticed that I described Neil as an artist in the above paragraph. This is not because of any resemblance to a small pop star formerly known as a squiggly symbol and now as The Artist, though Neil is dark and had a fondness for black leather. It is because the art of writing comics involves far more than simply putting words down on a page. Neil is a great writer - *Sandman* is the only comic ever to win the World Fantasy Award for fiction. But in order to produce a comic you have to be able to work with a penciller, and you have to be aware of how your work will appear on a page.

OK, granted that there are lazy comic writers who just send in a vague description of the action with their dialogue. You can tell these guys, especially if they are working with a lazy penciller, because the posture and body language of the characters in the panels bears no relation to what they are supposed to be saying and doing. There are people like Frank Miller who write and draw their own work, and there are people like Alan Moore who obsessively detail every facet of every panel. If Moore wanted a panel of a tramp on a park bench, he would detail the trees and flowers in the background, the slump of the character's body, the stains on his coat, the way the ash drips from the cigarette in his fingers, the stubble on his chin; and he would ask that the man's gaze be directed rightwards towards the pretty female jogger in the next panel.

Neil is somewhere in between. He is not as obsessive as Alan, but he has a fairly clear idea of what he wants to see drawn, and he does create scripts which rely on the relationship between panels. To do this he has to have a firm idea of what is in the scene. Novel writers can get away without this. "Keep the action moving, and let the readers decide for themselves what the scene looks like", is a perfectly acceptable means of getting round a lack of descriptive skill. Some writers are good at scene setting, and I often wonder what sort of work people like Thomas Hardy would have produced had they been able to write comics instead of filling their books with endless, boring descriptive passage. But perhaps the most powerful result of a story being written for comics rather than books is that the readers have a clear idea of what the characters look like. You can visualise them just as clearly as if they had been on television. And everyone sees them the same.

At which juncture my rambling argument finally begins to get somewhere, because the point of the above was to explain why it is so easy for other writers to set their stories in the *Sandman* universe. TV and film tie-in novels by a range of authors work because the characters and setting are very familiar. But I submit that if you got 20 respected authors to write about Beowulf Schaeffer, F'lar, or Marc Remillard, you would discover that they were writing about 20 very different people. Not so with *Sandman*: the characters are familiar, and well enough defined to let others loose on them.

Which is what *Book of Dreams* does. Neil invited a selection of his favourite writers, some famous, so not so, to contribute short stories using the *Sandman* characters and universe. The list of household names includes Clive Barker (thankfully restricted to artwork), Tad Williams, Gene Wolfe, Barbara Hambly and Tori Amos, but all the stories are good, and they nearly all approach the subject in very different ways.

Barbara Hambly, for example, sets her entire story in The Dreaming, Morpheus's magical kingdom. She does an excellent job of handling the stock supporting cast of servants and hangers on: Lucien the Librarian, Matthew the Raven, and especially Cain and Abel, around whom the story revolves. Wolfe, on the other hand, tells only of a businessman dying of a heart attack brought on by being stuck in traffic. Dream and Death appear only incidentally when their roles call for it. Williams tells a chilling fairy tale about child abuse, whilst George Alec Effinger weaves a brilliant and often hilarious pastiche of Little Nemo in Slumberland.

I submit also that this wonderful collection of stories could not have been given life had Neil not created such a rich and varied tapestry into which to weave them.

Of course part of the brilliance of *Sandman* is that Neil chose exactly the right themes for horror stories. "*In his palace at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming*". Thus wrote H.P. Lovecraft, one of the founders of horror fiction (and Steven Brust chides his paradox in a delightful folk tale in *Book of Dreams*). We find Lovecraft's work laughable today, largely because his own obsessions with fish, slime and tentacles so coloured what he thought we would find horrible. But he was on the right track. The staple ingredients of horror are dreams and death, Dream and Death: the two principal characters in Neil's work.

Lovecraft even tried to create his own dream world, recognising that the fantastical is so much more believable in dreams. Again, it didn't really work. And what he did wrong was to focus on the externals: the blood, the screams, the bizarre monsters who eat people alive. This is not the stuff of true horror, they are the funny bits. Lovecraft's chief protagonists were abhorrent beings from distant stars. Neil's are much closer to home: Dream, Death, Destiny, Desire, Delerium, Despair and Destruction. Those things are really scary.

But I want to leave the last word about Sandman to Will Shetterley. In his story, *Splatter*, he tells of a visit by a horror writer, Peter Confry, to a convention. In this conversation between Confry and a fan, Shetterley gives the essence of why *Sandman* stories hit home so well:

"[Joseph] Conrad looked from the outside and saw.." Hunter grinned. 'The horror! The horror!' But you look from the inside and see ... Beauty. Love. Power. The attempt to remake the universe as it should be, even when we don't know what it should be. The courage to act without regard for anyone's opinion."

Confry, still grinning, shook his head. "I try to show the effects on the little people ..."

"Exactly, the little people. They suffer."

Even when the subjects of his stories are famous people such as William Shakespeare or Augustus Caesar, Neil manages to make them small and human. One of us. We feel for them.

The Sandman: Book of Dreams, Ed. Neil Gaiman & Ed Kramer, Harper Prism, hardcover

Stalking Middle England

Well, I haven't got very far into Storm's book. I claim the 650 page length as my paltry excuse, but in reality it is more because the party season has already started and there is a Test Match on. But, given the synchronicity, which I am sure Storm would enjoy, I figured I ought to give it space. A final report will appear next issue.

I have only read one of Storm's books before. The reviews of the Wraeththu novels, most of which suggested that they were a sort of soft porn for mentally disturbed teenage Goths, did not really appeal to me. Hermetech, on the other hand, was different. It was SF, of a sort, and it showed off Storm's knowledge of occult traditions. I enjoyed it, and wish she'd write more like that. But I guess the Goth stuff is where her market is, and it may be where her heart is too.

Stalking Tender Prey is not a Wraeththu novel, but it is horror, and given that it concerns tall, pale-faced individuals who dress in black, it is most certainly Goth. It is also different. Once again, Storm has read widely (and probably spent a fortune in *The Atlantis Bookshop* along the way). Personally I can't resist a novel that lists amongst its bibliography John Milton, Lord Byron, a commentary on The Book of Enoch, several modern occultists and the music of the rock band, The Fields of the Nefilim. But the thing that is really different is not the subject matter, but the setting.

Storm says in her introduction that she has always wanted to write a novel with a present day setting rather than a fantasy one. I wish she had done it before, because her caricatures of life in a small village in middle England are wonderfully pointed and exact. The book will probably be very strange to someone who has not lived in England, but anyone who has had the misfortune to experience that world in which Hyacinth Bucket is regarded as a misunderstood heroine will get many of chuckle out of the text.

Of course this does tend to make the book take on a rather Lovecraftian air. Shadows of Insmouth loom close as Storm describes her small village setting, the inbred locals, and the strange people whose appearance is Not Quite Human. You start playing the game of "Guess which Innocent Bystander is going to get Eaten by the Tentacled Monster". Although so far, I am pleased to say, most of the characters are not quite as innocent as they might seem.

So far I'm about a third of the way into the book and things are starting to pick up momentum. I was going to make a complaint about Storm's portrayal of villainy because for most of that time her bad guys had seemed childish, pleasure-obsessed and selfish compared to the noble villainy of other fallen angels such as Marc Remillard or innumerable fictional representations of Lucifer, but I have just come to the part where she finally remembers that the greatest of the Deadly Sins is not Lust or Gluttony but Pride.

And that is as far as I've got. More next issue. In the meantime, Storm, love the cat character, but Ishtar isn't going to like this. I'd apologise to Her if I were you.

Stalking Tender Prey, Storm Constantine, Signet, softcover

Reflections on Australia - more fanzines

By now most of you will probably have heard that the fan guest of honour at Aussiecon Three will be Bruce Gillespie. Many of you will have cheered and be looking forward to meeting him. The rest of you probably said “‘Bruce’?, c’mon, it must be a joke”. Take it from this Sheila, the former group are the ones who are right.

In theory, Bruce publishes two fanzines: *SF Commentary* and *Metaphysical Review*. I say in theory because they are somewhat few and far between. The last *Metaphysical Review* was dated December 1995, whilst *SF Commentary* has not been seen since October 1993. Neither is officially folded, they just have a (very) irregular production schedule. In the case of most fanzines I would class this as a major failing, but with Bruce it is easy to see why it happens. He’s crazy.

To start with, they are huge. The two previous issues mentioned above amounted to 100 pages and 120 pages respectively. The ‘zines are A4 format, have fairly small type, are beautifully typeset and lavishly illustrated, and are perfect bound with card covers. They must take weeks to produce and cost a fortune to print and post.

This, of course, would mean nothing if the content was poor. It is anything but. Bruce does not do a lot of writing himself, though when he does it is very fine. However, he solicits contributions from a range of fine writers both within Australia and outside. Doubtless there is the occasional duff contribution, but there is such a profuse quantity of material in each issue that you would hardly notice.

In many ways it is a shame that Bruce is such a perfectionist. I would love to see his work appear on a regular, if somewhat smaller, basis. *Metaphysical Review* is more of a perzine and thus probably expendable, but *SF Commentary* is a fine SF magazine that would provide a superb focal point for Australian fandom were it published regularly. It would also be prime Hugo material.

Of course fanzine production is an intensely personal process, so I have no intention of attempting to persuade Bruce to get more issues out. But it might be a very good idea for the Aussiecon Three committee to solicit a series of articles from him for their progress reports.

Danny Heap is a lunatic of the nicest possible sort. In announcing that they are making a special guest, the Swancon 22 committee said of him: “*if, tomorrow, Danny was declared the Greatest Person on Earth, this would come as no surprise to many*”. Boy, he hated that. But he is the subject of massive adulation in Perth, and this is because he is so deliciously crazy.

Danny does not produce fanzines often, but when he does they are of manic intensity. The last one appeared many months ago and I am still waiting on the edge of my seat to hear the resolution of his encounter with UK customs officials on the way to Intersection. Sadly, I think that the concept of regular production schedules is alien to Danny’s eccentric thought patterns, but I do know that something is in the offing.

For several weeks now Terry Frost has been talking about a joint project with Danny entitled *Fans Behaving Badly*. This will either be a brilliantly manic exercise in insulting everything in

the world that deserves insulting, or a heap of appallingly childish macho-male nonsense. Probably both. I'm looking forward to it.

Resistance in Unnecessary

OK, I admit it, I wrote that title before going to see the premiere of the new Star Trek film, *First Contact*. The rumours that had been going round fandom about the awfulness of the plot were quite sufficient for me to decide beforehand that it was going to be intellectually disappointing. But then it has been a long time since anything coming out of the Trek industry has had any claim to great quality. There were a few good tear jerkers towards the end of *Next Generation*, and there is one *DS9* episode that I remember with fondness. *Voyager*, as we all know, is unremittingly awful: the ultimate expression of studio formula writing. And yet, for all its faults, I enjoyed watching *Generations*. This was not, as you might suspect, for the satisfaction of finally seeing Kirk die (because I knew that, just like Superman, he would be back again somehow), but for that one wonderful scene when the emotion chip allows Data to celebrate the destruction of the attacking Klingon warship. Trek is nonsense, but it is highly engaging nonsense when done well.

We have known for ages that the subject of *First Contact* would be the Borg. They are the only villains with any character in the Trek universe (Cardassians and Romulans being simply different species of bad guy humanoids out of the same mould as the original Klingons). I do, of course, sympathise entirely with Dr. Who fans when they point out that the Borg are simply updated Cybermen. Dr. Who might have had some of the worst sets in television history, and some of the most appallingly spineless female "assistants", but right from the invention of the Daleks it has always had interesting aliens. Nevertheless, I am happy to see Trek take the concept and run with it. They do, after all, have pots of money to spend on special effects, and the time in a movie to explore the concept. I was interested to see what they made of the challenge.

In fact it was not much. The same stuff about trying to make the Borg more human, which only detracts from their essential difference. But then when do you remember Trek treating any issue with depth.

So what did I make of it? The plot has holes you could drive a General Systems Vehicle through, and some of the direction I thought was poor - too many shots where a close-up of one person sent the others out of focus, and some very poorly choreographed stunts. It also had the classic "new bridge officer you know is going to die" thing, which you would have thought they would have grown out of by now. But it did have some great scale shots, and some OK jokes. It also had grit which, as Terry pointed out, was probably a B5 influence. For once, despite the idiocy of its design, the Enterprise looked like a warship with genuine military on board.

The one bit that went down really well here was when Picard opened the view port to look down on Earth and there was Australia looking back up. Did they shoot that scene differently for release in different countries, I wonder? Or here is another explanation. Bill Clinton was

out here recently to pat us on the head and check out the holiday qualifications of Queensland (film of this will be used in ads on US TV shortly). Rumour has it that he had a copy of the film sent out to him specially so he could see it before the scummy public. Perhaps this was just Paramount saying "Hi Bill, how's the holiday?"

Of course Australia wasn't the only country to be premiering the film. California got it 6 days earlier, and BASFA organised their own outing. I asked Kevin to give me his impressions, expecting him to don his Dr. Who fan hat and talk about Cybermen. Instead I discovered that he knows far more about Trek history than me. I have this awful feeling that I spent an entire year dating a media fan without knowing it. Will I ever be allowed to attend Nova Mob again, I wonder?

Ah well, take it away, Mr. Standlee. This review edited for American spellings.

The first challenge was getting a ticket. Our man from BASFA, Craige Howlett, volunteered to buy the fifteen tickets for our group because he works near the large theatre complex in Mountain View. He was third in line when they opened for advance sales. The first person bought one thousand tickets. The second one bought six hundred tickets. (A lot of area businesses, including Silicon Graphics, whose headquarters campus surrounds the theatre, were giving tickets to their employees and thus buying out the entire theatre.)

On the BASFA moving outing scale, we ranked it a "worth full price more than once." But try to see it in a decent sized theatre with the DTS sound. All of the seats in the DTS-equipped screens had been sold by the time Craige got to buy his fifteen tickets ("piker," sniffed the ticket-seller who had just generated 1,600 tickets for the previous two customers), so we were in a tiny theatre with only "regular" Dolby, and I think the movie suffered because of it.

Notice they aren't numbering the films any more. Maybe they realised that people had figured out that only the even-numbered ST films have anything going for them. But if you like *Next Generation*, you'll probably like *First Contact*. The Borg are back, and have decided to go back in time to the mid-21st century to stop Zephram Cochrane from making the first warp-drive test flight and thus altering history sufficiently so that the Borg can conquer Earth centuries later.

(But wait a minute; I thought Zephram Cochrane was from Alpha Centauri, wasn't he? And this guy they've got playing him looks nothing like the Cochrane we met in *The Original Series*. So much for internal consistency, again.)

(Remember that in *TOS*, World War III ("The Eugenics Wars") should be happening right about now? In *First Contact*, WWII has been postponed another sixty years (whew!) to the middle of the 21st century.)

The problem with the movies is that to give a sufficiently large conclusion, you end up needing a story where you destroy the ship. As Picard says after starting the auto-destruct sequence on Enterprise 1701-E when asked if they'll build another one, he said, "there's plenty of other letters left in the alphabet."

One other thing: time travel stories are like strong spices; use them too much and you ruin your taste for them. I find it funny that there was a *DS9* episode (*Trials and Tribble-ations*) just a couple weeks ago here that had the *DS9* people going back in time to station K-7 and getting involved in the events in *The Original Series* episode. The temporal investigators who come to quiz the *DS9* team about it afterwards say "not another predestination paradox! I hate those." And the events of *First Contact* seem to have "predestination paradox" written all over them, with the crew of the Enterprise getting intimately involved in the affairs of 21st century Earth. But as I said at the front, it's an entertaining movie, and I counted my US\$7.50 well spent. We'll probably try to go see it again in a couple weeks -- this time in a bigger theatre.

Footnote

Ah well, so much for it being a short issue, huh? Funny the way these things fall together.

This issue should get to Internet subscribers via the new mailing list that Kevin and Michael have kindly set up for me. Details of how to do things using the list (like escape from it) should have been included in a message you received when I signed you up, but I think I may do a Langford and include a Geek's Corner at the bottom of each issue.

Not much else to report. **Aussiecon Three** held a well concealed public meeting for people interested in getting involved. It was largely depressing, except for the point where Dick Smith, attending by telephone from the US, described me as a notorious media fan. I only wish he had been there to see people's faces. I'm not going to say anything more about this now, as there is still a chance that some sort of sensible compromise will be reached. But I would be very grateful if the idiots who are spreading rumours around the US that I am attempting to sabotage the convention would grow up and do something useful with their lives.

Next issue, Sherri Tepper, Jane Routley and William Gibson, or alternatively a detailed report of all the parties I have been to since you last heard from me.

Live Long and Prosper.

Ciao,

Cheryl