

EMERALD CITY

Issue 27

November 1997

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Introduction

Well, it has been an interesting month. Things have gone from not really having any work to do, to having to cancel all social engagements and be in the office 12 to 14 hours a day, including weekends. Still, at least I'm working.

I had a couple of job opportunities whilst I was here as well, but nothing seems to have come of them. Ho hum. I guess I just keep trying.

The other thing I've been doing is rushing around the country for meetings. This is what happens when you work on a project which involves people from several States. I got to spend the night in Sydney recently which meant I actually had the time to look around the city. Sad to say, the place is just one big building site at present. Everywhere you go there is dust and digging. I guess it will all be very nice come 2000 when the Olympics arrives, but right now it is just horrible. I can, however, recommend the Golden Century restaurant in Sussex Street, unless you are one of these people who can't stand the Chinese habit of asking you to select your meal from a tank full of live fish.

I'm returning to California on December 2nd and expect to be there for a couple of months. Kevin and I are going to SMOFcon in Boston shortly after I get back. After that, I'm intending to stick around for Potlatch and Superbowl weekend. The 49ers are 10-1 for the season so far and are already NFC West Champions. I think San Francisco might just be a good place to be at the end of January.

Three colours: Mars

Are you the sort of person who would jump at the chance to watch a full, uncut version of *Heaven's Gate*? Is your idea of good television a 12-hour debate between two aged professors of philosophy? Do you read engineering textbooks for relaxation? Boy, do I have a book for you.

Well, three books, actually. And between them they have won one Nebula and two Hugos. They should therefore be the very pinnacle of modern SF. In all my reading of science fiction, I have seldom been so disappointed or ashamed of the genre. Yes, I have finally got round to reading Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, and it sucks.

Now I have to admit that I am not a big fan of hard SF. If I want to be lectured on scientific principles, I will read non-fiction, thank you very much. The idea of a novel in which the science is more important than the story is anathema to me. I view SF as an opportunity to use a fictional format to explore the implications of scientific development. Robinson, on the other hand, seems to think it is an excuse to show how much research he has done. And, just as a bad fantasy writer will manipulate the plot so that the characters visit every site on The Map, so Robinson manipulates his plot so that every last scrap of research can be paraded before the reader.

Think I'm exaggerating? Listen: in *Red Mars* there is a section where he devotes half a page to listing all of the tools that one of the astronauts has brought with her. Who, with the possible exception of Tim Allen, is going to want to read that? But Robinson clearly thinks this sort of detail is essential to the story. So essential, in fact, that his little explanatory out-takes will intrude anywhere and everywhere. We have a character being chased by a polar bear? Let's stop for a few pages whilst we describe the structure of the landscape. The result is that the whole three enormous books grind on at the same slow, mechanical, lecturing tone throughout. If you read all three in succession, as I did, you get very bored indeed.

Perhaps I would not have minded quite so much if Robinson had applied the same degree of rigour to all of his future world, but clearly his interests are quite limited. He will spend chapter after chapter discussing Martian geology (sorry, "areology") or engineering problems, but he blithely chucks in developments in computers and robotics without so much as a whisper of an attempt to discuss them. Then there are the points where he is downright wrong: for example, using tiger genes to give humans the ability to purr when in fact the tiger is the only species of cat unable to purr.

With all this, you start to lose faith in the bits of science he does present, especially as there is so little attention paid to parts of the plot. For example, can a human being out-run a polar bear over a distance of 2 km? Even on Mars, I think not. Then there is the section in *Green Mars* where the Martian rebels, whilst supposedly being hunted by Earth military armed with sophisticated surveillance satellites, manage to launch two space planes, land on Deimos, set up a robot factory, fly home again and wait two weeks for the factory to do its job, all without being detected. Any thriller writer who put stuff like that in her books would never get published.

Back with pacing for a moment, one of the things I found very difficult in the books was the way that the time flow would change without warning. Several chapters might be spent describing the events of a few days. The narrative then switches viewpoint, or makes a few general comments, and without warning you suddenly realise that several years have passed. Often I missed some vital clue and was at a loss to understand the pace of technological or ecological change.

And whilst I'm on the subject of writing quality, how about the characterisation? Theoretically the book has a cast of thousands, or at least the 100 first colonists. In practice only a scant dozen or so characters ever make it beyond being one-dimensional. Many of the First hundred are known only as names introduced as attendees in various scenes but never saying or doing anything. What is worse, particularly in the early books, is that when the story is being told from the viewpoint of one of the characters, all of the others suddenly lapse back into one-dimensionality.

Even more annoying, characters get introduced, made to seem important, and then just dropped as if Robinson has got bored with them. The worst example of this is Nirgal who, when he is introduced in *Green Mars*, is made to appear that he has some superhuman abilities - perhaps a result of Hiroko's gene meddling. But by *Blue Mars* he is a minor character and his abilities are barely mentioned. It all seems horribly wasteful.

I note in passing that, of the seven major female characters in the books, four are vain, selfish and manipulative, one just selfish and manipulative, and one selfish and mad. The seventh is an engineer, the owner of the aforementioned pile of tools, and therefore presumably an honorary bloke. It is hard not to discern a streak of misogyny here.

So much for the writing. But it is clear from the start that Robinson is trying to do much more than tell a story. What begins and ends as the tale of the First Hundred colonists quickly becomes a seemingly endless debate on the future of human society. Somewhere in all that verbiage is a social manifesto. Is it sensible? Well thought out? Useful? Guess what.

Much of the books is given over to the great debate between the environmentalists (called Reds because they want to preserve the planet as it is) and the terraformers (ironically called Greens). But the whole debate is practically meaningless because all that the Reds have to protect is the Martian landscape itself. There is no life, no ecosystems, nothing but rock. In so restricting what his conservationists can protect, Robinson completely ignores the many major issues, for example the extinctions and the decimation of the gene pool, of Terran environmentalism. Indeed, he seems to be saying that if you want to preserve wilderness on Earth then you must logically want to preserve wilderness on Mars. He's setting up an idiotic position and then, surprise, surprise, knocking it down.

Besides, his Reds don't seem very purist in other areas. They are quite happy to blow up nuclear power stations to slow down the terraforming process. Strangely, this has no deleterious effects on the planet. Also they often seem happy to take advantage of the rampant genetic engineering which also takes place without a hint of problems.

But if his science is occasionally bad, his politics and economics are woeful in the extreme. Robinson is a big fan of decentralisation, claiming that the larger the state, the greater the power of the leaders and therefore the greater the corruption. But you only have to look at a few US cities, or Australian State Governments, to see that, if anything, corrupt regimes find it easier to establish themselves in small ponds than in big ones. He also misses entirely the chaos and inefficiency that will arise from each Martian town being allowed to define its own educational qualifications, tax laws, rules of the road and so on.

To give him his credit, Robinson does spot the problem that individual towns, especially if ethnically based, may impose legalised discrimination descended from old Terran cultures. He makes vague noises in the Martian constitution about discouraging this, but it is plain that many groups intend to ignore it. He also ignores the potential for the development of regionally-based Martian nations and cultures, although as for most of the series Mars is either tacitly or actually at war with Earth, this effect may be dampened somewhat.

Robinson's economics is even more radical, and would be interesting is it were not so badly thought out. You can always tell when he has no good argument to put forward because in

those cases characters make exactly the sort of emotionally-charged, illogical, ranting speeches that he normally reserves for the environmentalists and yet manage to carry the debate.

Chief amongst Robinson's fantasies is that profit is some sort of plug hole in the economy through which vast sums of money vanish into the pockets of evil shareholders. He therefore intends to make it illegal for any business to make a profit. Now, as anyone who has run their own business knows, profit is the difference between your income and your legitimate expenses. Those expenses happen to include the wages you pay, the rent on your premises and the cost of the equipment you buy. It is very easy to manipulate profit figures by such devices as increasing wages or upgrading everyone's computer. Thus, to outlaw profit, Robinson will have to have laws giving guidelines for how businesses spend their money. In no time he will be back to the sort of centralised, planned economy he claims to despise.

Profit is also a major source of money for company investment. Robinson manages to spot this, and argues that all investment will be provided from interest free loans from co-operative banks. OK, but if the banks cannot charge interest, how do they make any money to pay their staff? And does he seriously believe that those banks will not want some sort of say in how their loans are used, because that is what is required if his vision of no one but the workers having control of the company is to be realised.

Possibly the most glaring example of this sort of idiocy comes in *Green Mars* when, at the constitutional congress, one character proudly asserts that all Martians shall have the right to free housing, food, education and health care. This is to be paid for by taxes on businesses related to their use of natural resources, and a tax of one year's wages on all Martians.

Leaving aside the flat rate income tax structure, which will have its own problems, let us consider whether this equation balances. Modern societies have trouble enough paying for just education and health care. It is hard to gauge how much money the resource use tax will bring in, but we can safely assume that it does not amount to a lot more than business taxation in our world. As for income tax, a normal working life is around 40 years, so the Martian tax rate would be 2.5%. Or at least it would be if Martians lived standard lifespans. Unfortunately, genetic treatments invented by one of the characters (actually the very one who made the ridiculous promise above) have resulted in Martians living for around 300 years, so the effective income tax rate is only around 1%. Personally, I think the Martian government will have a serious balance of payments problem.

The longer the series goes on, the more of this naïve wish fulfilment we see and I found myself getting more and more angry with the books. Coincidentally, at the same time I was finishing *Blue Mars*, I happened to read Julie Birchill's review of the official Paul McCartney biography. Dear Julie, despite having sold out long ago to the evil press barons of Wapping, still tries to maintain the style of angry, anti-establishment prose for which she became famous in the punk era. This time her target was not so much the comfortably conventional Sir Paul, but John Lennon. Birchill, of course, detests McCartney's bland and vacuous silly love songs, but she reserves her greatest ire against Beatle-penned songs for *Imagine*. This is partly because what we now know of Lennon's life makes it grossly hypocritical, but mainly, it would seem, because the song is so damn naïve, complacent and lacking in any constructive suggestion of how its utopian vision might be achieved. I felt very much the same way about the Mars trilogy.

The irony is that in the end Robinson fixes on exactly the same solution to the world's woes as the capitalists he professes to hate. When I was at university, I attended a lecture given by Sir Keith Joseph, one of the smartest and most eccentric ministers of Margaret Thatcher's new government. Someone in the audience asked him how he expected economic growth to continue apace forever when we clearly lived on a finite planet. Most politicians would dodge this one, muttering about the difficulty of long term forecasts, but Joseph was never afraid to speculate. Science will provide, he told us. Continued technological progress will allow us to make more and more efficient use of the resources we have, and if we do run out, it will take us into space where the possibilities are almost limitless.

And that, dear reader, is exactly the same magic wand that is waved by Robinson in *Blue Mars*. Sure we are in deep trouble, sure utopian societies are a bit difficult to establish in a world where most people are starving, but science will provide. Terraforming, genetic engineering and robotics will work without a hitch. Fusion reactors will provide limitless free energy and the engines for super-fast starships. All of our woes will go away if only we let the world be run by scientists. There is a precise scientific term that is used to describe thinking like this: "crap".

Strange because they are Alien

And so from the pathetic to the sublime. Reviewing *North Wind* in Interzone, Paul McAuley described it as "one of the best radical hard SF novels of the year". I don't know what the poor boy was thinking about at the time - hard edged, perhaps - because Gwyneth Jones' writing bears the same resemblance to hard SF as fine claret does to wine vinegar. The one is rich in texture and a delight to savour; the other sour, unpalatable and best used in small quantities as a flavouring (which is indeed exactly how Ms. Jones does use it).

I guess the major difference between this and the Mars trilogy is that it can still claim the tag "imaginative fiction". Writers like Robinson imagine very little, though they may research a lot. Indeed, the whole ethic of hard SF is that the science in it is justifiable, not imagined. But Britain, I'm pleased to say, currently has a fine crop of writers for whom imagination is the key to their work. Gwyneth Jones is one of the best, but therein lies a problem.

You can always tell a good story from the fact that you dare not reveal any of the plot in a review for fear of spoiling the book for readers. But what do you do with books that are so richly and intelligently imagined, and so subtly revealed, that you dare not even mention much about the setting for fear of generating spoilers.

I looked back at my view of *White Queen*, the first book in the trilogy, in the hope that I could at least say what I said there without causing extra irritation, but I'd been very circumspect. So - spoiler warning - here is a little of the flavour.

The aliens are super beings. They claim to be immortal, are telepathic and can change sex at will. Their science is way beyond ours. Or at least that is what we thought when they arrived. Possibly they've been kidding us.

Take this immortality, for example. It isn't that they can't die, but they believe strongly in resurrection. When a child is born, they decide which dead character it resembles, and then sit the poor kid down in front of videos of that person until it is brainwashed into believing it really is that person. They attach deep religious significance to this process. As for their science, they are brilliant at biological engineering, but terrified of electronics.

Their social customs are disgusting, at least as far as humans are concerned. They live in a feudal society which, because of their reincarnation, means that individuals have their lives pretty much defined from birth. If your previous incarnation was a serf, you will be a serf too. Also they are covered with lice. They groom like monkeys, and, like monkeys, they eat any vermin they catch.

Humans have a morbid obsession with death. They claim to believe in permanent death, but this is only because they don't know how to identify new incarnations. Instead the poor devils spend much of their lives watching Life Records of thousands of people, desperately seeking information about former lives. Their priests are everywhere, poking cameras in your face and asking personal questions. They even cover their buildings in tiny devices called bugs to ensure that no detail of anyone's Life Record is missed.

There also seems to be some sort of belief in necromancy as they spend much time studying Life Records of people who have not died. They do this to us a lot. Perhaps they are trying to magically wish us dead.

Perhaps the most confusing thing about humans is their attitude to lying down together. Apparently they come in two species, each of which has only half a set of reproductive organs. Those with one set are expected to behave as if they were male, and the others as if they were female, despite the fact that it is obvious that both species exhibit both masculine and feminine traits in varying amounts. What is worse, one of their major political divisions is between the Women's Movement (which includes many biological males and whose leaders show strong masculine traits) and the Traditionalists (which includes biological females and people with feminine traits). It is all very confusing.

Most of the time they seem almost unaware of what they say in Common Speech and, as a result, can be unspeakably rude. They use Formal Speech much more widely than we do, and in that are much more circumspect in what they say. Much of their difficulty in communication comes from their not having wanderers. However, it is difficult to tell whether this is a physical disability, i.e. they are all isolate, or a result of their desire to surround themselves with death. Why, almost everything they make they insist on killing the materials, or using lifeless matter, before they start.

White Queen, as I reported in issue 20, tells of the original arrival of the aliens on Earth. The other two novels take place much later. *North Wind* is set about 100 years on by which time most human societies are collapsing fast and the Gender Wars are decimating much of the planet. The trilogy has the traditional introduction-advance story-conclusion structure, and

this means that there is a fair amount of set-up stuff in North Wind. Not that you notice it: it is a respectable spy story in its own right. It just doesn't have the level of philosophical debate that the other books have. If anything, it leaves you with just two powerful images to carry forward into the finale, both of which could have come out of a book by Joanna Russ or Margaret Atwood.

The first is a visit made by the lead characters to an old building which turns out to have been an hospital. There are two large wards, one painted blue which is empty but otherwise untouched, the other painted pink, thoroughly trashed, and full of small bodies. The second is a trip made by some aliens to a London street market where they find that humans have at last embraced their biological engineering techniques. The product is "lifelike" sex dolls, proportioned like Barbie, but around the size of a 12-year-old girl.

Phoenix Café is another 200 years later and human society, with the exception of the isolationist USSA, is now so disorganised that the aliens are effectively the only organised group, and hence form what passes for government. Unfortunately, they are planning on leaving, and the humans are not entirely sure how they will cope without them.

The story focuses on a small but growing grass roots movement called the Renaissance which aims to restore pride in human skills and achievements. But the scars of the Gender Wars don't go away that easily, and you can't build a brave new world without exorcising the ghosts of the old.

As a novel, I thought that *Phoenix Café* was excellent, particularly the ending which packs some whopping surprises. However, I was very disappointed with the final message. My apologies for getting into political philosophy twice in one issue. I'll try to keep this short.

Difference has always been the standard human excuse for war, discrimination and hatred. Sometimes it is just philosophical - people are happy to die for a religion, a flag, a political creed - but the favoured excuse is always the physical. Anyone who has a different skin colour, hair colour, eye colour, nose shape or, of course, gender, is physically different and therefore assumed to be evil and inferior.

To combat this, political theorists have constructed the excuse that we are all really the same. The differences are only cosmetic, or the result of our culture and upbringing. The idea that there may be scientific proof of actual differences is anathema to this belief.

Unfortunately, it is by no means obvious that political will can stop things from being scientifically true. We've done pretty well in proving that all humans are essentially the same species, and yet genetic variation does exist, and the one skill area in which individuals are commonly pitted against each other in public competition, sport, occasionally turns up worrying circumstantial evidence that certain ethnic subgroups do have advantages over others. There is continual worry that some scientist may come up with a genetic basis for homosexuality, and there is little doubt that males and females have substantial physical differences, including quite different brain structures. Besides, this "we are all the same" theory also leads us into problems in education where people quite clearly do not all have the same skills. And as for the animal rights crowd, who knows. This idea has such a pervasive hold on left-wing thinking that it would not surprise me to hear them claiming that humans, seals and cows are "all the same" under the skin.

Gwyneth Jones' books were interesting because they brought humanity face to face with intelligent beings who were undeniably different (as opposed to the anthropomorphic aliens you get in Star Trek and most other SF). Here there was an opportunity for someone to say "look, some people really are different, and we have to come to terms with this".

Sadly, Jones' has not taken this tack. Instead she used the aliens as a spur to encourage humans to put aside their gender differences (as in physically get rid of them) in order to unite against a common enemy. It is rather like trying to solve the Northern Ireland problem by saying, "look guys, we have to stop this, there's a war to be fought against Islam". A shame, I'd expected better of her

North Wind - Gwyneth Jones - Gollancz - softcover

Phoenix Café - Gwyneth Jones - Gollancz - hardcover

Wildwood with a difference

It is hard to review this year's World Fantasy Award winner without comparing it to *Winter Rose* (see Emerald City #24). Both are highly acclaimed fantasy novel, both by women writers, and both deal with Faerie and the Wildwood. And yet they could not be more different. Patricia McKillip has been writing fantasy for decades, and her book is set firmly in the world of fairy tales. Terri Wilding, on the other hand, is an experienced editor (she and Ellen Datlow have worked together on many anthologies) and *The Wood Wife* appears to be a rare, if not first novel. Unlike *Winter Rose*, it is set in the real world, albeit with weird things happening. It is close kin to the work of Rob Holdstock and Charles De Lindt. And where McKillip simply tells a beautiful story of love and magic, Wilding has a lot to say for herself, much of it rather confused.

The book is about a woman writer who unexpectedly finds herself willed the house of an eccentric poet, Davis Cooper, whom she had befriended in letters. The suave, urban Maggie, with her arty hair cut and Armani jacket, finds herself living on a smallholding in the hills outside Tuscon, Arizona. In part this is a welcome escape from her hugely successful and self-centred ex-husband, Nigel; in part it is a terrifying plunge into an entirely different world in which all of her pre-conceptions have to be thrown aside.

To start with, it is a pretty strange community. Cooper appears to have been drowned, in a dry river bed. His artist wife committed suicide, and the property turns out to include a number of other houses all occupied by people who are arty or crazy or both. It is all very Lovecraftian: small community, all of them fruitcakes. That, however, is quite mild compared to having something that looks to be half-girl, half-jackrabbit come to breakfast.

The mystery gets resolved in a reasonably satisfactory manner, although some of the characters seem to take rather too much for granted too easily, and occasionally behave oddly for purposes of fitting in with the requirements of the plot. Meanwhile, Wilding throws in her opinions on a wide range of topics from husbands to environmentalism to poetry.

The environmental bit is both confusing and depressing. The central character is a vegetarian, and most of the cast rail against property developers. Yet when, at one point, a Shaman character comes out with the standard "killing is natural" line: Maggie seems disgusted but does not attempt to argue. And do you remember the bit in the Mars review where I said some animal rights person would argue that animals are people too. Well, this book has shape-shifters, and guess what argument Wilding is using them to make. Aaaaaaargh.....

Another confusing part of the book is Wilding's attitude to fantasy. At some points she seems to be railing against publishers' negative attitudes to such work. There is, for example, a lovely aside where Maggie muses that if she ever wrote a book of her experiences she'd have to adopt a Brazilian pen name and call it Magic Realism or it would never get published. She is also a big fan of Brian Froud, one of the most distinctive of modern fantasy artists (think *Dark Crystal* if you don't know what I mean). Froud's work features in the book, and was clearly the inspiration for Wilding's Faerie. And yet at heart the book is really about artists, not mythical beings. Almost all of the major characters are either poets, painters or musicians, and many famous figures feature off-stage. Wilding "quotes" many of Cooper's letters, in which it is clear that he was an intimate friend of the like of Anaïs Nin and Salvador Dali. Sometimes it is hard to work out who is real and who isn't.

So why was this confusing? Because I could never quite work out whether this was a serious attempt to write a fantasy novel, or if it was some intricate commentary on the dreadful troubles of those poor tortured souls who devote themselves to the search for True Art. I think Wilding has spent far too long in the London luvvie crowd. The cover blurb seems to suggest that the book was written after she moved to Arizona. Here's hoping that the real desert does a better job of shaking her out of her pretentious arty and PC attitudes than her imagined Faerie did for Maggie.

The Wood Wife - Terri Wilding - Legend - softcover

Meanwhile in Melbourne

First up, a big cheer for the readers of SF Chronicle. The magazine's annual readers' poll has voted Ian Gunn Best Fan Artist. Good on yer, Gunny, mate.

And talking of Mr. Gunn, he has just launched a new fanzine. *Mind Wallaby* (the name was taken from a Fanthorpe description of someone with eclectic interests) is largely a collection of strange and amusing things. I must say that I think Ian's comedy is best expressed in cartoons. He writes very good serious articles, for example the Gunshots column in the latest *Ethel the Aardvark* which turns a Kalashnikov at the Aussiecon Three board and hits with every burst. The comedy articles in *Mind Wallaby* are not perhaps as funny as they might be, but at least most of it is original and not copied from Internet posts. Besides, it is a first issue. Worth checking out.

Also on the fannish scene, November saw the 40th birthday of leading Melbourne fan, James Allen (commonly known as "Jocko"). Terry Frost and I wandered along to prove that there is life after that awful landmark, and I have to admit that the location held certain attractions. It

took place in a café in the city's most famous suburb, Moonee Ponds. These days, there is a road called Everage Street, though there is some doubt as to whether the Housewife Superstar actually lived there or if it was just a piece of opportunism by the local council during a redevelopment. Whatever, it is still a famous location. Funny though, I didn't see a single gladiolus.

The October fannish pub meet was a bit of a damp squib, largely thanks to the local train services being on strike that day. However, the small group turned up was notable for the inclusion of Perry Middlemiss. You don't see the Aussiecon Three Chair at many fannish events, but Perry is not the sort of fellow to pass up an excuse for the good pint or five. Speaking as a Pom, I must say that I find the Dickens Tavern about as disgusting as the Outback Steakhouses in America. But they do have a good selection of (canned) British beer. UK fans please note (although the Sherlock Holmes is about 5 minutes closer to the World Congress Centre).

Anyway, I do hope that things pick up over the next few months. Melbourne fans need to get together with the A3 people as often as they can. This is a good opportunity.

Talking of that convention, I gather that Ian Gunn and Karen Pender-Gunn have been asked to run the fan lounge. This is a good move. They probably trade fanzines more widely than anyone else in Melbourne. Also it is something that they can more or less be allowed to go off on their own and do, which for two people who detest committees is probably a good idea.

Meanwhile, a suitable venue for the masquerade still seems to be in doubt. Wendy tells me despairingly that someone suggested they use the site of this year's Costumers' Ball. Sure, we'll bus people 20 km to a site with a maximum capacity of around 300. Get real, guys, you need to sort this one.

The News from Down Under

Turning away from SF for a moment, Melbourne is shortly to see a major sporting event. No, it is nothing to do with cricket, though it will take place at the famous Melbourne Cricket Ground (which, I point out, is bigger than Wembley and most NFL stadia). For the first time in ages, Australia is going to see an important soccer match. Under the expert eye of ex-Spurs and England manager, Terry Venables, the Socceroos are now just two matches away from a place in the 1998 World Cup. These are home and away matches against Iran, and the final game takes place in Melbourne on the 29th. It will be interesting to see the world's most sports-mad nation taking part in the world's biggest inter-national sports event (remember folks, Olympic competitors are supposed to be there as individuals).

Meanwhile, whilst El Tel is working hard to bring Australia glory on the world stage, the Australian Government is doing its best to shoot itself in the foot from every possible angle.

Some of you may remember me discussing the Wik controversy over Aboriginal land rights. The saga of how much of Australia was and is "owned" by Aboriginal tribes has been running

for some time. The most important question here concerns pastoral leases to settlers. Prime Minister Howard proudly points out that the Aboriginals have the right to claim over 70% of the land mass. Most of that, of course, is rather reminiscent of Mars before Kim Stanley Robinson terraformed it. The good bits, the fertile bits, have nearly all been "given" to whites.

Some years ago, Keating's Labour government tried to settle all this. Their legal advice at the time was that the Aboriginals didn't have a leg to stand on, and that made thrashing out a deal relatively easy. However, this was subject to waiting for the High Court to rule on the matter. In the meantime, some bright spark discovered records which clearly showed that some grants of land had been conditional on the new owner allowing the local tribes to continue their traditional use of the land alongside the cattle and sheep. This led to the Wik ruling, and mucho confusion.

The trouble is, that you can't tell which leases included this right and which did not without spending a lot of money on tracing the original documents. The farmers, with some justification, say that this level of uncertainty is intolerable. The Aboriginals say they are not giving up any rights they may have.

As far as I can see, Howard's proposed legislation does a reasonable job of interpreting the facts of the Wik ruling. However, he has promoted it in such an arrogant and insensitive manner that everyone is convinced he is being outrageously racist. A speech by Carl Lewis (a far more astute politician than Howard) on a recent visit here seems to have defused the threat of an Olympic boycott for the moment, but the issue is far from over yet. The worst aspect of it is that Howard has threatened to call a General Election if his bill is blocked by the Senate. To bring the country to the polls on a question that most people see as a race issue is mind-numbingly stupid. Fortunately there is little doubt that the Coalition would lose unless they got a big anti-Aboriginal vote, so the party managers will probably sack him rather than let him do it. And not a moment too soon.

Howard's other monumental disaster is the forthcoming international conference on CO₂ emissions. Australia is a rich country, and has one of the highest per capita emission of CO₂ in the world. All of its major cities except Canberra are likely to suffer significantly from rises in sea level, and many of its near neighbours are Pacific Islands that would be drowned completely by relatively small rises. It has the highest rate of melanoma in the world, courtesy of the Antarctic ozone layer hole. And yet, almost alone apart from the OPEC countries, Australia is standing firm in insisting on being allowed to increase emissions. Howard's excuse is that any form of emission control would cost jobs.

Most of the country seems to think he's being unreasonable. The media are crucifying him, and his only response is to stick his head in the sand. I hate to say this, but here's hoping the Kyoto conference slaps massive trade sanctions on Australia. That, of course, would cause far more job losses than a carbon tax. With any luck it would also cause Howard's government to fall.

Meanwhile, we are being treated to the interesting spectacle of an election for members of a Constitutional Conference. The purpose of said meeting is to decide what would be the best form of constitution for Australia to adopt were it to become a republic. Howard, of course, is a devout monarchist, but after Keating had promised a republic by 2000 he had to provide a sop

of some sort. Little of the debate so far is particularly edifying. A TV pundit on this morning's news suggested that Australians are far too laid back to be bothered with anything so radical as writing a new constitution. I fear he may be right.

Footnote

And there we must leave Cheryl, up to her neck and beyond in data on power stations, seriously lacking in sleep, and about to uproot herself once again. Michael Jordan seems to think that my life would make a good soap opera. Personally I don't think anyone would believe the script.

Fortunately, there are plenty of good bits too.

Next issue, SMOFcon, the Secret Masters of Fandom plot to overthrow the world. Which fannish leader is up for assassination? Who will get the Worldcon in 2004? Is Ben Yalow the secret boss of Microsoft? Can I get out alive with a report? Will I stay awake long enough to get one? Join us next week, same cat time, same cat channel...

Meow,

Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl