

EMERALD CITY #73

Issue 73

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An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at cmorgan@emcit.com or on line at <http://www.emcit.com>

Introduction

Welcome the issue #73 of *Emerald City*, the official newsletter of the Send a Hugo to China Campaign.

This issue features the traditional, lengthy report from Worldcon. My apologies to all of you who much prefer book reviews to convention reports. All I can say is that this only happens once a year.

In This Issue

Streets of Philadelphia - the traditional extensive Worldcon report

Ultimate Roleplaying - Matt Stover creates docu-dramas in a fantasy world

War in Fantasyland - John Marco admits that even in fantasyland war is brutal and nasty

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Streets of Philadelphia

A perfect site?

I'd like to start this year's Worldcon report by saying that Philadelphia is the best Worldcon site that I have seen. That doesn't necessarily mean that the convention made the best use of what was available, but the facilities were almost everything we could ask for.

To start with, the Pennsylvania Convention Center was large and spacious. There was never any sense of the crowding we had in Chicago, and things like the Voodoo Board could be placed near to major thoroughfares without causing a traffic jam. We could perhaps have done with a little more seating in those spacious hallways, but if you don't have the space in the first place you can't do useful things with it.

The Convention Center is surrounded by large hotels, some of them with direct walkway connections. They are big, downtown hotels in a major tourist city, so they don't come cheap. But there was none of the nickel-and-diming that we had to suffer in Chicago. Kevin and I were in the Marriott. It was a bit more expensive than we would have liked, and we avoided their

restaurants, but they had excellent Internet access. I paid \$40 for a week's high-speed service that was as good as my DSL line back home. Consequently getting the web log done was a snap, technology-wise.

The other good thing about the Marriott was that its elevators worked almost flawlessly throughout the convention. After the queues and breakdowns in Chicago, this was a welcome relief. The situation was, of course, helped by sensible planning of party locations so as to minimise elevator traffic, but even so the elevators did a fine job under the circumstances.

The building in which the Convention Center is located is actually the remains of an old railway station. As you can see from some of the photographs, the arched roof of the terminal is still in place. It is an excellent piece of re-use of a fine building, and not at all what you normally expect of American cities. The railway is still, to some extent, in place too. There is a station directly below the Convention Center and it has a direct service into the heart of the airport. The trains could do with more luggage space, but other than that it is a perfect transit arrangement.

Beneath part of the Convention Center is Reading Terminal Market. This is actually a survival of the original use of the site. The farmers were there first, and the railway came to them to minimise the difficulty of exporting food. Philadelphia clearly has a long history of sensible transit planning.

These days the market still has something of the favour of a farmers' market, but it has much more as well. Food comes in from everywhere, and in a wide range of cuisines. In one of the cheese shops I found the American version of Jersey Blue, a superb cheese made only on two small farms, one on Exmoor in England and the other in Vermont, USA. In the Thai grocery

I found shrimp paste for the first time since leaving Australia. Now I have everything I need to make Thai curry paste from scratch.

In addition to the grocery stalls, the market also has a large number of fast food outlets. You can, of course, dine on those famous Philadelphia cheesesteak sandwiches. Or you can get ribs, or pasta, or Chinese food, or salad, or just coffee and pastries. The market was an ideal venue for breakfast and lunch, and it was a tragedy for the convention that it was closed on Sunday and Monday (Monday being the Labor Day public holiday).

As for dinner, the Convention Center adjoins Philadelphia's Chinatown. Kevin and I tried five different restaurants, all of them good in their own way, and all of them within a few blocks of our hotel. Some of those restaurants were open until 3:00am, ideal for the somnambulant Worldcon crowd. There are more detailed write-ups of the various places we ate in my journal for IgoUgo.

The one disadvantage of the site is that it is, if anything, too big. We rattled in there. The exhibit space looked as if half of the planned exhibits had cancelled at the last minute. Also half of the program rooms were at the other end of the Convention Center from the majority of the action. They were hard to find, and everyone who got put down there (gaming, readings, WSFS, child program, academics) got the impression that they had been exiled. I'm sure that better space planning, and more active selling (or even giving away) of the available space could have made for a better convention, but once again, the important thing is to have the space in the first place.

Making the point

The one big mistake that The Millennium Philcon made was to print the names on the badges in very small type. There were all sorts of silly conspiracy theory explanations for this, the most popular being that the badges had been designed by a man who liked having to peer closely at women's chests. The real explanation, however, is that it was just another case of snafu.

The source of the problem was that the convention's registration database was a Microsoft Works spreadsheet. The lady in charge of registration got this just a few days before the convention started, along with all of the hardware and software she was to be using for check-in and badge printing. Not being very computer-savvy, she did the best she could under the circumstances, and in fact much of her time was spent sorting out the data.

To give the convention its credit, they did get some IT people in later to help out. The badge names were printed on adhesive strips stuck to the laminated badges, so it was relatively easy to offer a replacement badge name service. However, this wasn't well publicised and like the rest of the convention I spent far too much time peering at people's chests. I was also left wondering which idiot ordered only 3,500 laminate sleeves when the convention knew beforehand that they had sold over 4,000 memberships. It wasn't a good con to be working registration, and the superlative performance by Sharon Sbarsky and her team in Chicago made things look even worse.

MilPhil didn't have any other major public disasters, but behind the scenes people were tearing their hair out all over the place. Shortly after we arrived, Mark Olson asked Kevin how much ConJosé had paid the Philadelphians to set us such an easy

target to beat. But in fact few of the problems were noticeable. Hardly anyone knew, for example, that there were prizes for hall costumes available, but no one remembered to actually give them out. In retrospect, it is a credit to Todd Dashoff that he managed to remain mostly calm and serene in public, despite the fact that half of his committee seemed to want to kill him, and that Patty Wells was spending more time using her professional crisis counselling skills than running the con office.

WSFS Business

Kevin and I spent much of our time running the Business Meeting of the World Science Fiction Society. As this involves three 2-hour meetings, and creating agendas for the latter two on the basis of what happens at previous meetings, it is a major undertaking. We didn't have much time to see the convention until Sunday afternoon.

I was absolutely delighted to see the resolution for extending Hugo eligibility for the rest of the world passed for another year. The effect of this is that all works published in 2000 that did not receive US publication in that year are still eligible for the 2002 Hugos. Books falling into this category include *Perdido Street Station* (China Miéville), *Cosmonaut Keep* (Ken MacLeod) and *Revelation Space* (Al Reynolds). Given that the Glasgow Worldcon bid is being voted on at ConJosé, there should be a higher than average British voting block next year, and I have high hopes of *Perdido Street Station* getting a nomination, if not the Hugo that, in my humble opinion, it richly deserves.

Another major item for debate was the proposed split of the Best Dramatic Presentation Hugo into two categories. The

basic idea is to separate movies from TV shows, but in these days of made-for-TV movies and blockbuster mini-series, creating a workable definition of the split is hard. Last year three different alternatives were presented. The members of the Business Meeting found this so confusing that they referred the whole matter to a committee.

This year that committee recommended that the split be based on running time, with a fair amount of leeway allowed to the administrator for shuffling items between categories. There was some debate at the Business Meeting as to the best choice of length for the split, and the amount of leeway to be allowed. Eventually we settled on 90 minutes as the break point, with the lesser of 20% or 20 minutes for leeway.

The latter point deserves some explanation. Originally the split had been proposed at 100 minutes, for which 20% and 20 minutes are the same. Many people, including myself, wondered why the same leeway definition had been kept the same when the split was changed to 90 minutes. Kevin explained it thus: the amount of leeway allowed is based on the system used for written fiction (where it is 20% or 4,000 words). The same definition is used regardless of the length of the works in each category (and written fiction has four: short story, novelette, novella and novel). The same system has been adopted for dramatic presentations, just in case we add yet further categories (for example a very long form for mini-series or a very short form for songs or web animations).

The motion attracted some fierce debate, and I was pleased to see that those in favour of a split (primarily media fans) had taken on board the lesson that it is more important to get the motion passed than to worry about the precise details. I think that

most of the people who said that we should not pass the motion without a completely watertight and unambiguous definition of the two categories were actually using wrecking tactics.

By normal WSFS rules, the motion now passes to ConJosé for ratification. I expect more fierce debate. There is a substantial minority amongst fandom that feels that the Hugos should be confined solely to written fiction and who will mobilise to try to stop the motion. It could be interesting.

Of course no Business Meeting is complete without some degree of silliness, and this year's daft debate was about badge name sizes. A group of well-known fans who should probably know better put forward a motion that would change the WSFS constitution to require Worldcon committees to print badge names in at least 24-point type. This sort of thing is, of course, impossible to enforce (as evidenced by Westercon, which has a similar provision in its constitution but still often ends up with unreadable badges). It is also prone all sorts of silly nit-picking about the precise meaning of point size, the font used and so on. Ben Yalow sensibly suggested that we make the motion a resolution rather than a constitutional amendment, which would allow us to express our displeasure without messing up the constitution. However, the members were clearly sufficiently enraged by the badge name debacle to want to make a more positive statement. In the end we referred the matter to the Nit Picking & Fly Specking Committee (effectively WSFS's constitutional lawyers), ordering them to remind Worldcon committees "early and often" about the need for readable badges.

One new committee was created at the meeting. Its job will be to study the history of Worldcons and the Hugos. The intention here is to put an end to the interminable

arguments about what precisely should appear in Worldcon program books where the lists of past Worldcons and Hugo winners are given. We won't be able to produce a definitive answer, because in many cases there is no one around who can remember precisely what happened. But at least we can note all of the areas of dispute, which will hopefully prevent Worldcons inadvertently taking sides in long-running feuds because they did not have time to check out the details.

A surfeit of dragons

And so to my favourite part of the convention. The Masquerade, I hope, is fun for the audience because of the quality of the costumes and presentation. But it is also fun backstage. It is fun to be part of the show, and it is fun to be part of the slick, well-oiled machine that is the regular Worldcon Masquerade crew. We do a good show, and we know it. It is enough to make you want to run away and join the circus.

This year's Masquerade was blessed with a surfeit of dragons. Quite what promoted this I do not know, but three separate acts had chosen to produce dragon costumes. The baby dragon gave no hint of what was to come. Known as "Bubbles", it contained young Millisa Knappenberger and was a simple matter of childish delight. The middle-sized dragon was awesome, another stunning creation by master craftsman, Brian Healey (he who produced the Bucconeer motorbike costume). And then there was Irving: possibly the only thing that could put Brian in the shade, a full size Chinese dragon with no less than 18 people inside it. Fortunately the Marriott ballroom had the biggest and best stage I have yet seen at a Worldcon, though even so we were severely cramped for space thanks to the surfeit of draconian flesh.

As usual I was working as a den mom. I had only 4 acts to look after, but as one of them was the 8-person group, Carnivale of Mars, I had plenty of people in my care. Thankfully they were mostly magnificently behaved. Even the two novices, a father and daughter team, did everything right. My only real problem was that one of the Carnivale troupe sneaked off into the audience to see the show. Come time to line up ready to go on stage, he was nowhere to be found. Fortunately his sense of timing hadn't deserted him, and he appeared right on schedule, thus preventing a mass heart attack amongst his colleagues. This is not what I expect from *Emerald City* readers. You won't do that to me again, will you, Dave.

Prizes everywhere

I'm pleased to say that everyone in my den got an award. The biggest bouquets go to Gunther Anderson who scooped both Best in Class (Journeyman) and the coveted Costume APA Award. I have to confess that his costume was held together on a wing and a prayer. We spent ages trying to secure the helmet of his space suit, but nothing worked. Thankfully the costume looked fine at a distance, and anyway it was the presentation that was important.

A man in a 2001-style space suit discovers a strange, black monolith. It has a switch on it, and when he presses it a rectangular screen lights up. Images flash across the screen, and music plays. The monolith cycles progressively through TV shows that get more awful as time goes on. The theme tunes are what clues the audience into what is happening. The spaceman clutches at his head in pain, eventually wrenching off his helmet to reveal that a continual diet of bad TV has caused him to devolve into a monkey. The audience loved it, and so did the judges.

My happiness for the people in my den was dimmed somewhat by the fact that once again the judges gave far too many prizes. My guess is that between 80% and 90% of the contestants received awards. The kids all got something, they always do, but amongst the adults it was a small, select and deeply unhappy group that went away with nothing. Knowing how much work goes into each and every costume, it is heartbreaking to see the pain in those faces after the show. If there were more people who did not get awards it would not seem so cruel.

But what of the dragons? Bubbles got an award of course. Everyone knew she would. Brian got Best in Show (Workmanship), and deservedly so. The excellence of the dragon (which had many moving parts, including the wings) was matched by the armour of the troupe of space marines sent out to battle it. Presentation wise, however, the entry relied heavily on the awesomeness of the beast. Brian's chances were also harmed by mechanical problems, and the sheer effort and manpower required to hoist the dragon onto the stage, all of which resulted in his entry being severely delayed. Irving got Best in Class (Master), primarily by dint of being so huge. It was an OK day for dragons, but they did not conquer.

Best in Show went to a group entitled "Friday at Ten". The entry was based on the Twilight Zone TV show, and the costumes all represented some sort of monster. They were all dressed in grey and silver, because they were on a black and white TV show. Workmanship wise, most of the costumes were not that spectacular, but the audience loved the presentation. It has been quite a while since one of the big, spectacular acts failed to scoop the top prize. For many reasons, MilPhil's Masquerade will be one to remember.

A Hugo travesty

After the abominable display in Chicago last year, MilPhil's Hugo Ceremony team, could have forgotten all of their lines and still have been counted a success. Fortunately they were not quite that bad, but some of them tried very hard indeed to match Chicon's incompetence.

The majority of the attention focused on the program book for the Hugo ceremony. The people who did it had an interesting idea in that they were trying to make the booklet look antique - presumably 18th Century. Unfortunately the execution was seriously lacking. The graphic design was poor, and the reproduction quality was absolutely abysmal. The booklet looked like it had been put together by a bunch of school kids using a 10-year-old photocopier. Thankfully there were none of the embarrassing typographical errors that marred the Chicago program book, but it was still embarrassing. Goodness only knows what the people whose advertisements had been so badly reproduced thought.

The ceremony itself had a couple of hitches, but other than that proceeded smoothly under the leadership of Esther Friesner. She decided to get most of her jokes out of the way at the start and treated us to an amusing presentation as "Rap Master Toast". Her rap wasn't exactly memorable, but it did get the audience warmed up.

Sadly we then had to sit through almost an hour of those "other awards". This year the First Fandom, Big Heart and Seiuns have been joined by the Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award. This is a nice idea. It was founded by relatives of the late Cordwainer Smith and is intended to be given to past SF writers whose work the judges feel has been unjustly neglected. The

inaugural award was given, quite correctly, to Olaf Stapledon.

The trouble with these awards, all of which are good things in their own right, is that they are presented by the people responsible for organising the award. These folks feel honour bound to spend 10 minutes or so explaining what their award is and why it is given. That is excusable with the Cordwainer Smith Award, which is new, but not with the others. The Hugo audience is forced to sit through this every year, and every year there are complaints about it. Once these other awards are out of the way, we rattle through the Campbell and the twelve Hugos at great speed. Somehow Hugo ceremony directors need to explain to the other award people that they causing offence, and that they have no right to continue to use the ceremony as a soapbox. I like having these extra awards around, but if their presenters don't learn a bit of self-restraint they are going to find themselves excluded from the ceremony.

Still, as I said, everything else went smoothly. Both presenters and acceptors of the Hugos were mercifully brief in their comments, except of course for the very wonderful Connie Willis who is so entertaining that no one minds in the slightest that she goes on a bit. For the most part, as well, there was no attempt to make use of the platform for political purposes. The only exception was Victor Gonzales who took the opportunity of presenting the Best Fan Artist award to comment that a fanzine without art might just as well be rassf. I noted the insult, Victor, and I won't forget it.

Martin Hoare's acceptance speeches on behalf of Dave Langford are always worth a laugh as well. This time Dave sent a note to say that he felt this year's Best Fan Writer Hugo win would be his last. He understood that President Bush was

embarking on developing a sophisticated missile defence system, with the express intention of shooting down any Hugo rockets before they could leave the country.

The one thing that marred an otherwise slick presentation was the fault, not of the ceremony, but of the Hugo Administrators. The WSFS Constitution stipulates that all ballots give voters the opportunity to vote for "No Award" if they think that some or all of the nominees are unworthy of a Hugo. This year's Administrators, Saul Jaffe and Rick Katze, decided that this meant No Award was a legitimate nominee and should therefore be announced alongside all of the other nominees. The presenters clearly found this embarrassing, and tried hard to make a joke of it, but the audience was heartily sick of it by the third presentation. This is a classic example of the fannish tendency to take the most absurd literal interpretation of a piece of legalese that can be found and then insist that that interpretation has the force of Holy writ. Hopefully this nonsense won't ever happen again.

Hugo Results

Best Novel: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, J.K.Rowling;

Best Novella: *The Ultimate Earth*, Jack Williamson (*Analog* 12/00);

Best Novelette: *Millennium Babies*, Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*Asimov's* 1/00);

Best Short Story: *Different Kinds of Darkness*, David Langford (*F&SF* 1/00);

Best Dramatic Presentation: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Director Ang Lee;

Best Related Book: *Greetings from Earth: The Art of Bob Eggleton*, Bob Eggleton & Nigel Suckling;

Best Professional Editor: Gardner Dozois;

Best Professional Artist: Bob Eggleton;
Best Semiprozine: *Locus*;
Best Fanzine: *File 770*, Editor Mike Glyer;
Best Fan Writer: Dave Langford;
Best Fan Artist: Teddy Harvia;
John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer: Kristine Smith.

Retro-Hugo Results

Best Novel: *Farmer in the Sky*, Robert A. Heinlein;
Best Novella: *The Man Who Sold the Moon*, Robert A. Heinlein;
Best Novelette: *The Little Black Bag*, C.J. Kornbluth;
Best Short Story: *To Serve Man*, Damon Knight;
Best Dramatic Presentation: *Destination Moon*;
Best Professional Editor: John W. Campbell;
Best Professional Artist: Frank Kelly Freas;
Best Fan Writer: Robert Silverberg;
Best Fanzine: *Science Fiction News Letter*;
Best Fan Artist: Jack Gaughan.

Hugo Commentary

This year's results have sparked more controversy that I can remember in a long time. Straight away there were the usual rumblings about the Hugos being for science fiction, not for fantasy. This is based on pure ignorance. It says very clearly in the WSFS Constitution that the awards cover both SF and fantasy. Furthermore there is a very good reason for this. No Hugo Administrator wants to be put in the

position of having to rule whether a book like *Ash*, *Perdido Street Station*, or indeed any of Gene Wolfe's novels or Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels, falls in one camp or the other. It is a decision that is bound to be viewed as hopelessly wrong by around 40% of the electorate, no matter which choice you make. It is much easier just to give one award and let all fantastic fiction compete for it. We have already been given notice that at least one motion will be presented to next year's business meeting demanding a split between SF and fantasy in the awards. I foresee a storm of objection to consideration motions.

Both Best Novel and Best Dramatic Presentation were won by best sellers, but there is a subtle difference. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is being widely feted as a masterpiece. Many people have called it the film of the year; advertisements, with typical hyperbole, call it the film of the century. Ang Lee is one of the most widely respected directors working in the film business today.

In contrast, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* has received some pretty rotten reviews. It is widely accepted that the book was desperately in need of being edited. And despite all of her popularity, no one would suggest that J.K. Rowling's work has any great literary merit. As I said in my review of the first Potter book, she is Enid Blyton for the 21st Century, nothing more.

Why, then, did Rowling win? A case can be made that she is being honoured for her contribution to child literacy, and indeed literacy in general, for many adults who would never read an adult novel have devoured the Potter books. This is a worthy argument, and to some extent it is going to be easier to sell ConJosé to the general public, media, etc. because I can say that Rowling won last year's Hugo. It is

something that non-fans can understand and relate to.

It is also true that this year's field was somewhat weak for various silly reasons. George Martin's book, *A Storm of Swords*, is wonderful, but it is the third part of a multi-volume "trilogy" and it is unashamedly a fantasy book which, in the eyes of the many deluded people mentioned above, will disqualify it from contention. Nalo Hopkinson's book, *Midnight Robber*, is also wonderful, but the fact that it is written to a large extent in Trinidadian Creole will put off a lot of readers. *The Sky Road* is good, but is not one of Ken MacLeod's best books, and is probably on the ballot as a result of being at the crest of a wave of MacLeod fever. I can't comment on the quality of the Sawyer book, but I do know that its author has made himself very unpopular in professional circles thanks to his political antics in SFWA (Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America).

With all four competitors having a handicap of some sort, it is perhaps not surprising that the Rowling book should win. However, the magnitude of its victory is stunning, and brooks no explanations or excuses other than sheer bad taste on behalf of the voters. In WSFS we like to think that, because the Hugos are voted on only by dedicated science fiction fans (as opposed to the great unwashed who vote in SciFi.com's pre-Hugo straw poll), we get better results than might be expected from a popular award. That is one myth that has been blown clean out of the water by Rowling's win, and it calls the value of the Hugos seriously into question.

Another myth that has been exploded this year is that of literary community (as opposed to lack of community amongst media folks). Those who are opposed to the Dramatic Presentation Hugo claim that we

should not bother bestowing awards on people who are not part of our community and who don't give a damn whether they win or not. As I said last year, there was no doubt that the Galaxy Quest guys were absolutely over the moon about winning. They were jumping about all over the place. Ang Lee did not turn up to collect his prize, but he did send an amusing letter of thanks, explaining that he was taking his family on a long-planned vacation and that he feared his wife's vengeance if he cancelled it to come and see us.

J.K. Rowling, in contrast, did not send a letter of acceptance and did not nominate anyone to receive the award on her behalf. Indeed it is still unclear whether she or her publishers are prepared to accept it at all. This is a level of rudeness hitherto achieved only by Greg Egan, an absolute master of the art of insulting one's adoring public. It is of course true that the award should go to the best work, regardless of whether or not the author is a complete shit. That's why Egan keeps winning awards. But hopefully this display of arrogance will give a few of Rowling's fans pause for thought before they rush out and buy her next book.

Elsewhere, Dave Langford managed to secure Hugos for both fan writing and professional writing. This is almost unprecedented. The last time it occurred, as far as I can tell, was in 1967 when Jack Gaughan won both Best Fan Artist and Best Professional Artist. That led to an amendment to the WSFS Constitution that stipulates that anyone who is nominated for Best Professional Artist is automatically ineligible for nomination as Best Fan Artist in the same year. The situation with writing is a lot less clear as there is no single Best Professional Writer category, but it is just possible that Mr. Langford will go down in history as the cause of another Constitutional Amendment.

One of the closest fought categories was Best Related Book. Here the book, *Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader's Companion* by James Gifford, was leading in the votes for the first 3 rounds of counting (though never by more than 4 votes out of 700 cast), but it was finally overtaken by the Bob Eggleton book. It is worth remembering at this point why we have a preferential voting system. In most political elections you can only cast one vote, and victory goes to the candidate with the most votes. It is therefore possible for a candidate with, say, only 40% of the votes, to win an election, even though the other 60% of the voters strongly dislike him, because that 60% could not agree on a compromise candidate. Preferential voting provides a mechanism whereby a compromise candidate can emerge from a group of competing minorities. It also ensures that a candidate who is strongly disliked by a majority of the electorate cannot win.

As you might expect, the author of the Heinlein book is a hard line Libertarian. Naturally he is furious about losing. He has issued a long diatribe complaining about how the results were "cooked", with the implication that the Hugo Administrators somehow manipulated the voting to prevent him from winning. This is grossly unfair. The rules for Hugo voting are very clear and are set out in Article 3 of the WSFS Constitution for all to read. Rick and Saul did nothing except apply the rules as they are written. Indeed, because the result was so close they took the trouble to set aside their vote counting software and do a manual recount to make sure they got the right result. That is a considerable undertaking.

Of course childish petulance of this sort is exactly the sort of thing I would expect from a hard line Libertarian. Mr. Gifford and his ilk have no understanding of fairness, only of the primacy of their own

desires. It is axiomatic for them that they have a God-given right to win any contest that they choose to enter, not to mention the right to shoot anyone who gets in their way. One can hope that one day they will grow up, but it seems unlikely.

For those of you who are interested, I did tolerably well. I placed 8th in the nominations for Best Fan Writer and Emerald City was similarly 8th in Best Fanzine. I am very grateful to all those people who voted for me. I should, however, take this opportunity to remind you all that, should I obtain a nomination next year, I will be obliged to decline it. Technically ConJosé has appointed a specific Hugo Subcommittee to administer the Awards. However, as Kevin is a member of that committee it would be quite improper of me to accept a nomination.

General program

Another area where the convention made a fairly noticeable error was in the pocket program. It contained much of what was needed, but a large block of program rooms was omitted from the quick reference grid. It so happened that these program rooms were those at the far end of the convention center from most of the action. They were quite hard to find. The program book error exacerbated the feeling amongst those people whose activities were billeted in that area that they had been somehow deliberately exiled to the nether regions of the convention. I think it is fair to say that the attendance at items in that area was reduced as a result. In any case, what is the point of having a quick reference grid if it doesn't include all of the program items?

Having said that, the general program seemed to be quite good. There was a strong mix of subject matter and there were

far more program items that I wanted to go to than I actually had time for. By far the most popular items on the program were those devoted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This led to the unusual sight of arch-SMOF and devout Buffy fan, Ben Yalow, speaking to a room packed to overflowing with eager media fans. Who says that Worldcon is just about books?

My main complaint about the program was that MilPhil went back to one-hour time slots. In order to allow time for members to get between program items, this means that only around 45 minutes is allocated to the actual panel, and the chances are that 5 minutes of that are wasted because one of the panellists is late arriving. With 90-minute program slots you get 75 minutes of actual discussion, almost twice as much. I appreciate that Worldcons have a lot of demands on their program, and that program directors try their best to get as much in as possible, but personally I think it is time for a bit of quality over quantity.

Boston at last

The 2004 site selection vote resulted in a solid but not overwhelming victory for Boston. This didn't really surprise anyone. The Charlotte people were very enthusiastic, but demonstrated a degree of political naivety that made it obvious they were not going to win. For example, saying publicly that you will not provide free memberships and accommodation for the TAFF and DUFF fan fund winners, even thought that has been a cherished tradition of Worldcons for many years, is simply stupid.

In any case, the Boston people are seriously competent. We were quite pleased at ConJosé to be able to announce many of our hotel rates more than a year out, and to have those rates lower than those for many

years. Boston announced some of their hotel rates three years out, and they are lower than ours. OK, so they have the help of a minor recession, but it was still very impressive.

By the way, there were rumours going round the convention that the MilPhil committee had deliberately handicapped the Charlotte bid by placing their parties on a floor far way from most other parties. This is quite untrue. Charlotte had specifically asked to be allowed to use the Presidential Suite at the Marriott. In any case, given the animosity that existed between the Boston and Philadelphia folks in the 2001 site selection race, any suggestion of MilPhil helping Boston to win 2004 is laughable.

As they have (probably foolishly) stated all along, the Charlotte team has announced that it will bid to run a NASFiC in 2005, on the fairly confident assumption that Glasgow will be the site of the Worldcon that year. The people who ran the aborted Seattle Worldcon bid are also hoping to run the NASFiC that year. It is quite interesting to see a competitive race develop for a convention that we are not even certain will need to take place.

Of course the level of certainty is very high. Glasgow still has no serious opposition, except amongst local British fans, many of whom are quite fanatical in their opposition to hosting a Worldcon. At least one British fan said that she was going to beg the Charlotte people to bid for a Worldcon in 2005 instead. Thus far, however, Charlotte has shown an unaccustomed degree of common sense and is ignoring such importuning.

Whilst there is no serious opposition for the Glasgow bid, there are plenty of people willing to have a bit fun, and perhaps hold a party or two. To date I know of five hoax bids. These are for I5 in '05, the Eurostar,

the small town in North Wales with the very long name, M5 in '05, and Chico. The I5 and M5 bids are both road bids for travelling conventions. The I5 travels north-south through the Western USA while the M5 travels through south-west England. The Eurostar is, of course, the rail service between London and Paris. The convention will presumably be bilingual. Chico is a small town in Northern California once famous for its college parties and more recently for Kevin having run a hoax bid to hold a Westercon there. Kevin has nothing to do with the current Chico bid (he can't, site selection is one of the departments he is managing for ConJosé. I do, however, confess a certain amount of involvement in the M5 bid. Please don't anyone tell my mother that I have offered to use her spare room to put up 5,000 of my closest friends.

Bidding for 2006 has got lively. There are now two extant bids, one for Los Angeles and one for Kansas City. The LA bid has a stellar cast of backers, and the proven Anaheim site, but LA has a long history of losing contested races. This is going to be an interesting one. The good news is that the two bids have elected to follow the San José/Seattle example and maintain friendly relations throughout. Boston fans please take note.

The Tokyo bid for 2007 is still going strong and shows no sign of attracting opposition. People are now thinking seriously about such things as getting merchandise through Japanese customs and Japanese sales tax law. It is going to be expensive, and it will probably be quite small, just as Australian Worldcons are, but I think it is going to happen.

Newsletter rumours

Strange goings on surrounded the newsletter at MilPhil. The story I got was that the convention management ordered the newsletter not to carry any of the famous party reviews by Curt Baty and Scott Bobo. Given that these reviews are a traditional feature of Worldcons, and that Baty and Bobo had previously announced that they were retiring after this year, this decision was massively controversial. Rumour has it that MilPhil's senior management had not forgiven Baty and Bobo for preferring Boston's parties over their own during the race to win the 2001 Worldcon.

Anyway, controversial it was, and Mike Nelson, the newsletter editor, promptly resigned. Much anguish ensued, and Patty Wells' crisis counselling skills were employed to good effect. Eventually Baty and Bobo were restored, Mike took his job back, and normality resumed. Being part of the publications department for ConJosé, I sincerely hope that this doesn't happen to us.

Aside from that, the newsletter did a decent if not spectacular job. I was particularly pleased that there was always a sufficiency of issues available. Too many Worldcon newsletters underestimate their print run and never reprint. At MilPhil it was almost always possible to obtain a complete set of issues. I picked up a set myself on the Monday afternoon.

In my position as WSFS Business Meeting secretary, I end up spending a lot of time at the newsletter office. There are three sessions of the Business Meeting, and each one requires many copies of a printed agenda. The only way to get this done is to use the newsletter photocopier. Some times this can be an embarrassing experience, as the newsletter staff regards this requirement as an intrusion on their

territory that they should not be required to suffer. At MilPhil it was a joy, and I would like to nominate Bob McIntosh for Cheryl's Hero of the Convention Medal for his friendly and helpful attitude. He made my job much easier.

There were two hoax newsletters produced on the Monday. One was an "official" one produced by the newsletter team, which wasn't very funny at all, probably because it would have had to be vetted by the excessively intrusive MilPhil management. The other, I think, was by Seth Breidbart, and was notable for a very subtle joke - a report on the Business Meeting that was totally dry, but was printed entirely in 24-point type.

By far the funniest publication produced at Worldcon is the Libertarian publication, Frefanzine. It isn't meant to be funny, of course, but its editor, Sam Conklin has such a liberal approach to facts that his utterances would not seem out of place in the *Weekly World News*. I managed to miss the first two issues, but the third one was a classic. Sam began by bewailing the fact that no Libertarians had won Hugos, while crowing about the success of Heinlein in the Retro Hugos. He seemed oblivious of what sort of statement this made about the current popularity of his political views. He then went on to explain how Worldcon attendance was in terminal decline, from a high of 8,000 in LA in the nineties, falling steadily through the decade, and being brought to its knees by visits to Toronto in 2003, Glasgow in 2005 and Tokyo in 2007. This conveniently ignores the fact that the 8,000 attendance LA Con II was in 1984, that the Glasgow Worldcon in 1995 had over 5,000 members (more than San Antonio?) and that Bucconeer in 1998 was the third largest Worldcon in history. In general with Sam, you can be fairly sure that if he makes a point, the opposite is in fact true.

Worldcon gets saved

As I mentioned earlier, we shared part of the convention center space with a bunch of Christians. Early rumours held that they were Baptists, which I reported in the web log. As it turns out, they were an independent sect. We were rather amused that they took over the imposing front hallway of the convention center, an area ideally suited to demagogic rallies. However, their event was very civilised and there was little inconvenience to Worldcon members other than a slightly longer walk back to the Marriott. In comparison to the fans, the Christians were, in general, better dressed, darker of skin, and underweight rather than overweight. Other than that, they were pretty much the same as us. They had unreadable badges too, and they spent a lot of time greeting friends that they hadn't seen since last year's convention and giving them big hugs.

Wrap up

To summarise, there was quite a bit that the MilPhil convention committee did wrong, but they had such a good site that, given the usual support of Worldcon regulars, it would have been very hard to run a bad convention. I would be very happy to see Worldcon go back to Philadelphia. Of course for it to do so, we will need people in Philadelphia willing to do the groundwork. Given the amount of crisis management and emotional counselling that seemed to be going on, it is questionable whether anyone in Philadelphia will be prepared to contemplate such a venture for many years.

We need to ask, therefore, why things like this happen. Why, given all the many years of experience that we have of running

Worldcons, do some of them still go bad. If you had asked Todd Dashoff before the convention, was he planning to have unreadably small names on badges, or to have his newsletter editor resign on his half way through the convention, he would have said "no". Nobody trying to run a Worldcon deliberately creates disasters. So what went wrong, and how can we avoid such things in future?

Part of the problem, I suspect, lies in the highly acrimonious contest between Boston and Philadelphia for the right to hold the 2001 convention. There were some rumours that Boston people were less willing to help out than they normally were (although I saw no sign of that). Also Patty Wells said to me that she felt many people on the MilPhil committee were desperate to get respect from their fellow SMOFs by running a good convention. That sort of attitude makes you unwilling to ask for help when you need it, and believe me you always need help on a Worldcon.

A very cogent analysis of the shortcomings of the MilPhil committee was provided at ConJosé's post mortem meeting on Monday evening. Elaine Brennan was one of the few non-Philadelphia fans that held a senior position on the committee. Many Worldcon regulars had been seen around the convention wearing ribbons that proclaimed, "Elaine Rules", and the lady herself wore a badge that simply said "Insubordinate". Clearly something significant was going on here. Elaine was a rebel within the committee, and she was greatly admired in many quarters for this.

Elaine gave several reasons why things went bad, and they are all important. Firstly she said that communication within the committee was poor. Each division went away and did its own thing, and did not communicate what it was doing to others. Second, several important local fans

had been given senior management positions, even though they had little Worldcon experience and showed no talent for the jobs that they had been given. In an amateur organisation, once someone has been given a job, it is almost impossible to get rid of them, no matter how incompetent they prove.

Related to this, Elaine said that many people in senior positions seemed to be more interested in the prestige of their position than in doing any work. When a Worldcon happens, ambitious people jockey for senior posts, often with little thought of the work involved. They then won't give up the posts, even though their departments are clearly failing.

Finally, far too many people on the MilPhil committee believed that their Worldcon was simply a somewhat larger version of Philcon, their local convention, and that it could be run successfully using the same techniques as were used for a Philcon. This is a serious mistake. Worldcons are not just three times the size of a typical American regional, they are different in many ways. For example, the majority of their members will come from outside the local area, many of them from overseas. The level of information that those people need is far greater than would be the case if most of them lived locally. MilPhil assumed that everyone flying into Philadelphia would hire a car at the airport and drive to the convention, and the driving directions that they gave were incorrect.

Equally many of these outsiders will end up working on the convention. You can't rely on everyone being familiar with how you do things and able to slot easily into your system. Indeed, the sheer number of staff required to run a Worldcon may overwhelm systems that work well on a convention a third of the size. Talking of size, the Hugos and Masquerade are

expected to seat more people than attend a typical regional convention. That may result in wholly new problems of crowd control. And Worldcons are deeply steeped in tradition. Any committee that says, "we are doing Worldcon the way we do things here, not the way everyone else does it", is liable to provoke outrage from regular Worldcon attendees.

To sum this up: Worldcon is big, Worldcon is terrifying, but Worldcon is a solved problem if only those involved are prepared to listen to advice, to accept help, and to understand that they are far more likely to cover themselves in glory by running a good convention than simply by acquiring an important-sounding job title.

ConJosé goes green

All of which brings us to ConJosé. We are no longer a Worldcon, we are The Worldcon, and this time next year I will be writing this article about all of the things we did wrong. Make no mistake, we will have disasters. No matter how much you plan, something will go wrong. Sitting in the post-mortem meeting in Philadelphia listening to Elaine, we found ourselves looking round at each other and thinking, "wow, we sometimes do exactly the sort of things she is talking about". This year will be tough for many people, because it is the year that requires serious work, and the year in which an influx of outside conrunners will join our ranks. What used to be a group of 20 people planning for the future will become a group of 200 people with major responsibilities.

Kevin and I have spent five years working to bring you this convention. Kevin at least has the benefit of having been through the whole thing before with ConFrancisco, when we did indeed make exactly the same mistakes as MilPhil did. Like Todd and

Joni Dashoff, and all of the senior members of MilPhil, we really want to bring you the best convention possible. And yet, as we go through the ups and downs of convention running, there are times when we wish we had never started. All we can do is work as hard as we can, make use of all of the experience we have and all of the help and advice on offer, and bearing in mind that not even lunatics like us can afford to risk our jobs or our health for a hobby. Along the way there will be ugly compromises to be made: some practical, some economic and some political. Not everything will turn out as we had wished. I just hope that this time next year I won't have too many apologies to make.

Ultimate Roleplaying

Matt Stover is a Libertarian. There's a good chance you'd guess that just by looking at his photo in the book. The interview with him in which he credits Robert A. Heinlein as his primary influence is also a dead give away. But there is more. China Miéville is fond of saying that he would never try to convince anyone of Socialism in a novel: it would make for a bad novel and a bad example of Socialism. Stover has yet to learn that lesson, but fortunately he doesn't ram his politics too fiercely down our throats, and he manages a decent story at the same time.

I picked up a Stover's novel because he had been recommended to me by several people. China speaks highly of his work, and Gabe Chouinard at SF Site rates Stover as one of the major new stars of American fantasy. The reason for this (other than the fact that Stover writes very well) is that his work is a long way from mass-market Tol-clone fare. It is possible to characterise

Stover's fantasy world along traditional lines. Overworld is a parallel world to Earth. It has magic and faeries and orges and the like. You get there through something more akin to a Larry Niven transporter booth than a wardrobe, but the basic concept is the same. But when we get to the adventurers things get very different.

Overworld is well known on Earth. In fact it is probably the best known place in the universe. After all, it is on TV every night. You see, the folks who go adventuring in Overworld are not ordinary people like C.S. Lewis's Narnia children, or the students who visit Fionavar in Guy Gavriel Kay's novels. Stover's heroes are professionals. In fact they are actors.

It works like this. Life in Overworld is far more interesting than life on Earth. Like I said, there is magic. Faeries and ogres and the like are real. What is more, it is a mediaeval society. Living is dangerous. It is possible to have adventurers in a way that is quite unthinkable in the sanitised environment of Earth. As docu-dramas have proved the only reliable source of interesting plotlines, the TV stations send actors to Overworld with instruction to get themselves into trouble and have adventures. Everyone back home watches, and the leisured classes are able to follow the action live through a mental hook-up with the star of the show.

Let's stop for a moment and think about what these "actors" do. Firstly they have to be athletes. They have to be sufficiently endowed with the physical skills necessary for hand-to-hand combat (with or without sharp, pointy things), or with the mental discipline to master magic. They must also, of course, be stunningly handsome or beautiful. And they have to be real actors. This is not a case of learning lines, or reading them off an autocue, and shooting the scene again if you get it wrong. This is a

matter of making it up as you go along, real time. It requires manipulating other people so as to create an exciting story, while all the time your own life may be at stake. These people have to be pretty special.

But of course in Stover's world they are all wage slaves. It is an axiom of Libertarian mythology that smart, good-looking, capable people (for which read over-weight computer geeks who really could be fit, beautiful and athletically talented if they didn't have more important things to do such as watch TV, honest) never get the success that they deserve. Success always goes to the slime who are good at things like diplomacy and managing a profitable business, who of course don't deserve to do well. This, then, is the core of Stover's work. On Earth good people are put upon by despicable types with no skills other than how to make numbers in a spreadsheet add up, but on Overworld they are wild and free and can fight for Truth, Justice and right to do whatever they want.

Stover's America is Libertarian nightmare of America as a class society. The poor are enslaved as Labourers. The Professionals (the good guys) are contractually enslaved and are ordered around and manipulated by pen-pushing Administrators. Those with enough money to be able to invest are Businessmen: entrepreneurs. And those who have enough money not to need to worry about business are Leisuremen, the top of the social tree. All of this is hereditary. The social structure is, of course, enforced by the Social Police, whose uniforms are United Nations blue. See what could happen to Americans if they don't guard their freedom. Better tear up a few more international treaties before it is too late.

But enough of the politics for a while, what about the story? Our hero is Hari

Michaelson, better known to his adoring fans as Caine, a lethal fighting machine in faded black leather. The people of Overworld call him The Blade of Tyshalle after their God of Death. Every time there is a major political event, Caine seems to be right in the middle of things, influencing the outcome. This, of course, is not an accident. Much of Overworld's politics is planned on the far side of the galaxy. Caine's latest exploit was the assassination of King Toa Phelathon of Ankhana, thus ushering a long and bloody civil war. But this led in turn to the rise of the Mage-Emperor, Ma'elKoth, and Ankhana politics are looking worryingly stable.

Part of the reason for Ma'elKoth's success is that he runs a ruthless police state. Anyone who dares speak out against him is denounced and executed. To help save some of the free-thinking individuals caught up in this horror, the mage, Pallas Ril, has set up an underground movement to smuggle them out of the city. For her secret identity as head of the movement she has eschewed the obvious name of The Scarlet Pimpernel and opted instead for Heinlein's similar hero, Simon Jester. Thus far the operation has gone well, but the number of refugees keeps growing. Eventually a safe house is compromised and Pallas is besieged by Ma'elKoth's enforcer, Berne. To escape she activates an experimental spell that causes mass forgetfulness. Unbeknownst to her it also severs her link to Earth. In a few days the trans-dimensional link that maintains her presence on Overworld will decay and she will come back to Earth as a sludge of disconnected atoms.

To people on Earth, Pallas Ril is better known as Shanna Leighton, actress, and estranged wife of Hari Michaelson, alias Caine. The studio would really like it if their two big stars could somehow manage to get together again. Hari would like it too,

although it does mean somehow managing to convince Shanna that Caine is just an act and he isn't really a heartless bastard. But right now her life is in danger, and someone has to find her and warn her to get to a transfer point so that she can be brought home. Who better to do that than Caine? The studio is, of course, happy for him to undertake the mission. They have just one condition. He must agree to assassinate Ma'elKoth while he is there. Given that the Emperor is the most powerful mage Overworld has ever seen, this is almost certainly a suicide mission. Perfect, isn't it: Caine rescues the woman he loves, and dies in the attempt. The post-transmission sales will be enormous.

Well, there's the plot, and Stover makes it rattle along at a stunning pace. Some of the bluffs and double bluffs that Caine comes up with in order to fulfil his mission are very clever indeed. And, of course, as the story progresses, we discover that things are far more complicated than they originally seemed. There is a certain amount of politics in there, but it is the subconscious bigotry rather than the overt preaching that really gets to you. Firstly, whilst Shanna is clearly a very capable adventuress in her own right, the book is full of classic Heinlein-esque background sexism. More annoyingly, Stover clearly associates evil with homosexuality. Heroes and honourable bad guys are straight, but the nastier characters are the more likely it is that they will be gay.

All in all, then, a very competent writer with some excellent ideas whose work is marred by politics that are sometimes a little strident and once or twice repulsive. That won't stop me reading Stover's books, but it is likely to reduce my enjoyment of them, which is a shame.

Heroes Die - Matt Stover - Del Rey - softcover

War in Fantasyland

It isn't often that I give up on a book without finishing it. I certainly wasn't expecting to do so with this one. John Marco has been recommended to me by some of the same people who rave about Matt Stover. Unfortunately he simply isn't in the same league.

The basic idea was good. *The Jackal of Nar* sets out to tell a gritty war story in a fantasy setting. Sure, there are elves and magic, but people die nastily when sharp, pointy things are thrust into their bodies, and lightning is terrifying military weapon. Unfortunately, if you are going to tell a war story, you really should know a bit about military affairs. For example, don't use real-world terms if you don't know what they mean. Saying "brigade" when you mean "platoon" is not a good start. And if a bunch of infantrymen are holding a position using trenches, and they are relieved by cavalry riding around the ends of those trenches, how come the enemy never thought to outflank them earlier?

Also the book is hideously padded. I gave up around page 250 out of 750. I reckon that at least of third of what I had read was unnecessary to either the plot or to character development. It was simply there to make the book the right length for a modern fantasy novel. Marco has none of the sense of pace and drama that Stover exhibits, and consequently the book drags.

Finally, the book appears to be written for (and quite possibly written by) adolescent boys. It got totally fed up with the idiotic behaviour of the various lead characters. Well, sure, they are young men, and I guess we should expect them to get drunk, lust after girls, have petty feuds and so on. But do I want to read about such people? No.

I'm sure there is an audience for this sort of thing, but it isn't me. Sorry.

The Jackal of Nar - John Marco - Bantam - softcover

Travellers' Tales

This book, *The Grand Ellipse* by Paula Volsky, is the only one of the World Fantasy Award Best Novel nominees that I hadn't yet reviewed. It seems to have been an unexpected choice, given that it was very hard to find. No one at Worldcon had a copy, and one dealer told me that they had long since returned unsold copies to the publisher. This should not be taken as a comment on the quality of the book - good stuff often gets ignored - but it does provide an interesting take on the state of the industry.

One of the reasons that the book may not have sold well initially is that it is hard to categorise. Imagine if you will a combination of Jules Verne, Wacky Races, and a romance novel. The book is set in a fantasy world that bears a close resemblance to 19th Century Earth. There are steam trains and newspapers, and many wild and undiscovered places, hence the Verne connection. Indeed, Verne himself wrote about racing around the world, and *The Grand Ellipse* is also about a race. Some of the other contestants are rather comical, hence the Wacky Races reference. And finally, the central mystery of the book revolves around which of her fellow racers the heroine will finally marry. The book is most formulaic in its romance element, but it isn't easy to find the right place for it on a bookstore's shelves.

Although *The Grand Ellipse* is ostensibly set in a fantasy world, Volsky makes good use

of parallels with Earth to help the reader connect with her creation. As you won't have the benefit of all of the text, I'm going to make the links explicit here to give you a fuller flavour of the plot. The heroine, Luzelle Devaire, is French. You can tell that by her name, her love of culture, and the fact that her country recently had a revolution and chopped the heads off many of the nobility. However, by making Luzelle a feisty feminist and defender of civil liberties, Volsky manages to make her seem American as well, which is a neat trick.

In the book Luzelle's country is called Vonahr, and it is in serious danger because the militaristic and ruthlessly efficient Grewzians (sorry, German readers, I didn't write the book) are busy conquering every country in sight. Soon they will be in a position to assault Vonahr, and the Vonahrish government is in desperate need of a miracle.

Meanwhile in Low Hetz (Switzerland) the eccentric monarch, Mad Miltzin, has been developing the talents of a Rhazaullean (Russian) sorcerer called Nevenskoi. Unbelievably for one of Miltzin's protégés, the fellow has actually come up with something good that isn't edible. In fact he has developed the ultimate weapon. The Sentient Fire has a mind of its own, is able to blaze ferociously or shrink to a small flame, and can even choose whether or to burn what it envelops. Nevenskoi apparently has it under mental control. Mad Miltzin is happy using it for parlour tricks and theatrical props. Everyone else in the world see the military possibilities.

But, being Hetzian, Miltzin is proud of his country's long tradition of neutrality. He absolutely refuses to sell the Sentient Fire to anyone. Indeed, he soon gets so fed up of foreign ambassadors begging for help against Grewzian invasion that he refuses

to even receive them anymore. How is poor Vonahr to save itself?

Then, quite unexpectedly, the mad king comes up with a new wheeze. He decides to hold a race for travellers. The Grand Ellipse will follow an elliptical course around the world, starting and ending in Hetz. It will take in most civilised countries, and many rather less civilised ones as well. The winner will receive a Dukedom, lots of money, and various other goodies. Most importantly, the prizes will be presented by the king himself. This gives the Vonahrians an idea. They could enter Luzelle Devaire, famous adventuress and travel writer, who just happens to be possessed of exactly the sort of ample physical charms that Miltzin is known to find irresistible. The only problem is how to make sure that she wins, and the Grewzians do not.

That is about it for the plot, except for the fact that the Grewzian entrant, Karsler Stornzof happens to be stunningly handsome, utterly charming, and possibly the only Grewzian in the world with a sense of honour. He is a much more pleasant travelling companion than former-Marquis Girays v'Alisante, the other Vonahrian contestant, whom Luzelle happens to have jilted some years ago because he is an arrogant, sexist, elitist snob. Of course Luzelle doesn't know why Girays has joined the race, his previously stated views on world travel and foreigners being particularly narrow-minded, but if you can't work that one out, dear reader, I shall be very disappointed in you.

There isn't a lot else to say. Luzelle and her fellow contestants visit a lot of strange countries where they have very strange customs and adventures take place. All of this is incidental to what happens at the end of the race, and after it, and consequently it lacks interest. We know,

after all, that Luzelle has to make it to the end. Thankfully Volsky manages to make the travel sections fairly amusing, and also intersperses scenes of the race with reports of what is happening back in Hetz. Miltzin, Nevenskoi and the Sentient Fire make a good comedy team.

As I said earlier, the only real element of mystery in the book is which of the two men Luzelle will end up with. But there is another question as well, and that is what happens to the Sentient Fire. It is quite clearly an amazing military weapon. Suppose Vonahr gets its hands on it, what then? Besides, what are we to make of a weapon that is as lethal as an atomic bomb but has the fine control of a stiletto? I'm sure a certain US President wishes he had one of them right now. Volsky only barely touches on the ethical and political issues that the existence of Sentient Fire poses. Without such discussion the book is truly a fantasy, a dream of being able to impose a "righteous" military solution without any thought of what "righteous" actually means. I think Volsky owes it to her readers to produce a sequel that addresses these issues.

The Grand Ellipse - Paula Volsky - Bantam - hardcover

Rock of Ages

Oh my, Gwyneth, what have you done here? I mean I know that books take some time to get from manuscript to bound volume. You would have been lucky if you had the pitch invasions from this summer's England-Pakistan cricket matches for inspiration, let alone the Oldham election results. And yet, with recent events in mind, that chapter on the war between

Anglos and Muslims in near-future Yorkshire sounds dangerously prescient. I should say, of course, that the solution Ax came up with is far more imaginative, and far more likely to work, than anything cooked up by The Shrub or Tony "can I bomb 'em now" Blair. Which just goes to show that maybe pop musicians, or even SF writers, are just what the country needs.

But I get ahead of myself. Let's start from the beginning. If there is to be a flowering of British SF (and let's face it we seem to have one) then clearly it should produce books that talk about the Matter of Britain. And by that I do not mean more Arthurian fantasy, but about politics, about society, about the soul of the country. A little while ago I reviewed a contribution to the debate by Paul Cornell. Now Gwyneth Jones has entered the fray with *Bold as Love*, an unusual take on the subject: government by rock musicians.

The Rock 'n' Roll Reich

Now to many of you that is going to sound pretty bizarre, but to us Brits at least it does make some sense. To start with, for those of us who are old enough to remember it, there was Live Aid. To Kevin, and I guess to most Americans, this was just a big American charity pop concert. In Britain it was so much more. It was Michael Buerk strolling helplessly amidst the dead and dying in Ethiopia (images almost certainly deemed too disturbing to be shown in America at any hour). It was Bob Geldorf and Midge Ure galvanising the world into Doing Something. It was Geldorf having a bigger political profile than Margaret Thatcher, despite spending much of his time yelling "give us yer fucken' money" at the cameras. And now he is Sir Bob for his pains. Not bad for the front man of a second rate punk band.

And then, of course, there is Cool Britannia. Slick Tony realised long before most people that the general public doesn't trust politicians any more, but it does trust pop stars. They might have a few rough edges but, like Sir Bob, they are largely devoid of guile. They stand up for controversial good causes when no politician would dare to do so. When your popularity is dependent on your music, not your politics, you can afford to be controversial. People love pop stars all the more if they are willing to speak out. So, back in '97, Tony surrounded himself with the rock glitterati. They all thought it was kind of cool, the public voted for Tony in droves, and the pop stars got to go to Downing Street for a celebratory knees-up. These days, of course, most of those same musicians have long since lost faith in New Labour, although Geri Halliwell (formerly Ginger Spice) did a party political broadcast for this year's election.

So now, through the miracle of SF, we can roll time forward into the near future. It is Dissolution Summer. Officially that refers to the dissolution of the Union. The four parts of the United Kingdom are about to become wholly separate countries. But there are few more dissolute than those who gather in the mud of Reading for the famous annual rock festival. Once again the government of the day is courting these hard-drinking, hard-drug-taking, hard of hearing because their amps are turned up so high superstars. Home Secretary, Paul Javert, thinks that a small coterie of rock nobility could somehow become spokesmen for the Counter-Cultural Movement. Maybe if they, like, kinda got involved a bit, they might head off some the deep-green Nazi violence and other nastiness that is looming on the horizon. There might even be a few seats in the House of Lords up for grabs. How about it, folks? Little do our guitar-wielding heroes

realise that they are being set up to keep order, not simply in the failing economy of an independent England, but in the aftermath of a coup.

Topping the bill in all this are two guys and a gal. Axl Preston (supposedly named after Axl Rose from Guns & Roses, though some relation to the comic character, Axel Pressbutton, cannot be ruled out) is the brilliant lead guitarist of the Chosen Few and a natural dreamer. He is prone to Lennonisms, and can't resist the chance to Make a Difference. Steven "Sage" Pender is the front man of Aoxomoxoa and the Heads, a bunch of brainy techno-freaks with a bizarre fondness for a bunch of dear, departed Californian hippies. Naturally the band all wear skull masks on stage: dead neat, huh? And then there is Fiorinda, a genuine rock princess, daughter of the legendary Rufus O'Neill of Wild Geese and the famous music journalist, Suzy Slater. Fiorinda is a teenage sensation, Kate Bush meets Chrissie Hynde, hair that is Chuck Berry red, a heart of chrome and a voice like a horny angel. There, people of Britain, are your new royalty, sort of.

State of the country

All of this is, of course, an excuse for Gwyneth to ponder upon the state of modern British politics and suggest a few solutions. Well, at least I think that's what she's trying to do. *Bold as Love* is nowhere near as difficult a read as some of Gwyneth's books, but it isn't exactly clear what political point she is making, and that may be because she's an unremitting pragmatist and therefore eschews any neatly packaged philosophy. Gwyneth Jones politics is based firmly on the idea of Love, but it is not the wishy-washy Love Is All You Need of the Beatles, it is a firm, and occasionally uncompromising love that trumpets rights and liberty but will not lie

down peaceably in front of those who wish to trample on such things. Love is the Law, but Love has to be defended.

West country references

Meanwhile we get treated to an entertaining tale of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, and a whole bunch of rock references, most of which probably passed me by because I have been out of the scene for so long. One mention, however, means slightly more to me than most other readers. Ax Preston and his band come from Taunton, and are thus familiar with the rock scene elsewhere in Somerset. Consequently *Bold as Love* ends up as one of the few SF books ever to not only mention my home town, but to spell it correctly as well. Someone at Gollancz deserves a medal for not "correcting" it.

The idea that a tolerably well-known rock band should come from Bridgwater, or that Ax might describe the town as a "hip burg" is, I think, a little far fetched. Then again, the fact that they are seriously violent is no surprise. I guess my old friend Brian Smedley will be kind of pleased with the idea that the town should be famous as a hot bed of musical anarchists. Sadly it isn't really true. The Dangerous Brothers (who coined the name long before Rick Mayall and Ade Edmondson stole it) weren't quite up to scratch. Though I suppose a band that could count Kim Newman, Eugene Byrne and me amongst its entourage must have had something going for it.

Back to the book

But this is a distraction. I should be talking about the book. And it is certainly a fun book. I think you have to be into music to enjoy it, and it is even better if you happen to be a middle-aged woman who always wanted to be able to make music. It is

uncompromisingly nasty in places - Gwyneth pulls no punches - and *Ansible* relates that publishing an extract from the book got *Interzone* reported to the police for supposedly publishing paedophilic pornography. Which just goes to show that there are indeed idiots in the world who want to ban anything that admits to the existence of unpleasantness in the world (and not all of them live in gated communities in America).

There are only two areas in which the book let me down. Firstly it has been touted as an SF-fantasy cross-over. There are hints of both SF and fantasy in there, but very little of either. There are issues that have been carefully dropped into the story, but there is little indication as to where they are going. Which brings us to the other point. This is only part of the novel. *Bold as Love* just stops. The story will be continued in the next volume. I hope I don't have too long to wait.

Bold as Love - Gwyneth Jones - Gollancz - softcover

Miscellany

This month on IgoUgo

My latest travelogue is going to be about Philadelphia, primarily about the restaurants in ChinaTown because Kevin and I did not get a chance to do much sightseeing. I think it unlikely that it will be online by the time you get this issue, because I still have a heap of post-Worldcon work to do, but it will get there eventually.

By the way, the IgoUgo folks have been busy revamping their site. They managed this despite being based in New York and

therefore having other things to think about this month. I think the new look is a great improvement. Why not check it out (<http://www.igougo.com/>)?

Tad at BASFA

This is a reminder that the very wonderful Tad Williams will be appearing at the Bay Area Science Fiction Association on Monday, October 7th to talk about his new online venture, Shadowmarch (<http://www.shadowmarch.com/>).

Details of how to get there are on the BASFA web site (<http://www.basfa.org/>).

Hugo site update

With another Worldcon over, I have updated the Hugos section of the *Emerald City* web site (http://www.emcit.com/hugo_home.shtml). The most important part of this is, of course, that I can now recommend *Perdido Street Station* for a Hugo again this year. Send a Hugo to China, you know it makes sense.

While I was at MilPhil I managed to get some photographs of past Hugo rocket designs (there is a travelling exhibition of past Hugos that appears at every Worldcon). I hope to get those photos online soon, although all such things do take time.

Fictionwise

Still with the Hugos, I have had some recommendations in from a short fiction web site called Fictionwise (<http://www.fictionwise.com>). This isn't amateur stuff, the authors include Kage Baker and Mike Resnick, and I have links to the actual stories if you want to read them.

Life goes on

It has been a very strange month in America. I have seen some of the best and some of the worst of the country. On the one hand there have been calls for nuking Afghanistan and a campaign of genocide against Moslems; on the other hand, despite the magnitude of the terrorist atrocity, there are still people out there on the streets calling for a peaceful response.

I happen to be lucky enough to have the right sort of racial profile. My skin is pale, my hair red, and I don't wear any strange headgear. Thus far, although I am a foreigner and here on a temporary visa, I have not had any trouble. How long that will last I do not know. What worries me a lot more is that President Bush seems quite content to throw away the US Economy in order to pursue his war on terrorism. For companies like mine that rely on commodity markets that is very bad news. I will be very surprised if I still have a job in six months time.

Fortunately, amongst all of the tales of doom and disaster, and the jingoistic cries for revenge, one newspaper has kept its mind on more important things. "Bill catches Hillary with Space Alien", screamed the front page of the *Weekly World News*, complete with photographic evidence. As Obelix the Gaul would have said, "These Americans are crazy".

Footnote

Next month we get back to normal after the Worldcon craziness. Up for review are new novels by Sean McMullen, Storm Constantine, Ursula Le Guin and Maureen McHugh.

Ciao, Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl