

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Well, here I am again. The US Air lounge at LAX, thanks to the awful connections that QANTAS offer on their services to San Francisco, is somewhere where I have spent rather a lot of my life. It is educational, I suppose, listening to the Anglenos talking about their therapists in very loud voices. It isn't necessary, because I could just grab a ticket on Southwest and catch the next shuttle. But that will cost me, and I forfeit the frequent flier points. So here I am again. This time, however, it is different. This time I can't go home, because I don't have a home.

But I am getting ahead of myself. There is a very busy week between the last issue and now.

A quick interjection here. Whilst I often try to write *Emerald City* as a continuous narrative, clearly it is hardly ever so. In this case I am stopping the flow for an important announcement. On getting back from Westercon I received a message from my dear friend, Ian Gunn, announcing that he has been diagnosed as suffering from cancer. The doctors' prognosis is reasonable, although chemotherapy will be required. I'm sure that I speak for the whole of fandom in wishing Ian a full recovery. Hang in there, mate.

Leaving Australia

It started with goodbyes. I handed out the last issue to people on Friday night, and spent the next day playing in my kitchen in preparation for my farewell party that night. Terry Frost and Sharon Nebel, superstars that they are, made the first of many valuable contributions to the week by helping with the set-up. At least this time the weather was cooler, so the pastry behaved itself. I even managed to make a Partan Flan without disaster.

The party itself was a bit quiet, thanks mainly to competing with a number of other events. A major party in Adelaide claimed many potential attendees, Winter Solstice celebrations dragged others away, and a Murder Mystery Party took yet more. My thanks to those who did turn up, especially to Deirdre Rose for proving to the SF fans that some economists are human. Thanks also to Wendy Purcell and Chris Ballis for dropping in at Midnight on their way back

from the murder party, and to James and Jeanette Allen, Steve Smith and Craig McBride for coming round on Sunday to apologise for missing my do.

The purpose of this partying, other than to say goodbye, was to get rid of stuff. I'd found to my consternation that removals to the USA were a lot more expensive than to other parts of the world. To transport everything except my furniture across the Pacific various companies quoted in the region of \$4000. Given that that was almost more than my belongings were worth, I decided to get rid of as much as I could and air freight what was left.

We got there in the end. On Tuesday night Fabian Stretton performed miracles helping me get all my books, clothes and tapes into packing boxes whilst Leah did a wonderful job on the kitchen. Terry and Phil Wodarczyk did sterling work transporting furniture on Thursday, and hopefully Melbourne fandom has been enriched by my going.

Between those two we had the company farewell do at which I managed to demonstrate that I might not have a degree in economics but I can find a damn fine Thai restaurant when required to do so. I wasn't entirely sure what to make of the farewell gift of a leather briefcase - it seemed an odd thing to give someone you've just made unemployed - but I'm taking it as a gesture of faith in my ability to get a new job.

On the Thursday night Terry and Sharon took me out to dinner as a thank you for the vast quantities of stuff I had foisted upon them. We went to Rhumbas in Brunswick Street at which we discovered that the lamentable habit of putting slices of lemon in people's beer has made it's way to Australia. The food, however, was excellent. Melbourne is good like that.

On Friday it was the turn of my boss, Danny Price, to help shift my junk. We got all the boxes to the airport and were pleased to find the total weight only 3 kg off what I had estimated. It cost around \$750. And the removals quotes were for sea freight. There was a small panic when we discovered that batteries were not allowed in the luggage, and a consequent embarrassing moment for Danny when it was revealed that his soon-to-be-ex employee owned a toy ray gun that made silly noises when fired. I don't think it is quite the image for economic consultants. Other than that, I was packed.

The other job on Friday was to hand over the keys to my flat. I still had quite a few bits of kitchenware and stuff hanging around. Jo Ryan from work got press-ganged into helping pack them up, and my landlady kindly offered to drop the lot off at a local charity shop.

In the evening I popped into K&M's and the MSFC. My thanks to Michael Jordan for the kind farewell speech. Fortuitously, however, any sadness of the occasion was quickly overshadowed by the announcement that Bev Hope and David Arblaster are getting married. My very best wishes to them, and apologies that I will not be in town for the happy event. Life goes on.

And then there I was: Tullamarine, and this time not coming back. Terry, Sharon and Danny came to see me off, and it is just as well they did. Firstly I get a lot less emotional in front of people I know, and secondly I didn't have a chance to sneak off and go hide in the outback.

Someone seemed to have told QANTAS that it was a special occasion because they laid on *Wunala Dreaming*, the 747 painted up with Aboriginal artwork, to take me to LA. It is a strange feeling, leaving your home and most of your possessions behind and heading off for a country where you have no right of work or residence, but I'm not panicking. I think maybe I'm just

numb and that I'll realise what a mess I'm in a few weeks later. The rest of this issue will tell, after I've got a few reviews out of the way.

But before normal service is resumed, I must say thank you once more to Terry. He has been a wonderful friend over the past two years. We've sharpened our wits on each other, enjoyed each other's fanzines, and provided support in times of need. I'm delighted to see him and Sharon meshing so well and look forward to seeing them again sometime. I was especially flattered by the kind farewell that Terry wrote in the last issue of *Mimezine Flashback*. He did rather annoy Boris, my wild boar, by describing him as a wart hog, but soft toys are quick to forgive and forget. Goodbye, Terry, mate. Good luck with the SF2002 agency I've dumped on you, and here's hoping we'll both be at Bucconeer – you as DUFF delegate. Meanwhile, don't forget to e-mail.

Sharp as Shuriken

You should know by now that I am a sucker for synchronicity. This one, I think, is a classic. I'd gone to say goodbye to Justin Ackroyd and Danny Heap at Slow Glass. Justin, never one to miss a sale opportunity, managed to present me with a copy of a book I'd been waiting for for some time. It turned out to be the ideal book to end my stay in Australia. Why? It goes like this.

Two years ago, when I dropped in on the Scottish Worldcon, I was hoping to meet a few Australian fans. It didn't take long to find them, and the first two I met were Elaine Kemp and Stephen Dedman. This seemed too good to be true: she was a fellow neo-pagan, he wrote role-playing material. The only trouble was, they lived in Perth, a whole continent away. We managed to catch up a few times since, and in the meantime I have been watching Stephen's short fiction appear in various places and waiting eagerly for his first novel. This was the book that Justin had waiting for me on my farewell visit: *The Art of Arrow Cutting*.

Michaelangelo Magistrale, Mage to his friends, is an itinerant photographer. He owns little save a few pairs of jeans and t-shirts, a pair of sneakers, a very expensive camera, and a list of women whose beds he is likely to be able to talk his way into should he need a roof over his head. Lounging around in a Greyhound station one day, he happens to lend a few bucks to a pretty blonde who is short of cash. In return, she gives him a key to her flat.

A couple of days later, the girl is dead, Mage is being pursued by the Yakuza, and some very strange assassins are on the loose.

Leanne Framm once said that a review of one of her books that Stephen had written told you more about the writer than about the book. *The Art of Arrow Cutting* tells you quite a bit about Stephen. It tells you that he loves women, Japanese mythology and ninja movies. It tells you that he knows quite a lot about guns and has travelled America on a shoestring budget. And it

tells you that he loves the sound of words on a page and enjoys crafting them without some of the florid excesses of some of his contemporaries.

Other reviews of the book have been remarkably consistent. They focus on the “future noir” setting and the lightness of touch Stephen brings to his writing. I can’t really say more than that, because I agree. It is a good piece of dark fantasy from someone who clearly has the potential to be a top flight writer. It doesn’t say anything much profound, but it holds the interest well and doesn’t disappoint. Recommended.

The Art of Arrow Cutting – Stephen Dedman – Tor - hardcover

Land of a Thousand Conventions

One of the many good points about living in America is the profusion of SF conventions on offer. The weekend after I arrived was July 4th, and that guaranteed something big. That something is traditionally Westercon, the big west coast regional convention. This year it was held in Seattle.

No, let’s put some detail in that. It was held in Seattle by a team that composed many members of the Seattle in 2002 Bid Committee using the hotel which will be the main hotel of the Seattle Worldcon should they win. Needless to say, we members of the San Francisco in 2002 team were watching events with great interest. I’m not going to say any more about this because slagging the opposition is not part of our strategy. There will be other con reports, I’m sure. Suffice it to say that we were well pleased with the weekend.

Kevin, for some reason known only to him, had booked us on the 7:20 flight out of San Jose. Arriving at Sea-Tac, we met up with a few more of our crew and, having a full load, worked out that a stretch limo would be the cheapest way to get there. OK, it was a cheap shot, but we were saving money.

Seattle, I must say, was on its best behaviour for the holiday weekend. It was warm, it was sunny, there was not a trace of rain. Unlike Potlatch, which was held out in the suburbs near the University of Washington, Westercon was right in the city centre and convenient for the shops, restaurants, wharf and the Space Needle. I even got to see a little of it.

Anyone remember me raving about Chutney’s, the Indian Restaurant that Kevin and I discovered during Potlatch? It was a bit far to go back, but we discovered that they had another branch near the Space Needle. This killed two birds with one stone. Kevin got to ride the Seattle monorail, and I got to see the Space Needle. Sadly I could not find the Orkish restaurant that my *Shadowrun* sourcebook says is thereabouts, but Chutney’s did us proud once more. Many thanks to Patrick Lasswell for his excellent company and generosity during the evening.

Much of the time, however, was taken up with bid work. We had a table to man, and we had a party to run. Kevin also had the additional responsibility of chairing the business meeting and overseeing site selection (which was run by Crickett Fox – an all San Francisco team).

Our party took place on the Friday night. Lynn Gold, our party co-ordinator, put on a splendid show including fudge brownies, hot crab dip and French bread pizza. It being her birthday, and in keeping with the Summer of Love theme of the party, Lynn also produced a tie-dye birthday cake. Irish coffee (a San Francisco invention, believe it or not) was supplied by the very wonderful Bob and Brenda Daverin. And, it being July 4th, we even managed fireworks, albeit out on Lake Union and viewed from our suite window. Finding a break in the music, I slyly put on “If you are going to San Francisco”. Much to our surprise, people started to sing along. I think it all went rather well.

Meanwhile, back at site selection, interesting things were happening. Westercon has a bidding process similar to Worldcons but on a 2-year cycle. We were thus electing the committee and site for the 1999 convention. There were three bidders: Santa Clara, Colorado Springs and Spokane.

A lot of people expected us to be backing the Santa Clara bid, it being just down the road from San Francisco. The bid committee had even approached SFSFC, the parent corporation of SF2002, for support, but had been unable to agree terms. Since then they had had very little contact with local fans. Ben Yalow asked a question about local backing at the meet-the-bidders panel, though it was unclear whether he was trying to embarrass the bid by pointing up their lack of support or embarrass Kevin by associating SF2002 with them. In any event, their performance was deeply uninspired and they polled accordingly.

The Colorado Springs bid was being run by Kent Bloom who is a well known SMOF, an experienced Worldcon Division Head and a very nice guy. The site is beautiful – one of America’s premier tourist towns – and they should have done well. They were certainly my first choice before the con. Strangely enough, however, they seemed infected with Santa Clara’s lethargy. Kent’s wife, Mary, is the sister of Mike Mormon, the head of the Santa Clara bid. Perhaps something was catching.

In marked contrast to the other bids we had the Kids from Spokane. Telling an American that you plan to run a major convention in Spokane is rather like telling an Australian you want to hold one in Albany, or a Brit that you are aiming for Yeovil. The bid committee was all very young and was suspected of being unduly influenced by the Seattle crowd (Spokane is in Washington State). But they had energy, they had enthusiasm, and above all they were willing to learn.

Senior SMOFs recognise two types of young con runners. There are those at the mention of whom they put their heads in their hands and mutter “oh no, I can see it coming, another last minute rescue operation”, and there are those of whom they say “we could train these guys to do our jobs”. The Spokane team were clearly of the second breed and by the end of the convention had wormed their way into the affections of most of the members. They also won the vote by a clear majority on the first round. I’m looking forward to their convention.

As usual, I didn't get to see much of the programming. I attended a panel of the use of Third World mythology in novels at which a bunch of arrogant American fantasy writers explained that if you mouthed the right Politically Correct platitudes it didn't matter who you ripped off. The paganism panel was disappointing too. American paganism seems to have degenerated into a swamp of wishy-washy, new age nonsense in which anything goes as long as it is touchy-feely-environmental. Mary Kay Kare was the only one of the five panellists who seemed to belong to a serious pagan group, and she admitted to being a new convert and not well versed in the theology. None of the rest seemed to be able to conduct a coherent theological argument, or have much knowledge of their roots. I had the awful feeling that if I asked whether anyone else had read *Drawing Down the Moon* or *The Spiral Path* they would all have said "you what?".

The one program item I was on was a panel entitled "Will there ever be another non-North American Worldcon after Aussiecon Three". Beforehand I was a little worried that this might become an excuse to lynch a token Aussie in revenge for the high membership rates of A3. Fortunately, with Jerry Kaufman, Jan Howard Finder and Kevin also on the panel we agreed beforehand that the answer was yes and went on to discuss the more interesting question of where. This focused attention on the German bid for 2003. Somewhat to my surprise, Ben Yalow announced, with all the authority of someone who has already had it arranged, that the German bid would never get off the ground and was likely to fold sometime soon. This was followed by *Ansible* announcing that the 2003 bid was a practice bid for 2005. I know that Ecki Marwitz has some strange ideas about bidding, but I didn't think things were that flaky. Jorgen?

That would leave the 2003 bid between Toronto and Cancun. The Toronto folks have certainly come out all guns blazing, but most of their BidCom haven't been involved in running Worldcons for years and they seem to have sidelined John Mansfield, the chair of ConAdian. I've always wanted to visit Chi'chen Itza...

One additional panel item I attended was Jerry Kaufman's piece on the future of fanzines. Jerry and I have had friendly disagreements before over whether electronic fanzines are "the real thing" or not. This time, although Jerry still seems convinced that layout and artwork are what fanzines are all about, I got a much better hearing. I suspect that this was in some what connected to the fact that Andy Hooper, also at the panel, had recently discovered the truth of my assertion that printing, collating and stuffing envelopes are a pain in the butt that ruin your enjoyment of writing. It isn't something I would wish on anyone, Andy, and I do hope you find yourself wanting to keep writing. But I can't help saying, to fanzine fandom at large, "I told you so".

Discussing *Emerald City* with Andy earlier in the con, we concocted an interesting idea for a fanzine panel. Andy told me that he always prints out his *Emerald City* when he gets it, and then started talking about which font he uses. Now I am hopeless at layout (as those of you who get the paper version will know), so I try not to do it. But it suddenly occurred to me that people might like to do their own layout with the 'zine when they receive it. And each person's view of it will be different. Andy built on this by expounding the notion of the e-mail fanzine as a DIY kit, pre-processed words with which you could create your own physical 'zine.

I'm not sure when we will be able to manage this (I'd like to do it at a con that Andy can attend), but sometime in the future I want to run a panel at which a whole bunch of people bring their own version of a paper *Emerald City* and talk about what they have done with the layout. Anyone interested?

Meanwhile, the San Francisco team was busy costuming. Raven O'Neill scooped everyone with a *Men in Black* hall costume, but the star of the show on our team was Shirl Roth with her excellent B5 dolls and a Narn outfit of her own. JMS, who hates cute, agreed to be photographed with her and the dolls, but muttered under his breath about having her spaced.

On Friday the masquerade was looking to be something of a disaster. No one seemed to know what was going on. It turned out that Peggy Stewart, one of the Spokane team, had been drafted in to run it a mere 2 months out (and to judge hall costumes 2 weeks out). Given that she was now 7 months pregnant, she wasn't spending much time at the con. But we got it all together in the end. Between the SF2002 team and the San Francisco costumers we managed to staff half the ninja team and create a green room team from scratch. Michael Citrak's tech people were great and everything went smoothly. Raven got a rosette for her appearance as Lee Loo from Fifth Element, a costume she put together at the convention.

Come Sunday, after a second night of parties until 3:00am, I was a little the worse for wear. This probably contributed to my catching a bout of convention flu which laid me low for most of the next 2 days. I won't say it was the best convention I have ever been to, but between the partying and the masquerade I managed to have a pretty good time.

Now, when is the next one?

Adrift in a Sea of Ideas

Confession time: yes folks, I am one of those sad and sorry people who actually enjoyed *Foucault's Pendulum*. Thus, having seen a hardback copy of *The Island of the Day Before* on sale at \$10 in Melbourne, I snapped it up. It has taken me a long time to get to the end, but get there I did. I'd like to say it was worth the effort, because Umberto Eco is a man I have a lot of respect for. This time, however, he failed to pick a subject that interests me. It was very hard going.

The trouble with Eco is that he is not really a novelist. He is, as most of you probably know, a professor of Semiology, which is the study of signs and symbols. Perhaps more accurately, he is a student of ideas and their impact on cultures. *The Name of the Rose*, for example, was about mediaeval views of the world as much as it was about the detective story that was turned into the film. Having tried to construct a believable mediaeval setting for a role-playing game, I developed an interest in those ideas and knew a little about them before reading the book. That helped me a lot.

Foucault's Pendulum, on the other hand, was about much more modern ideas. It focused on conspiracy theory, secret societies and the like. Again it was a subject that I knew a little about,

and I was able to enjoy the skill with which Eco had woven together just about every plot and conspiracy you could think of. The trouble was that was all there was to the book. The plot, such as there was one, was thin and uninteresting.

The Island of the Day Before suffers from very much the same problem. Here the theme is 17th Century ideas of the world. This is not a subject with which I am very familiar. Hence I was unable to enjoy Eco's erudition, and therefore experienced the same ennui that most readers suffered with *Foucault's Pendulum*.

There is a plot or sorts. Eco does seem to know that he's supposed to be writing a story. But it seems like *The Name of the Rose* was a flash in the pan. Either that or he gets so carried away with the idea stuff that he forgets the task in hand. The story, such as it is, concerns a young Spanish Nobleman, Roberto della Griva, who is shipwrecked off an island which lies exactly on the international dateline. Roberto ends up, not on the island, but on a fortuitously well provisioned abandoned vessel moored just off the island. He cannot reach the shore because he cannot swim. Much of the concept behind the book thus arises from the fact that whilst for Roberto on his ship it is today, a few hundred yards away on the island it is yesterday.

As the story develops, Eco takes us back to review Roberto's life: how he came to be where he is, and how he came to acquire the ideas and obsessions that drive him when he has nothing else to think about. This includes discourses with priests and soldiers at a siege, and with courtiers and philosophers in the salons of Paris. In short, everything Eco needs to cover the whole gamut of view of the world prevalent at the time.

In a minor thread, Eco toys with the ideas of books within books. He, as translator, tells us Roberto's story as the castaway wrote it. Included in Roberto's papers is a novel he wrote during his confinement and which features himself. This is cute, but it has been done much better by other people. It certainly isn't enough to sustain the weight of Roberto's philosophical contemplations.

A lot of the trouble stems from the fact that Eco is becoming increasingly prone to Fanthorpisms. He can never state an idea once, but rather has to approach it from every conceivable angle just in case there is something in the similes and analogies that can lead him on to something else. This, of course, leads to long and boring passages in which he is saying the same thing over and over again. It is scholarship rather than literature. It is, perhaps, what we might expect from a man who owns 300,000 books.

All of this is a great shame, because *The Name of the Rose* is a wonderful book (and a wonderful film, although they are very different animals). I keep hoping that Eco has it in him to produce a repeat performance. Perhaps the vast quantities of *Island of the Day Before* that have found their way into remainder bins will prove a salutatory lesson. I hope so.

The Island of the Day Before – Umberto Eco – Secker & Warburg - hardcover

Men in Tight Black Rubber

Hey, I got someone to go to the movies with!

What is more, out here we have all the latest released and huge, multi-screen cinemas with the latest in sound technology. The nearest one to us is the big Century complex over the road from the Silicon Graphics campus. I expect to use it lots.

First port of call was *Batman & Robin*. After all, who can resist a couple of guys in skin tight, anatomically correct rubber costumes, especially when there is now Batgirl to keep the straight guys and lesbians happy too. One does occasionally pause to wonder why Batman and Robin have nipples on their costumes whilst Batgirl doesn't, but hey, it's a comic book, not real life.

And that pretty much sums it up. On leaving the cinema, Kevin said to me that it was the most faithful translation of comic book logic to the screen he has ever seen. He's right. There are totally implausible stunts, there are plot twists that defy all logic, and there are characters so cardboard that Elle MacPherson's acting seems not at all bad. And yet it flows, it keeps you entertained and keeps you giggling. Also the special effects are stunning.

Occasionally, however, I like to go to movies for something other than the SFX. We've now had four Batman movies and three different Batmen, so there is a lot to compare. I have to say that George Clooney is a complete disaster. He has neither the manic intensity of Val Kilmer nor the distracted craziness of Tim Burton. Clooney portrays Bruce Wayne as an amiable eccentric with a penchant for cute facial expressions, and he portrays Batman in pretty much the same way. He is, perhaps, much closer to the Adam West version, but he lacks even West's fanatical devotion to wiping out crime. He's just this guy, you know. He is not Batman.

Chris O'Donnell is his usual cute self and his Dick Grayson is still in the upstart kid sidekick mould. I'd love to see him do Nighthawk sometime, but I doubt that we'll see it. As for Alicia Silverstone as Batgirl (and please note that Barbara Gordon has been given the push in favour of a schoolgirl niece of Alfred's), her attempts to play a tough, modern, feminist teenager are simply laughable. She has a great costume, though.

The film is rescued by the villains. Arnie's Mr. Freeze makes good use of the Hollywood millions for a costume that really looks like a cryo-suit and he has all of the intensity and insanity that Clooney's Batman lacks. Uma Thurman as Poison Ivy has an absolute whale of a time and does it superbly. She also has all the best lines in the movie (although this might be an illusion resulting from her being the only one who can deliver them convincingly).

It is an enjoyable film. I certainly don't think I wasted my money on it. But compared to the first Batman movie it is very thin fare indeed. There will doubtless be more Batman films, but if they continue to drift further and further from the Dark Knight concept towards the TV silliness I might just stop watching them.

Men in Black is also based on a comic book, albeit a much more modern one. Unlike Batman, it is meant to be a funny book, and the film has been billed as the comedy smash of the year. The setting is very simple. There really are aliens, there really is a cover-up, and there is a secret department dedicated to making sure that no one on Earth ever knows, despite all the scrapes that the aliens end up causing. It is a good setting. It should work very well. It doesn't.

Not that it is a bad film. The aliens are amongst the best computer graphics I have ever seen. The skin texture still tends to be a bit too bland – real skin has detail, and they don't yet have the processing power to render all that in the time – but they are remarkably convincing all the same.

The plot is fairly simple, though more complex than that of *Batman & Robin*. One group of aliens is hiding a powerful device on Earth, another group sends an assassin to steal it, and the first lot threaten to blow up Earth to prevent him getting away with it. If the story is a little thin, it is because a large part of the film is used up explaining the background leaving very little room for plot development. Like *Batman & Robin*, there is an awful lot of comic book logic in the plot, but the majority of the non-sequiturs are somewhat less obvious.

The problem I had with the film is that for the most part it just isn't funny. There are, I think, two reasons for this. Firstly the film is very American. Much of the humour comes from poking fun at American society. It has a go at everything from New York to the FBI to National Enquirer and Elvis sightings. I noticed Kevin laughing uproariously at things that completely passed me by. In addition, the scriptwriters have gone for a very downbeat, deadpan style. There are very few wisecracks. It is as if they had taken *Ghostbusters* and re-made it in the style of *Dr. Strangelove* without Peter Sellers.

As an example, here is an opportunity for a gag which was passed up. Will Smith, playing the new recruit, is being shown round HQ by Tommy Lee Jones. He marvels at all the gadgetry and asks where the money comes from. Jones replies that they own Earth patents on a number of items shown to them by aliens, including velcro and microwave ovens. Now velcro is a good choice, it is bizarre and very useful, but there is nothing funny about microwaves. If instead he had said something like "velcro, pot noodles and cabbage patch dolls" there might have been a few more laughs. I found myself wishing that they had let my dear friend Marc Gascoigne at the script because he is brilliant at this sort of thing (see the *Judge Dredd* role-playing game, or Puffin's *Advanced Fighting Fantasy* series, for example). Americans, I suspect, are not good at dry humour.

I'd like to end with some words of praise for Will Smith. Not only does he play the wisecracking black guy better than Eddie Murphy; he also wrote and performed the theme tune. This guy has talent. Watch him.

In summary, two films which are worth seeing but neither of which are worth seeing again. By next issue, however, I should have seen *Contact*, and that promises to be a different matter altogether.

Only in America – Outback Steakhouses

Whilst I was living in Australia I did a series of articles aimed at exploring my experiences of Australian culture. It seems facile to do the same for America. After all, we all know what American culture is like, don't we? We see it on the TV every day. This, of course, is a gross

generalisation, and I'm sure I'll find interesting things to talk about at some point. However, there is one thing that the rest of the world knows for certain about America. In the words of the immortal sage, Obelix, "these Americans are crazy".

No, seriously folks. This is a big country, full of people. It probably has no more fruitcakes per inhabitant than any other country, but lump them all together and there are rather a lot of them. This is, after all, the country in which I found the 24 Hour Church of Elvis. It is also a country that believes that people have a right to be crazy should they so wish. So I figured that I would write a series of articles about the really weird things I found here. If any Americans are starting to get offended, remember that the really good things will include the con reviews, the restaurant reviews and the film reviews. Hey, I might even get to a few big concerts.

Meanwhile, back in the land of the zany, a dining experience the like of which you would never find in Melbourne. Looking around for somewhere to eat before *Men in Black*, Kevin said to me "how about the Outback Steakhouse"? "Darn", I replied, "the hat with the corks is in the freighted luggage. What will I wear?" Yes guys, this place really is a cross between Sizzler and Crocodile Dundee. It is full of soft toy roos and koalas, boomerangs that would never get there, let alone come back, and schmaltzy tourist posters for Queensland. Cultural imperialism in spades.

Equally bizzarely, it is almost across the road from Apple HQ. When we arrived, the place was full of intense young men in t-shirts, jeans and sneakers discussing the day's announcement that Apple had fired yet another CEO and speculating as to whether the company would stay in business long enough for the new operating system to be finished.

There is, I understand, a chain of these places. They even have their own web site (<http://www.outbackbowl.com>). If you go look at the menu you will notice that there is little that could be called authentically Australian on it, though I did note with satisfaction that the 20 oz Porterhouse steak was called "the Melbourne" whereas Sydney just got a dessert. The really embarrassing thing, however, was that the food was very good indeed. What is more, they did have some almost decent beer. It is a brew called Sheaf Stout, produced by CUB, which Terry says he'd seen in Sydney when he was younger but is now apparently only made for export. Weird.

The Nova Express Saga

Those of you who haunt the fannish newsgroups are probably sick to death already of hearing about *Nova Express*, but my guess is that this only accounts for about a quarter of the readership of *Emerald City*. My apologies to that quarter, you can probably skip this section.

For the rest of you, *Nova Express* is a Texas-based magazine which has been campaigning hard to win this year's Best Fanzine Hugo. This in itself is enough to incite the ire of fandom at large. Whilst most American fans (unlike Australians) seem to be happy to accept that mere mention of the award's existence does not in itself constitute rabid self-promotion, there can be

little doubt that Lawrence Person's energetic spamming of fannish newsgroups is evidence of serious campaigning. Reactions have ranged from the guardedly defensive to extreme outrage.

Given the vast quantity of material that has flown through the ether on this subject, it is difficult to summarise and still be sure that you have captured every shade of opinion, but I'm going to try anyway. Views which have been expressed include:

- it is legitimate to let people know that your 'zine has been nominated and to offer free copies to interested parties;
- it is not legitimate to do so by spamming everyone in sight;
- it is most certainly not legitimate to create a spam using a fannish email address resource that specifically states it should not be used for that purpose;
- publishers can and do campaign for their nominees in the Hugos;
- campaigning for the fannish awards will only serve to devalue those awards;
- in any case, *Nova Express* is not a fanzine.

It is the last point which is potentially the most interesting. People are, of course, entitled to vote against *Nova Express* because their publicity has been annoying, or in order to make the point that campaigning does not work. However, both such attitudes can be claimed to be taking into account external factors that have no bearing on *NE's* fitness for the award. The final point suggests that there are criteria for being a fanzine that *Nova Express* does not meet and that it should be voted down on those grounds. To understand this requires a little knowledge of Hugo history and rules.

Originally there were only two Hugos for magazines, professional and fannish. The distinction was quite clear. Professional magazines were produced by companies with salaried staff and had a cover price. They concentrated primarily on what was happening in the commercial world. Fanzines were produced by amateurs and were generally available for trades and contributions. They were often highly personal, containing as much or more information about the editor and her friends as anything to do with SF. This simple picture was muddied by two magazines, *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*, neither of which were a big enough concern to provide a full time salary for their editors, but whose production quality was far above that of the average fanzine. To prevent them dominating the fanzine category, a special award for "semi-professional" magazines was created.

The people who drafted the rules for semi-prozines did so very carefully to try to ensure that everything fell into the right category. Mostly the rules cover things like the level of circulation and whether contributors are paid. As far as we know, *Nova Express* does not qualify under any of these rules. And yet it does not look like or read like a fanzine.

I didn't get one of Lawrence Person's spams (obviously he felt that Australian voters were irrelevant), but Kevin got one and sent off for the proffered free 'zine. It arrived this week and it was quite obvious from the style and content that it set out to imitate professional magazines. It contains one article, two interviews, and lots of book reviews; it is litho printed, and has a glossy cover. The article, a short piece in which one Texan writer berates two of his friends for their unimaginative choices in Asian restaurants, could legitimately be called

fannish, and the editorial is a little too chummy, but the rest of it has the detached air of professionalism.

The sad thing is that the Hugo rules allow a magazine to qualify for the semi-pro category simply if the editor asked for it to be so considered. I say sad, firstly because I think that is where it belongs, and secondly because there are so few potential nominees for the semi-prozine category. Stuff like *Interzone* and *Locus* are stiff competition (as would be *Eidolon* and *SFC* if only they published a bit more regularly). But from what I've seen, *Nova Express* is well ahead of *New York Review of SF*, one of this year's other nominees.

I'm not quite sure why Person has chosen to enter the fanzine category. Possibly he simply wasn't aware of the rules. Possibly he felt he had a better chance of winning there (though if he did he was sadly mistaken). But most likely I think he simply doesn't understand the distinction. Back when I was publishing an RPG fanzine, the field went through a phase where every schoolboy in Britain felt that he could produce the next *White Dwarf*. It is true that Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone produced a fanzine at one point on their rise to riches, but that does not mean that a fanzine is simply a professional magazine done badly. They are quite different animals. People who try to produce fanzines as if they were professional magazines normally end up with something over-priced, dull and pretentious.

I must add that the above does not necessarily apply to *Nova Express*. The one issue I have seen contained some interesting stuff and several excellent contributors. If Person can get the circulation up, and thereby have money to throw at things like colour covers, it should get to be quite impressive. But it is not a fanzine, and has few of the features that make fanzines interesting. It is expensive, impersonal, and concentrates solely on books and writers. As it is in the fanzine category, I shall vote on it with that in mind.

And I guess I should also add that any magazine whose front cover screams "Duel Interview Issue!" and is not making a pun doesn't really deserve an award.

The End of the Whorl

It took me several weeks to finish *The Island of the Day Before* and I read other stuff in the meantime. I can't imagine myself ever saying that of a Gene Wolfe novel. I get them, I read them: two or three days, a week at most. *Exodus from the Long Sun* was no exception.

I could have reviewed other parts of the *Long Sun* series in earlier issues. I have avoided doing so because Wolfe is such a clever plotter that I would undoubtedly end up displaying a lamentable lack of understanding of the plot. Indeed, it is not unusual to get to the end of one of Wolfe's collections and still not know what was going on. *Long Sun* is no exception. Indeed, it is perhaps too typically Wolfe.

Those of you who appreciate great writing will remember the *Book of the New Sun*, featuring Severian the Torturer, with particular fondness. When I read the first *Long Sun* book my initial reaction was "oh no, the publishers have asked for a repeat performance, we are getting a clone". There is the same post-technological society in which magic and high tech are

intermixed. There is the same naive hero who, from humble beginnings, rises to become a ruler. But whereas Anne McCaffrey or Larry Niven might just use the repeat formula as an excuse for laziness, Wolfe brings to bear the same dedication and quality that characterise his work.

Take world building, for example. Before he started the book, Wolfe had worked out the social structure; he had worked out the details of the technological society that created the present one. He devised a convention for naming his characters, and a slang in which the lower classes would talk. And each one of those characters has a clear, well defined personality that grows with the books. Each one even has their own way of talking, so you can tell who says what without being told. To sustain that sort of commitment over four novels takes a lot of work.

Then, of course, there is the plot. Wolfe is an absolute master of devious plot twists, subtle misdirection and cunning duplicity. And he writes well too. Interzone, in their review, say "Right now, Wolfe may be the finest science fiction writer in the world" It is difficult to disagree with such sentiments.

I'm not going to say any more about the plot. Saying anything is liable to give away some of the delightful surprises that the series has in store. Besides, there may yet be aspects to it that I haven't understood. When I manage to get my library in one place again, I might just have to re-read the whole lot.

Can we have another *Soldier* book now, Gene? Please.

Nightside of the Long Sun, Lake of the Long Sun, Calde of the Long Sun and Exodus from the Long Sun – Gene Wolfe – Tor - softcover

Footnote

So how are things going here so far? It is different. But then so was Australia. I'm not entirely sure how I'll survive in a country where no one has electric kettles and kitchen shops are able to get away without stocking teapots. Then again, the food is great, the weather is great, the web resources are great, and there's just this wonderful sense of being where things are happening.

It is good to see TV programs as they come out too. Most things are in repeats at the moment, but only from a month or so back. I have no intention of giving away plotlines, but things do seem to have progressed on a number of fronts. DS9 is decidedly more gritty and violent. In last week's episode Cisco bombed a Maquis planet. Xena, on the other hand, has gone from being a program with a big lesbian audience to an overtly lesbian show with full on kissing and soppy interludes. B5 is its usual wonderful self. Voyager is still crap.

No news on the job front, I'm afraid. I know there are jobs out there, but finding them is hard work. If you want a computer job round here you can be put in touch with likely prospects very easily. Power systems consultants are another matter. In Australia I could guarantee that any job I was interested in would be either in the *Financial Review* or in the Saturday *Australian*.

Here each city has its own newspapers. The web is no help either. Many of the companies I'm looking for do not have sites, or don't advertise jobs on them and there's no set nomenclature for the type of work that will allow search engines to do their stuff. Still, gotta keep trying. In the meantime, I'm having a great holiday.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl