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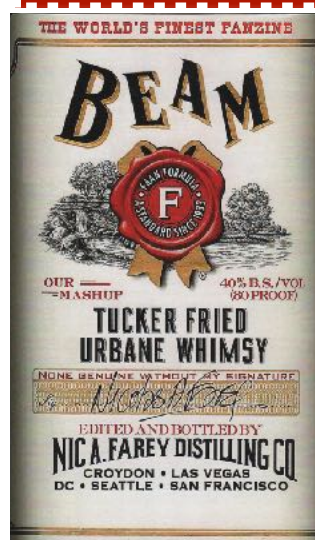
THE OCCASIONAL UNOFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

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MAY TUCKER'S GHOST BE SMILING UPON US



“Now is not the time to have a one night stand with your conscience.”



SHORT MEMORY

ULRIKA O'BRIEN

Or, Listicles, Spectacles, Too Much to Watch

We are all victims of the superheated attention economy. We're constantly battered by data gushers from all the outlets, mostly through our screens: broadcast news, cable news, podcasts, blogs, online newspapers and magazines, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, BlueSky, Twitter/X, Telegram, Messenger, Snapchat, Reddit, Spotify, Pinterest, Quora, Threads, LinkedIn, Twitch, Discord, Tumblr, Rumble, Substack, and so on and so forth, not even counting Xiaohongshu and VK and Viber and lesser non-anglophone platforms. All of them hungry for your eyeballs, and most of them infested with AI-generated botspew. I was going to say it's hard to keep up, but it's not. It's impossible.

It's also hard to remember. Hard to recall what happened five minutes ago, let alone five weeks or five months. Too much to see. Here, click on this.

I was reminded of the dizzy velocity of our current memory-holing project when I recently succumbed to a WatchMojo listicle video on YouTube (no, I am not immune) that purported to offer the “Top 30 Most Hated Songs of All Time.” I watched it to see whether the (no-longer-Jefferson) Starship’s “We Built This City” made the list. Spoilers: it did not. Already that Five Minute Hate was lost in the rearview.

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This issue of **BEAM** is edited by **Nic Farey**, **Lucy Huntzinger** and **Ulrika O'Brien**.
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In a prior, slower, age, when clickbait had been invented but not yet weaponized, “We Built This City,” briefly made the rounds of snarky pop-culture essays portrayed as, wait for it, “The Worst Song Ever.” One source goes so far as to credit that assessment to Grace Slick herself.

But even taking hyperbole, self-deprecation, and concert fatigue into account, that’s a bold claim. I wouldn’t even put WBTC in the running for “Worst Song of My Lifetime,” let alone whatever twee and treacly abominations might have leapt from the sheet music pages of the 1860s, or the skillingtryck chapbooks of the 1530s. And we just don’t have sufficient documentary evidence to nominate the Worst Songs of the Younger Dryas. Ever is a very long time.

Maybe more to the point, calling “We Built This City” the Worst anything just seems unjust, even for its own era. I mean, it’s not a GREAT song, maybe not even a GOOD song (though I don’t personally mind it) but it’s not particularly awful, either. When considered against the backdrop of mid-80s popular music, not even actively BAD. I mean yeah, some of the lyrics fail hard – the mamba/mambo confusion and all – but it was a catchy enough tune to chart in the Top 5. Though charting is perhaps no real defense. There have been some serious turkeys in the Top 5 in my lifetime.

But I think the specific lifetime of the author or target demographic is revealed in these listicles.

The core audience for that WatchMojo list must be in their early 30s, at most. Not one song on it came out before 1990. A full twenty-six out of thirty songs are from the 21st C., and roughly half of those date from 2010 or later. A virtual eyeblink ago. The collective memory of that audience is less than 40 years deep. Poor things, they’ve missed so much. There was so much truly terrible music made before 1990, and they are oblivious to it. Tadpoles.

There’s clearly an opportunity here. A teachable moment, as they call it. We can delve into the wretched musical effluvia of earlier decades. I offer my own selection, personal and idiosyncratic and

definitely a product of MY g-g-generation, of tripe to make your ears bleed and your little gray cells curdle. Purely in the interest in fomenting a little harmless controversy (as opposed to the more usual kind) and perhaps launching a few earworms, I give you:

My Personal Top 15 Songs of My Lifetime Worse Than Built This City (in no particular order):

1. MacArthur Park (Donna Summer, 1978, or even worse, Richard Harris, 1968) – Sad dumped dude was sad. Moping about a failed romance. I had no idea the original was sung by Richard Harris (SFX Voice of Christopher Lloyd: “The Actor?!”), who renders it all extra painful to the Angeleno ear by consistently calling it “MacArthur’s Park.” Nonetheless, Harris charted with it, inspiring a decade of equally grating covers which I blissfully missed before Summer charted with it all over again.
2. Honey (Bobby Goldsboro, 1968) – Spoiler: Honey is dead. Weepy, manipulative, mawkish vomit.
3. Send in the Clowns (Judy Collins, 1975) – This one was rehabilitated (a bit) when I saw A Little Night Music, wherein the lyrics are revealed as more ironic than pathetic. Better, but still not good.
4. Seasons in the Sun – (Terry Jacks, 1974) – An English-language lyric (penned by Rod McKuen!) that started life as a Belgian hit for Jaques Brel, titled “Le Moribond” (The Dying Man) in 1961. I imagine the French lyrics were no less sappy. Dying sucks. Got it.
5. (You’re) Having My Baby – (Paul Anka, 1974) – Ghastly, over-sweet slobbering egotistical sexist drivel. Getting pregnant as ultimate valentine, you betcha.
6. Fly Robin Fly – (Silver Convention, 1975) – Debut single by the German! Disco! Group! Nothing says “lyrical genius” like German disco. Originally meant to be called “Run, Rabbit, Run” which sounds more ominously Teutonic. Or Teutonically ominous.

7. Johnny Get Angry – (Joanie Sommers, 1962) – Ode to the romantic potential of toxic masculinity. Show me you love me by having a little rage out. That always gets me going.

8. Delta Dawn – (Helen Reddy, 1973) – Spoiled Southern belle loses her mind after being jilted at the altar and spends the next two decades wandering around town looking for the dude, whom she has lately confused with Jesus. Or possibly Elvis.

9. Every fucking thing ever by Steely Dan – Don't agree? You're wrong. Fight me.

10. Alone Again (Naturally) – (Gilbert O'Sullivan, 1972) – Weedy, pathetic wimp who ALSO got jilted at the altar and is now threatening suicide to show somebody... something. Was he trying to give us sympathy for Joanie Summers?

11. Black Water – (Doobie Brothers, 1974) – Might not be entirely the fault of the song. It happened to be inescapable at a particularly awful time in my school days.

12. Afternoon Delight – (Starland Vocal Band, 1976) – I like a little innuendo as much as the next upright featherless biped, but not cloying, sticky, glitter-doused innuendo, please.

13. Grease – (Frankie Valli, 1978) – “Grease is the word, the word that you heard, it's got groove, it's got meaning.” It's got what? Proof that you can have bad musicals without resorting to Andrew Lloyd Wossface.

14. Do They Know It's Christmas? – (Band Aid, 1984) – Look, I'm sorry, even now I can't face listening to it again to dig up the receipts for why it's the Godzilla of cringe. If you want to argue, go listen to it yourself. (But please sign this liability waiver first.) My journalistic courage fails me. But

also: Africa. I hear they have some Muslim-majority countries there...where even the non-starving tolerably wealthy might not celebrate Christian holidays. Just a thought.

15. We Are the World – (USA for Africa, 1985) Cringe-a-palooza, take two. The irony-challenged join together in a Yet Another Super-Duper Group fundraiser which unblushingly proclaims that “love is all we need,” while passing the collection plate around.

It's been a trip down many rabbit holes pulling this list together. The dishonorable mentions could fill

Trotsky's bathtub. (Indeed, despite having produced LOTS of great music, the year 1976 alone could provide another 15 songs worse than WBTC.) I delved into YouTube a lot. The Some Random Guy compilations of various 7X Hits of 197X were especially enlightening, not just for reminders of familiar songs, both great and terrible, but a trove of forgotten or never-met nuggets of musical history. And my ghod didn't Jeff Lynne and Billy Joel and Lindsay Buckingham have gigantic hair in the 1970s? Oh, and isn't Lindsay Buckingham some sort of under-appreciated fingerpicking guitar genius?

Anyway, it's interesting that although the firehose of content on the internets works to shorten our memories, occasionally it also helps us learn and remember. Meanwhile, here, click on this:

WatchMojo: <https://youtu.be/jCUP8ieBeLc?si=9eKosCOPPMWH4BWm>

Some Random Guy: https://www.youtube.com/@somerandomguy_music

Fleetwood Mac “The Chain” live: <https://youtu.be/kBYHwH1Vb-c?si=NCLuNsHiMGXj8ReD>



DIESEL AND DUST

NIC FAREY

Some folks live in water tanks. Some folks live in red brick flats.

The British class system is something with which I'm sadly familiar, as old friends will be aware, and it's a topic which does tend to stimulate my pen from time to time, perhaps to the point of tiresomeness, but here we go again, nevertheless, as little as the British class system has any specific equivalence to what I'm about to discuss.

The lyric above is from "Warakurna" by the Australian band Midnight Oil, and there specifically refers to racial disparity, something generally indistinguishable from class disparity in most cases.

Class structures as they exist, however, cannot be simply equated to racial prejudices, nor to any particular perceived minority, as typically hard done by as they all are. All class-based systems, I argue, can be attributed to the sometimes different natures of what particular kind of -archy or -ocracy happens to be "in charge", and so it is with the self-described "meritocracy" of fandom itself.

Similarly to asking *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, we may ask *Quis decernit quis meritum habeat?*, or for the Latin-challenged, "Who decides who has merit?" This isn't a question with an objective answer, unlike a plutocracy, for example, where money is measurable and the haves and have-nots are clearly discernible. "Merit" by contrast is entirely subjective.

Awards given in various bits of the Faniverse could, you might suppose, define "merit" somewhat quantitatively, but wide participation giving a proper cross-section of opinion is generally lacking, as John Hertz continues to wail about regarding the Fan Hugos, whose four

categories at last year's Seattle Worldcon yielded the statistic that less than 30 nominations were needed to get on the final ballot. More people, of course, actually vote on that final ballot, but not as many as you might think ought to (a problem common to all awards, it seems). Only around 1.6% of the membership of 7,739 voted in the fan categories, excepting the more popular Fanartist rocket (2.8%). Compare that to the admittedly much smaller membership of Corflu, which managed a 32.6% FAAn Award voting turnout this year, although that can also be considered disappointing, given its status as a dedicated fanzine fans' event.

That's an aside to the main point, though, albeit that the voters who determine these awards have decided for themselves that *they* have sufficient merit, or perhaps more accurately the ability to be able to judge the merit of others.

Ulrika points out to me that she considers fannish merit to be "intersubjective", a term I inevitably had to look up. It's an interpretation which apparently emerged in social science in the 1970s, and is described as "the awareness of self and other's intentions and feelings in the dynamic sharing of minds acting in companionship, exchanging self-conscious intentions and emotional

evaluations." A group mind of sorts, then? This, I now think, holds true for a meritocracy, even though the Faniverse is fractured - at least it will hold true within group subsets like fanzine fandom in particular.

I have always fondly recalled the truth of a conversation with Joyce Katz many years ago. We were looking around the room at a Vegrants gathering and wondering what it was that could bring such a diverse and different set of people together, and after some back-and-forth we concluded that it was the shared *context* we had of science fiction and/or the fandom thereof.



Returning to purely objective vs subjective distinctions, though, the sociologist Thomas Ford Hoult defined them in as follows in his 1974 'Dictionary of Modern Sociology':

Objective social class refers to all the aspects of social class that can be expressed in objective terms, such as income, occupation, and education (Hoult, 1974).

Subjective social class refers to how people choose to perceive and categorize themselves and their class allegiances. Hoult explains it this way: "[subjective class is] how people place themselves within the society".

Objectiveness in the fanzining meritocracy could be historically considered to include a wealth measurement, since a participant would have needed to own the means of production: a duplicating device (capital investment), ink and paper (operating costs) as the basics. The other main expenditure is, of course, distribution, which in bygone days would mean postage, envelopes and the like. There would have been practitioners of more limited means who, by the time-honored methods of "beg, steal or borrow" also became part of the group, but this still implies some kind of discretionary expense for the hobby, like any other.

The subjective side of things speaks to the individual's sense of self-worth or self-importance - as Hoult puts it "how people place *themselves* (my emphasis) within the society".

Classical Marxism admits to only two classes - oppressors and oppressed - and presupposes that class conflict is the only way forward. More relevant (and more complex, and arguably more accurate) is Max Weber's tripartite theory of stratification, one element of which is *Stände*: social power. This is described by Charles Hurst in 'Social Inequality: Forms, Causes, and Consequences' (1992) as follows, and the first three elements are fandom to a tee:

The existence of status groups most often shows itself in the form of:

1. Endogamy or the restricted pattern of social intercourse

2. Sharing of food and other benefits within groups
3. Status conventions or traditions
4. Monopolistic acquisition of certain economic opportunities or the avoidance of certain kinds of acquisitions.

I was about to go off on another tangent here about *fanzine* fandom's habit of ancestor worship and reverence to elders, but I'll spare you, no doubt to sighs of great relief all around. It's notable, though, that this corner of the Faniverse seems for the most part to have avoided the modern trend to re-evaluate and then denigrate past masters by dissecting them through a modern lens. One wonders how history will view today's protagonists.

However, let's further consider the ostensible topic of this editorial. Awards, which in fanzine fandom's case would be the FAAns, should be considered the likeliest measure of merit within the group. William Breiding, however, has argued that a great deal of very meritorious work is effectively hidden away in APAs and seen by few - although there is nothing to prevent anyone who *has* read such work from voting for the titles or their creator(s), even as there may not be enough of them to propel the work to actual heights of glory. Notably, though, APAzines have been getting circulated beyond their initially restricted readership. Fred Lerner's *Lofgeornost* is one such, although its overall circulation is still tightly controlled and it's paper only. Still, this has been enough for the title to be a consistent top five finisher in the FAAn Awards perzine category (and deservedly so, in my own opinion).

So is there an actual conclusion to be drawn? Predictably perhaps, not a firm one. If our fandom *is* a meritocracy, it isn't a "pure" one, since it likely suffers from the same inequalities of any class-based setup, which seems paradoxical in the context of "merit" but there it is.

For further information, consult your local *Stände*. I know I have.

UNUSUALLY IN THIS ISSUE...



Is it more AI with an unusual number of fingers? Not at all, as we welcome **ANITA S MOORE** to the front end with actual art.

COVER

It's not unusual to see **TOMMY FERGUSON** adjacent to a whisk(e)y, and with ***Feck, Arse, Drink, Girls*** he happily supplies the backstory.

PAGE 9



There isn't much that's not unusual about Australian life in the small town of Alice Springs, but trailing spouse **DAVID CAKE** fills in some of the details in ***Life in Alice***.

PAGE 10

S&RA BOND may be prone to unusual adventures, as she continues to relate in this episode of her TAFF trip report : ***Her Beautiful Mistake Chapter 4***.

PAGE 15



PAT MURPHY, residing in the desert environs of Boulder City NV, enjoys a varied if not locally unusual ***Backyard Bestiary***.

PAGE 21



KEV WILLIAMS got an unusually close up look behind the Iron Curtain, and here relates his memories of ***The Soviet Experience - An Alternate Reality***.

PAGE 23

IAN SALES generously and not unusually allows us a reprint from his review blog in which he contends we should perhaps be ***Reconsidering Phlebas***.

PAGE 33

A more unusual slice of reportage from **LEE WOOD**, from Paris, France as well as her regular domicile in New Zealand. Here, then, are the latest ***Thoughts from Taranaki***.

PAGE 36



UNUSUALLY IN THIS ISSUE...

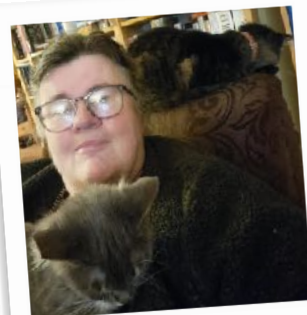


DAVID HODSON interrogates **NIC & JEN FAREY** in last year's *Corflu 50 Interview* at Corflu 42 at Newbury.

PAGE 41

collected in a fanthology first, but perhaps most unusually **ULRIKA O'BRIEN** provided *The Road to Joy* for the current issue before Nic finished his editorial.

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THE READERSHIP : *Suscipe Verbum*. Edited with the usual savagery by **Ulrika**.

LOCS : PAGE 57

ON OTHER PAGES...

Uncredited text by **Nic Farey** and/or **Ulrika O'Brien**. Editorial song titles by **Midnight Oil**.



Special guest lyricist this issue: **IAN SORENSEN** (pp 39-40)

A timebinding vignette from **carl juarez** (p35)

BACOVER: Teddy Harvia

Art: **Jay Kinney** : BEAM label logo (p2); **Brad W. Foster** (pp 43, 45, 46, 53) ; **Ulrika O'Brien** : Loccol fillos (pp58-66)

Photography: **Oliver Facey** (S&ra Bond, p7) ; **Rob Jackson** (Corflu 50 interview, p8) ; **Pat Murphy** (pp 21-22) ; **Alan White** (p52). Other photographs/illos, predictably nicked off the internet, selfies or unknown credit. Or FBF profile pics.



THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS...

...is the name devised to describe the late-night fangatherings, surprisingly often in the environs of N Farey, which are mostly laid-back affairs, tending to involve the consumption of Jim Beam and other fine liquors, and a whole lot of ~~bullshit~~ amenable conversation on whatever topic might arise (including actual fannish stuff).

If you think you might be or might have been an Unusual Suspect at any point in time, then you probably are.

Wherever two or more may be gathered in the spirit of Tucker, we encourage you to raise a glass to the Suspects' Toast: "Absent Friends".

"They say the only people who tell the truth are drunkards and children. Guess which one I am."

FECK, ARSE, DRINK, GIRLS

TOMMY FERGUSON

“Will ye have a wee whisky, Tommy?”

“No, I’ll have a big ‘un. ...”

So, whiskey and wine tasting (courtesy of Spike) has become a bit of a thing now at Corflu and I’m wondering how that has happened. Actually, I know – I like whiskey, the convention pays for a few bottles (or Glasgow Worldcon does,) or bottles are donated. Like for Corflu Craic by Zi Graves – a nice Japanese whiskey – or Nic himself, a relatively inoffensive bourbon, as bourbons go. Although not everyone enjoys wine to the extent of Spike, or Rob Jackson, even the most ardent whiskey phobes will try a snifter – to be social they say, though I’m not so sure. At the end of the day, the various Corflu committees know their target audience and free booze is always a winner. My own journey to appreciating the finer drinks in life, after Guinness, started a while ago.

I recall my first taste of Laphroaig – it was in Toronto in 1997 when I was hanging out in a cool, hipster bar playing some funky jazz music just off Bathurst on Bloor Steet West. I was drinking there, trying to be cool after leaving the Michelob special student dive that I normally frequented. Why yes, there was a woman involved.

My first thought was that they were allowing smoking again for these joints, and looked around for the ashtray. It turned out that the person next to me was drinking whiskey and I was intrigued. I’d always been an Irish whiskey snob – particularly Bushmills. This was before ‘The Wire’ and the theory that this was ‘protestant’ whiskey and Jameson was the preferred Irish whiskey we should all be drinking. Weirdly I was protective of the Bushmills brand because it was a Northern drink and even then, that sectarian bollocks didn’t really impact me.

As I said though, I was trying to impress the bar person and enquired what the hell that stuff was. “Acquired taste, not for the likes of you...” she replied, as she knew me from the student bar across the road.

“Anyway, it is really expensive.”

And that was it. Don’t push this red button. You can’t do that. It’s not for you. The stubborn dickhead in my 30-year-old self hadn’t gone away you know!

“Ok – give me one of those.”

Now my first reaction was on the money – what is this shit? People actually like this stuff? It wasn’t sweet, it certainly wasn’t ‘whiskey’ tasting and perhaps I should put a drop of water into it as she suggested. But hey I was cool, could hang with the hipsters and ‘enjoyed’ all these weird and wonderful drinks. So I persevered, taking gentle sips, listening to the groovy jazz fusion music and trying (very unsuccessfully, but let down very graciously) to hook up with the bar person. But she was right about one thing, it was very expensive and I wasn’t going to leave without finishing it.

And I’m not sure what it was but I started to appreciate it. Like definitely wasn’t the right word but smell and the fumes going up my nose, all the weird stuff going on in my mouth and the really pleasant burn on the way down was ticking boxes for me. I didn’t even know my taste buds had such tick boxes, even a form for them to be filled in.

As I was a whiskey snob already and could be a real dickhead about ‘expressions’ – this opened a whole new avenue of ridiculous conversations and trying to impress people. It’s been going on ever since.

LIFE IN ALICE

DAVID CAKE

My wife Karen and I have lived most of our lives in Perth. But in 2008, we lived in Alice: Alice Springs, in the very center of Australia.

Alice Springs, also known as Mpartwe in the local Arrrente language, houses around 30,000 people. The population varies by several thousand over the course of a year. Roughly a third of the populace are Indigenous, a population that also varies quite a bit over the year. Alice also has a lot of transient inhabitants: people who come to town to just for a while. And we were two of them.

We moved there because Karen was training to be an emergency medicine specialist. The training required that she work somewhere outside of a major city for six months. After her six months were up, we weren't ready to leave. So we stayed six more.

Alice Springs, usually referred to as just Alice by locals -- we like that -- is a town full of people who just intended to work there a few weeks or months, but stayed for years.

It is hard, I think, for people from other countries to understand just how big and empty central Australia is. The catchment area for the single hospital where Karen worked is the size of Germany and France combined. Many patients can only be brought in by light aircraft, so the head of the emergency department also must sort-of run a small airline, having to keep track of the Flying Doctor planes, plus tracking the pilots and their sleep requirements. An extra complication for the "airline" is that many indigenous men have such a strong taboo against associating with their mothers-in-law that they will not share a plane. If both need to come to hospital at once, it takes two separate trips.

I used to say the four main industries in town were tourism, bureaucracy, art, and spying.

Tourism, because Alice is an amazing place, and central Australia is beautiful and like nowhere else. Also because many tourists think that Alice Springs is the place you have to go if you want to see Uluru (formerly better known as Ayers Rock). Uluru is actually about 450km away and has its own airport.

Bureaucracy, because a lot of government support for the whole of central Australia is located all in the one town. Many temporary residents are public servants of one kind or another.

Art, because the modern Indigenous art movement began in central Australia, and Alice, as the only town, is a big buying and selling center for the national industry. Many non-Indigenous artists from all over Australia also find employment in town, helping to run galleries, art centers,

workshops, studios, agencies, and other parts of the art trade. Many continue their artistic practice while in town, so Alice has not only a thriving, but also quite varied, art scene for a town its size. It's the indigenous art galleries that are the stars, though, with some absolutely incredible commercial galleries in town. The galleries are well worth a visit just to browse, but for buyers the incredible indigenous art is usually for sale at a small fraction of what it might sell for in Sydney, Perth, or Melbourne. And an Indigenous artist selling canvases by the side of the town pedestrian mall, or in the courtyard at the hospital, might turn out to be someone with a national profile, whose art sells elsewhere for ten times what they charge in Alice.



And spying because 20 kilometers outside of town is Pine Gap. Officially a US-Australia joint signals intelligence facility, in practice almost 100% of Pine Gap staff is American. Pine Gap is secret enough that it is omitted from maps. Civilians aren't supposed to approach it, though its cluster of white domes is visible from all passenger flights to and from Alice Springs airport. Almost ten percent of the townsfolk are from the US, either workers at "the base" or family of Pine Gap staff. The Americans tend to keep to themselves, and are officially encouraged to do so.



The town is in some ways typical of Central Australia, typical of arid landscapes the world over. The region has cattle grazers, and cowboys (called jackaroos or jillaroos in Australia) in broad brimmed hats. There are mining operations around, though most are far enough from town that you never notice. Alice is a shipping hub for these industries and others. Goods ship both in trucks up and down the Stuart Highway from Darwin to Adelaide, and by rail. The freight trains are long enough that if you get stuck at a crossing waiting for a train, you switch the engine off and get out and walk around. You could be there for quite a while.

But there are also unexpected things about Alice. While the gay scene there is very low key, the town is well known as lesbian-friendly. Besides the art scene, Alice has a strong music scene and history.

We met people in the town's underground "bush doof" scene, and through them attended wonderful parties with sound systems dragged out into dry creek beds, the music reverberating against the silent landscape and the perfectly clear and stunningly beautiful night sky. Alice had a great restaurant and fine dining scene, largely due to the tourist trade, with a quirkiness all its own. Restaurants with improbable combinations of cuisines were common. The Swiss-Indian place was a favorite, but also Thai-plus-Pizza, and other oddities. Alice isn't big, so locals end up trying every restaurant at least once. One Vietnamese place a fair way out of town was particularly beloved by locals. Its location nearer the airport meant few tourists were even aware it existed, but locals revered it because the owners used underground water to grow their own fresh vegetables. Every other place in town got their vegetables trucked in from the coast, usually frozen. After months of that, fresh-picked greens were a profound joy.

Central Australia is empty, dry, and hot. In the summer, at the beginning of the calendar year, when most temporary residents like us arrive, the temperature can be over 40°C for weeks at a time with bone dry 0% humidity and pure, pitiless blue skies. (We used to joke that the short clothesline behind our apartment was enough, because by the time you had finished pegging clothes to the far end, the ones you started with were already dry and could be taken down again.) Another unwelcome shock for new arrivals is discovering that many local businesses shut down for weeks at a time in summer. The business owners take their chance to visit the coast or to just avoid the merciless heat. While Alice does have water compared to most of the country, it's not visible. The Todd River that runs through the center of town is dry -- just a strip of sandy riverbed -- almost all the time. The water flows a foot or two beneath the sand. While there are trees in town and near the river, beyond them the landscape to reverts to the classic 'red center' biome: red dirt

with clumps of spinifex, a dry, spiny plant consisting mostly of knee-high spikes. Unwelcoming and stark though the landscape appears, it is also incredibly beautiful, full of rich, vibrant colors. One of the first things you see driving from the airport through the Heavitree gap into town are the McDonnell Ranges, their bare, bright orange rock formations contrasting against the blue of the sky, as you pass.

Alice's most popular car, by far, was the Toyota Landcruiser. The Landcruiser is a top choice anywhere that four wheel drives are necessary, working vehicles -- Africa, the Middle East, Russia -- but even more so in Central Australia. It is by far the most popular model of 4WD, and Toyota does most of its new model testing there. The indigenous community doesn't even consider other cars. We did see a few Land Rovers, and the odd 4WD Lexus or Toyota HiLux ute -- utes are what most of the world calls pickup trucks, and a bit of an Australian cultural obsession -- but Land Cruisers are cheaper than most comparable vehicles, have a reputation for reliability and easy maintenance, and as such a near perfect match for what most people need in Alice.

But did we have one? Of course not. We were just coming for 6 months, so we thought, and were generally quite short of money. We just brought along our little Toyota Yaris 2WD hatchback. Did this mean we avoided rough roads? Of course not! We got very used to driving on poorly-maintained gravel, and the lightness of the Yaris meant that didn't have the inertia that could get bigger vehicles into bigger trouble.

Still, we learnt to read subtle differences in signage. "4WD Recommended" meant "if you aren't used to driving on gravel, I guess." "4WD Only," meant that you had to drive really slow and carefully if you were driving anything else, and it you would probably regret it anyway. But "High-wheel base 4WD" was serious, and meant what it



said. What that indicated was not really a road at all, just a track that some other vehicles had previously attempted, and which might regularly feature foot-high broken rocks.

Alice's population is small- and transient- enough that it was hard to maintain a regular cultural scene exclusively for locals, but a whole bunch of things happened that drew on the wider area. The social calendar typically had at least one event per weekend that everyone knew about: a touring theatre or musical act, a rodeo, or the annual race meet. And a bunch of events are unique to the town, making Alice feel far more lively and interesting than most remote towns its size. The Beanie festival honors woolen knitted hats, and was one of the biggest events in the winter. Winter daytime temperatures are pretty warm, often around 25°C, but the clear desert skies and zero percent humidity mean that temperatures drop precipitously once the sun goes down. In the summer the nighttime cooling is welcome, but in the winter the nights can get below freezing. If you might get caught outside after sunset, it's essential to be able to add warm clothing quickly. A key garment is the ubiquitous beanie, easy to carry in a pocket but making a huge difference to warmth. The Beanie festival features huge beanie markets, selling over 10,000 beanies in a weekend.

In a town of ~30,000, those are seriously impressive sales. The beanies for sale are hand-knitted, mostly by the indigenous women in the regional communities. There is vast choice, lots of interesting variants, and all unique. I'm particularly fond of my one with emu feathers in it. The festival also features an annual beanie art competition and exhibition, with amazing beanies that push the artistry and innovative designs to the limit. Beanies are entered by artists from all over the world. Most entries are for sale, but for hundreds of dollars each. These are art works in knitted form. Thousands of people visit Alice for the Beanie festival each winter.



There is also a music festival, with bands from across Central Australia featuring styles that include Indigenous rap, country music, and 1950s style rock and roll. We loved the Indigenous reggae group that sang in the Pitjatjatjarra language, partly because it gave us a chance to practice our (pretty basic) language skills.

The Henley-on-Todd Regatta is a famous Alice Springs event. First “sailed” in 1962, the Henley-on-Todd is a spoof of the famous Henley Royal, a rowing regatta held annually on the Thames, at the town of Henley-on-Thames. The Henley Royal Regatta embodies the height of English sporting tradition, pomp, and ceremony.

The Henley-on-Todd pokes fun at the original by offering a rowing regatta with no water. The Todd

River that runs through the center of Alice Springs is, as mentioned, dry. Over 95% of the time, the Todd is just a big sandy strip running through town. In the Regatta, teams compete at multiple events: ones featuring “rowers” who run the Todd bed while holding up a bottomless canoe body, or fake swimming races, or a race in giant human-sized “hamster wheels.” There is a mock battle between ‘pirate ships’ fought by cars and trucks wrapped in ship facades, spraying each other with water cannons. Though it has been going since 1962 the Regatta was once notoriously cancelled due to water. That year the Todd wasn't dry. The regatta is a big charity event that it is just as fun and silly as it sounds.

The Camel Cup is a camel racing day. It's like horse racing, but with camels. The camels make all the difference. Horses, you see, reliably run fast when asked. Camels run fast only if they feel like it. Some races would see the first two camels racing past the finish line, and then a long gap. Perhaps five minutes later another camel would casually saunter past, its rider frantically trying to motivate it to speed up, to no visible effect. Another two

camels might still be chasing each other around the starting line. It is a pretty wild sport, too. Riding a camel has been compared to being stuffed inside a running washing machine. The Cup is perhaps a bit like a traditional day at the races, but with extra drama and comedy. The event also highlights one aspect of Alice Springs life that normally keeps its head down. The list of sponsors of the event has a couple of anomalies: along with the expected local supermarkets, local radio station, local tv station, local hotels and galleries, you also see sponsorships by Raytheon and Northrop-Grumman. The Camel Cup is the one event that the US military-industrial complex that supplies Pine Gap chooses to engage with. And so every year a sponsored camel is flown in

internationally to compete in one of the heats!

We had a lot of favorite places to take visitors. The botanical gardens, where our favorite spot was actually just off the car park, where we could view the bower bird bowers. The Desert Park, including its nocturnal house where you could see bilbies, and mala, and rufous hard wallaby.. But our favorite thing to do with visitors was simply head out along the Western McDonnell ranges and stop at every little outlook until we got tired of seeing -- the glowing orange walls of Standley Chasm, white gums growing in the dry river bed at Simpsons Gap, the still water of Ellery Creek Big Hole, the Ochre Pits, the purple rock walls of Ormiston Gorge, and the lake at Glen Helen. This country, that is supposed to be desolate and empty, is a feast of beauty if you know where to look.

When our year was over, we were glad to be heading home, but we also knew we'd found a new second home and we'd always want to head back. And we have managed to a few times since.

These highlights of our year in Alice Springs don't really capture what day to day life was like. Isolated, sure. Relaxed, sure, with the slower pace of a



country town. But what sticks with me the most is the beauty. The mountains of the McDonnell ranges like the bright orange bones of the landscape. White gum trees. The purple rocks in the gorges. And everywhere the red dirt. The watercolor paintings by Albert Namatjira are famous, but until you've been there yourself, it is hard to believe those vibrant colors are real. And the default.



HER BEAUTIFUL MISTAKE (CHAPTER 4)

SANDRA BOND

(The story so far: Sandra Bond has landed in Boston on her 2023 TAFF trip, and has so far overrun various parts of the US with fire and the sword: her gleeful reports of the chaos and wreckage left in her wake may be found in Banana Wings (chapter 1, Massachussetts), Inca (chapter 2, New York) and Boonfark (chapter 3, Chicago, forthcoming from Dan Steffan).

We left her bidding farewell to Nigel Rowe over the ticket gate of a Chicago Loop station. Now read on – because this is where the story really starts.)

There are few places where I feel as comfortable as in the driver's seat of a car, with the wheel between my hands, the pedals under my feet, the gear stick to my side and a can of Monster in the cup-holder.

Given that I drive for a living, this is no bad thing. I leave it as an open question whether “post hoc” and “propter hoc” have become tangled up, here; maybe it was inevitable that I should end up driving for a living, though it's a fact that I had driven the US, coast to coast, before I was ever paid a penny for turning a wheel professionally.

Be that as it may, here I now was, with all of the items listed above surrounding me except the gear lever. This was, after all, America, the land not only of the free but of the automatic transmission. Still, I'd driven automatics before, just as I'd driven on the “wrong” side of the road before; the former I find trivially easy to make the mental switch to, whereas the latter, I find, is almost as simple if you can persuade your brain to take its cue from everyone else on the road around you, and not to dwell on the fact that most of your environs are the mirror image of what you are used to.

So – as I already said, here I now was. “Here” was an Interstate freeway. I had taken the train back out to Midway, where I had graciously allowed Hertz to put me in the driver's seat of a Mazda CX-30 on a Michigan plate; had gone from the hire depot along 55th Street to a convenient gas station, stocking up on road food and appreciating the ruler-sharp straightness of American city streets; then continued on 55th until it crossed I-90, at an intersection also evidently designed by a transport planner fond of right-angles. Traffic was not too heavy, the weather was pleasant, I was on my way through town and out the other side. And on the other side of Chicago, Wisconsin and Madison awaited me.

In younger days, I had become enamoured of an equally youngish gentleman living in Wisconsin, a member of that wild and woolly corner of fandom, The Furies. Small wonder that I accompanied him to a good many of their conventions (I shall always cherish the look of astonishment on Taral Wayne's face when he looked up from his table at the Anthrocon dealer's den to find me watching him draw), and though both the relationship and my activity in that department had come to a close years previously, I still maintained friendships with

some of the more worthwhile people I'd met there; in particular, there was Chessie Sutherland. Chessie had been the roomie of my boyf in Madison, and my relationship with her had been close enough for us to adopt one another as sisters, and for it to long outlast my romance with her former roommate. She'd celebrated my becoming a published author in the traditional manner; I'd celebrated her becoming a BNF in the fanfic world with a million-word epic noir



tale set in the My Little Pony universe, which (I do not say this through gritted teeth) has had more readers than the entire sum of my own written oeuvre.

I had wondered whether it was cheeky of me to use my TAFF trip to visit Chessie, but had banished them by reminding myself that TAFF belongs not only to all fandom but to all *fandoms*, and that I myself have long held myself to a rigid standard of having no truck with gatekeepers. Besides, if I had to get myself from Chicago to Minneapolis, stopping over for a night in Madison was barely even out of my way.

Soon enough, I was recognising landmarks and town names from fifteen years ago when I'd driven the roads around Madison and Milwaukee regularly. I was on my way to visit one old friend, and that knowledge made every familiar spot I passed seem like another one. I stoked my fires of reminiscence by stopping for lunch at a Culver's, that peculiarly Wisconsin chain which advertises "Frozen Custard Butterburgers"; I



once had to reassure my friend H. that those were two separate items and not one.

By the time I reached the interchange where I-94 t-bones I-90 and is forced to take a right-angle turn to merge with it for the next several hundred miles, leaving those wishing to drive into Madison itself to drive a mere non-Interstate divided highway, nostalgia had me firmly in its grip.

The highway in question, by the way, outdoes the interstate, which north of Madison is 39-90-94;

to get into Madison you take 12-14-18-151. (That's Numberwang!)

I navigated this maze of numbers successfully to find Chessie's place, was welcomed in, and I flopped out cheerfully. Chessie was (and is) an old and close enough buddy for me to *really* relax in her company, not merely sitting down and taking the weight off my feet. She was also a close enough buddy to share a joint with, my first of the trip, which aided the cause of relaxation; all the more so because I hadn't been in the same physical space as Chessie for too long, and had forgotten quite how strongly she rolls 'em.

All of a sudden it was tea-time, and Chessie and her roomie were rattling off various suggestions for places where we could go and eat. The range of possibilities made my head swim (or maybe that was still the dope), and I seized on one option as it flew past, not on the basis of its cuisine, but because it was a kind of dining option I'd never heard of or even imagined before – an autism-friendly restaurant.

I am officially Not Autistic (like Sheldon Cooper, my mother had me tested) but I am absolutely positive that I lie somewhere on the spectrum, and nine days into my trip, I was feeling sufficiently stressed that the thought of eating in a safe space sounded highly appealing.

Well, goodness me, that was a smart move. Ollie's lays it on the line on the very front page of their website: they are

"PROUD to offer options to make our guests more comfortable while visiting us like fidgets, coloring pages, noise reducing headphones, and a choice to order through a QR code at the table or have a server take your order. You are welcome here, come as you are!"

For that inclusive attitude, I was prepared to forgive them for more than one single comma splice.

When we reached Ollie's, they delivered on all they promised. Right inside the door was a big ol' bowl of not only fidget spinners but a medley of other gadgets and devices of every kind, enough to gladden the heart of any inhabitant of the spectrum. They certainly pleased us. We picked one or two each and swapped back and forth happily, none of us ashamed or abashed in the least. The main courses when they came were nothing extraordinary, but were more than adequate. We swapped those around some, too.

The desserts, though, kicked things up a notch. I shan't resort to the worn-out jokes about how you can tell American attitudes to desserts from the girth of some American fans, especially with my own waistline being what it is, but I demolished their lemon cheesecake (well, "cheese"cake, as it was vegan) in no time.

It came with a 'cheerio crust': "I thought Cheerios were a cereal," I said to Chessie. "They are," she replied. I don't know what they did to them over and above crushing them to turn them into a cheesecake base, but it worked.

"I said cheerio, you sonofabitch, and shot him in the head," I said with my mouth as I pushed the dish away. I delivered the quote out of the corner of my mouth, actually, as befitted its gangster style. This throwaway remark brought a thoughtful look onto Chessie's face.

"Hey..." she mused. "Have you seen Lackadaisy?"

I sent my memory back years and rummaged in its Furry Comics files. "What, Lackadaisy Cats? The one set in the prohibition years?"

"Yes, that one. Have you seen the pilot?"

"The *pilot*?"

Turns out that its creator, Tracy Butler, had crowdfunded a campaign to make an animated pilot of the comic, which had been released a few months before. We went back to Chessie's and watched it.

It was splendidly done. I'm sure the furries loved it. (In fact, off the back of that pilot, it attracted some sixteen thousand backers who between them put over two million dollars into making a full series; I'm sure they couldn't *all* have been furries.) As pilots tend to, it left a good many threads dangling, but it had enough meat in the story to stand up alone, and the end credits in particular were an absolute work of art.

I could have happily have hung out in Madison with Chessie for longer, revisiting haunts from fifteen years before and discovering new delights, but TAFF trips invariably feature pins in a map marked You Must Be Here By Date X Or Else, and my map had just such a pin stuck in Minneapolis and with the next day's date written on the tag, along with the legend "Diversicon".

And so, next morning, I bade Chessie farewell, little knowing

that within a year Donald Trump would be re-elected and Chessie would flee from his tyrannical empire and move to Lithuania. I filled the car with gas and snacks and energy drinks on the way out of Madison, and hit the Interstate northward.

A brief pause to say hi to another old friend from years ago, the Giant Pink Elephant just off the highway at DeForest. Over the broad Wisconsin River, past the freeway divergence near Portage, and up to Wisconsin Dells. The Dells are northern Wisconsin's prime tourist resort, and as



I neared them, I began to see licence plates from all over the fifty states.

From beyond, too; I spied a Saskatchewan plate. There was a Rhode Island car. What was on that vehicle? Oh, Alabama. (The Alabama car had a tarp strapped to its roof, covering something unknown of irregular shape; I wondered briefly whether I was witnessing a restaging of the granny-on-the-roofrack urban myth.)

I would have been glad to take my time and play tourist on this leg of my travels – though possibly not around Wisconsin Dells – but I had an appointment to keep at Minneapolis Airport. I pressed on, north-westerly, mile after mile, exit after exit. Tourist traffic died away and the road became quieter and quieter, two lanes in either direction easily sufficing. Another freeway divergence saw I-90 peel off and for the first time since Madison, I was on an Interstate with one number only: I-94. (A very fannish number, that. Ask Spike, sometime.)

I only allowed myself to leave the interstate when my tummy, having long since disposed of Ollie's dinner the night before, began to demand fresh supplies. The next town that was large enough for me to be pretty sure I'd find a suitable lunch venue was Osseo.

The main highway through Osseo boasted several chain restaurants, but I chose to gamble and ignore them in the hope of finding something more unique. I spied something called Norske Nook down a side turning, and made my way there, only to find that it was just what I was after – an eaterie

that specialised in Norwegian and American baked goods, famous for its award-winning pies, and looking thoroughly inviting.

It had closed for the day five minutes before I got there.

I could have retraced my steps and gone to McDonalds or Taco John's, but the thought of resorting to a bland chain after the sight of Norske Nook was not to be borne. I headed onward hopefully, but soon left Osseo behind me. The next few towns were too small to have anyplace to eat; Foster (not named for Alan Dean), Brackett (not named for Leigh). After those I found myself in Eau Claire, ended up miserably in the worst Burger King I've ever dined in, and allowed myself a few minutes of wallowing in feelings of why-the-hell-did-I-let-them-talk-me-into-standing-for-TAFF?

The food did a little to restore my spirits, but only a little. If I'd had a rendezvous with someone I knew well and another evening like the last of relaxing and chilling, I might have felt less jittery; but I was meeting Larry Sanderson, of whom I knew only that Geri Sullivan thought him a top bloke, and going straight to Diversicon, a convention where I confidently expected to know nobody.

The highway over the last dying miles of

Wisconsin towards Minnesota was featureless and dull, like my mind. Every few miles came an intersection, but even they were dull; diamond interchanges, two on-ramps and two off-ramps, repeated again and again, with signposts for places I'd never



heard of, places no member of fandom, I felt sure, had ever lived; Elk Mound, Rusk, Menomonie. Only the last of these rang the faintest of bells; when I checked up later, I found that Neil Gaiman had lived there, which shows how much *I* know.

Finally I spied an impressively huge bridge ahead, which would carry me over what I assumed was the Mississippi River (but was actually the St. Croix). Halfway across I hit road works and had to crawl along, though at least I had a view to enjoy. On the Minneapolis side, the jam cleared, but I was now paying more attention to what roads to follow to bring me safely to the airport.

I turned onto the MSP beltline and followed it around, crossing the real Mississippi River without even noticing. I was in a city again, now, as was betrayed not only by the buildings all around but by the intersections being majestic cloverleaves instead of dull diamonds. Pausing only to snigger at the aptness of Pilot Knob Road being located so close to the airport, I found my way to the rental car return location, gave my faithful Mazda back to Hertz, and went in search of Larry Sanderson.



I found Larry with just as much ease as I had found the rental return. We greeted each other, and Larry looked at me, and looked at my two suitcases and my CPAP in its case and my other bags of this and that, and looked at his car. Larry had come along in his boyfriend's car, which would seat two with ease, and might even allow one of those two to bring a briefcase and a packed-lunch box if they felt expansive.

Eventually Larry put me in the car first, and then such luggage as he could put in the proper luggage space, and then put the rest of my bags between my legs and in my lap and round my neck. I felt a complete idiot for not having told him in advance how much I had. I felt about six inches tall. In fact, I wished I *was* about six inches tall, which would have made fitting all my luggage aboard a great deal easier.

But somehow we managed it, and set off from the airport on the south side of the twin cities, to Diversicon, so far on the north-west side that it wasn't even in Minneapolis or St Paul, but in Plymouth, MN. Eventually we found our way to Xenium Lane, which contrary to all appearances does not seem to have been named in honour of Mike Glicksohn's fanzine, and to the Crowne Plaza Hotel. At which point, I discovered that Larry was not himself attending Diversicon, which rather took me aback; I had been hoping that I'd have him, at least, to talk to on arrival, and help me get into the convention mindset. I'd made my plans to attend Diversicon as something of a dry-run for Pemmi-Con the weekend following, to give me practice at North American cons and their little ways such as con suites that differ from British practice.

But Larry isn't a big convention-goer, I learned, and I was on my own till Sunday. Ah well, if he had been planning to attend Diversicon, and brought some luggage of his own, there would have been even less space in the car for mine.

We extracted my luggage, and myself, from the ill-used voiturette, and free of its unaccustomed

overload, it shot off like a little bullet to take Larry away and leave me there alone. Well, no point standing around looking decorative, I thought, as I looked around for the main entrance and the front desk.

“You’re leaving it there, Sandra? You only just got to Minneapolis!”

“Yes, Alter-Ego. I’m way past deadline”

“But this is chapter 4, Sandra!”

“Yes, I know that, Alter-Ego. That’s why it says Chapter 4 there at the top.”

“But Geri Sullivan already published chapter 5.”

“What of it?”

“It begins with you crossing the Canadian border. What happened to you in Minneapolis? What about Readercon? What about your hilarious encounter with those Mexican sports team kids? What about that anecdote with Steven Barnes and the heaps of dead bodies?”

“Um. Yes. Hey, here’s a tip for future TAFF report writers: write the damn thing in order, and then you won’t find yourself screwing up as you fill in the gaps and having to resort to desperate and transparent measures.”

“Well, what do you expect people to do? Deface their copies of that lovely professionally printed *Idea* by crossing out the 5 and adding a 6?”

“Good grief! What kind of philistine do you think I am? I have a better idea.”

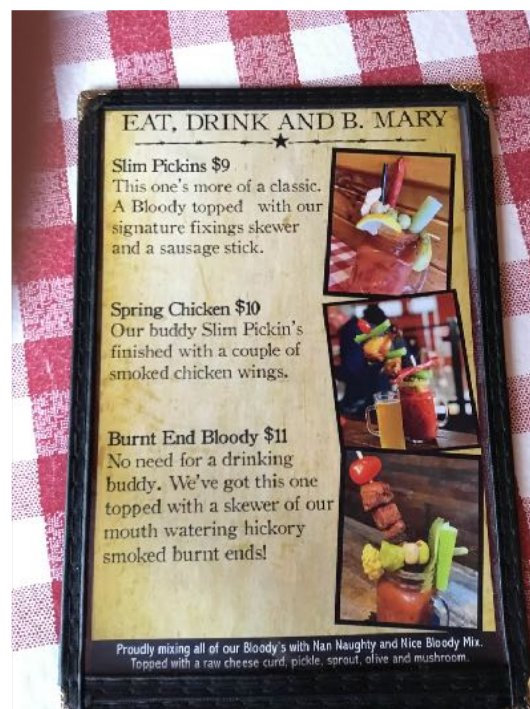
“You mean...?”

“Yes, Alter-Ego. Watch out for Chapter 4½ of *Her Beautiful Mistake*, coming soon to a fanzine near you. Christ knows which fanzine, but let’s worry about that later.”

“And what about chapter 3, and Chicago?”

“Go and ask Dan Steffan about that one. Quit bothering me! You’re nothing but a figment of the imagination! Dick Geis’s imagination, for that matter; you’re a figment of a dead man’s imagination.”

“Humph!”



BACKYARD BESTIARY

April 27

Just outside our dining room window, Dave and I have an ongoing nature documentary. It looks so peaceful -- but there was a bunny battle 15 seconds later.



June 4

Bunnies at breakfast! This bunny decided to wait patiently in line until their friend finished eating. But then...

They realized that there was more than one plate! Breakfast for all the bunnies!

And yes, I do feel a little bit like a children's book about manners is being acted out in my backyard...with bunnies.



June 21

In the latest Backyard Bunny News, another baby bunny has been sighted. We are experiencing Bunny Abundance! (And yes, my vegetable beds are protected with chicken wire. The bunnies can frolic and munch among the native plants in the rest of the yard!)



July 3

Good morning! It's breakfast in our backyard, with small, medium, and large bunnies. Sort of like the three bears, only with bunnies.

August 3

When you live on the edge of the desert, you sometimes get interesting visitors. This roadrunner came up to our back patio door, looking like he wanted to come in! A big bird -- about two feet from head to beak I'd guess, and definitely a predator. Roadrunners kill rattlesnakes by bashing the snake's head on the ground (then swallowing the snake whole). Clearly, this bird knows he's descended from dinosaurs!



August 5

This morning, one of the resident cottontails started chasing the roadrunner all over the yard. Around the raised beds, up the hill, around the tree -- all at top rabbit/roadrunner speed. I don't

PAT MURPHY

know what started it. It calmed down at one point, then the rabbit started up again and chased the roadrunner out of the yard. Could the roadrunner have been going after one of the baby bunnies? I don't know, but whatever happened, that rabbit was pissed off! Not one of the biggest rabbits, just a medium sized cottontail with an attitude.

Never a dull moment in the backyard.



September 8

A new visitor to our backyard. I saw this hawk perching in a pine tree yesterday. Today, he came



down to get a drink in our backyard oasis -- frequented by rabbits, doves, mockingbirds, a road runner, and now a hawk. I think this is a Cooper's Hawk, but I'm no expert.

September 28

The roadrunner has become a regular visitor. Yesterday, he stopped by for a drink at our small oasis (a dog watering bowl). When he decided it was time to go, he hopped away, rather than running. Looks like he has a sore foot.

October 2

In the continuing saga of my backyard: It rained a few days ago -- about 3/4 of an inch. Now the Texas sage, ordinarily a big shrub with gray-green leaves, is blooming like mad. The backyard is filled with purple blossoms. The bunnies are acting all nonchalant, like they don't care. Bunnies are like that.



THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE: An Alternate Reality

KEV WILLIAMS

I have always been fascinated by the Soviet experiment in society, especially that heady period during the Khrushchev premiership. You might say I have been *rapt with the pact*. My preoccupation has been bolstered by personal experience. As part of my job, I visited what was then East Germany (the DDR), in the early 80s. and saw first-hand some of the paranoia. But then in the 90's after the fall of the Soviet Union, my work took me back other ex-Warsaw Pact countries and especially to Russia herself, working with the locals. It felt to me in the early-mid 90s that the optimism of the Khrushchev era when they created their amazing early space programme was returning.

I cannot help thinking about the USSR and the Warsaw pact countries without seeing echoes of SF. These were isolated meta-stable societies, like a pocket universe where the protagonists are constrained, and the story /history, is how they gain freedom (eg. Dan Galouye's 'Dark Universe' or Aldiss' 'Non-Stop'). And the Soviet space programme graphics looked a bit like an Ace Double from the late 50s (Emsh? Valigursky?):

The USSR

Russia herself developed from medieval times to a peasant culture under the absolute monarchy of the Czars and then in short order during the twentieth century was violently converted to a socialist utopia, transitioned on the death of Stalin to an utopian dream under Khrushchev. It then collapsed into a form of one-party oligarch capitalism.

It is a country with a unique history, culture, art, science and engineering. Following the 1917 revolution, it was grown into the USSR by the absorption of 14 more constituent Republics and after WWII, 8 other Soviet Satellite states as part of the Warsaw Pact collective defence treaty.

This amalgamation was scarred by the rules of Lenin and Stalin but then given hope during the Khrushchev period only to collapse in 1991,

eventually giving way to Putin who has effectively controlled Russia since 1999. The Russian people are nothing if not resilient. They have been serfs, peasants, comrades and citizens embracing a form of capitalism. What are they now – subjects? If not of a king, then of an ideologue. You have to feel for the people. There has been no tradition of true democracy.

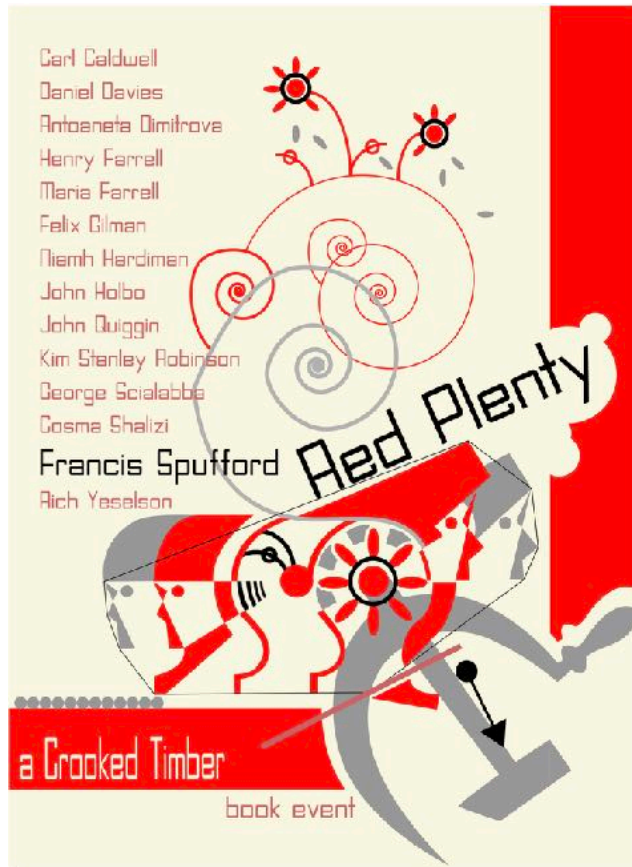
It took Lenin 6 weeks after the 'victory of the people' in the revolution, to found The Cheka, the first of many names for a repressive, secret police. Castro took the same time to found the Cuban equivalent, the DGI. East Germany (DDR) had the Stasi, Poland the UB and so on. I guess that there's just something about the system. The 'Cause' requires it. The Stalin Era in particular, with the Gulags and the staggering losses of WWII, followed by the famines caused by agricultural collectivisation were awful for the people and the Great Terror purged many of his perceived political opponents.

Red Plenty: The Soviet Utopia

After Stalin's death, with Khrushchev's premiership from 1956, began a staggering era of growth in technology. This was driven by the optimism (absence of fear) created after Khrushchev's courageous de-Stalinisation efforts. The Soviet Space programme literally took off in the late 50s and early 60s, and for 5 or 6 years, outstripped the efforts of the US. People in the west felt disquiet as it seemed that the Soviet Union was growing faster than any other country except Japan. Faster than Western Germany, faster than the US. This was not just a claim of the Soviets. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of its archives, this growth was confirmed by economic historians and the CIA.

It's an extraordinary story, of which the space programme is only a part. It is brilliantly described in Francis Spufford's 'Red Plenty', which is about this moment in history. The brief era in which Khrushchev's Soviet Union looked

forward to a future of rich communists, and envious capitalists, where as the man himself said: “Every Lada would be better engineered than a



Porsche”.

‘Red Plenty’ is effectively a collection of short essays about the history, politics and economics of the era and needed the brilliant scientists and engineers (what engineers!) to make the dream come true, complemented by short stories, fictionally illustrating what was going on.

It’s not SF, but Ken MacLeod says of it:

It’s a bit like reading a novel by Kim Stanley Robinson, Neal Stephenson, or Ursula Le Guin - or maybe a mashup of all them; full of arguments between passionate and intelligent people, diverting (in both senses) infodumps, and all about something that actually happened -

and, more significantly, about something that didn’t happen, and why it didn’t.

In fact, Kim Stanley Robinson also has something to say, having chaired a book event on it:

Red Plenty is like no other history book, a collection of stories, faction, part detective story, a set of artfully interwoven genres, reverse magical realism and half novel/half history. Of course, it does not help that the first words of the novel are “This is not a novel. There is too much to explain...”

What I particularly liked in Red Plenty is the way it humanizes a mysterious and convulsive mass of recent history. It’s a tremendous demonstration of what a great diagnostic power the novel can wield in the hands of a strong novelist. You could call it an outstanding example of socialist realism, in that its critique of the Soviet experiment also contains a deep sympathy for the experiment’s goals, and for the many people who continued to struggle for those goals to the end, despite the worsening circumstances.

SF and the Russian Space Programme

Russians were of course very early participants in the world of SF - much of it inspired by Wells and Verne. I came across this when I was 15, in the form of ‘The Call of the Cosmos’ by Tsiolkovsky published in the UK in 1963:

It was a collection of scientific articles, and SF stories about the building of a spaceship, stories set on the Moon and the Asteroid belt. Messrs Clute and Nichols in the SFE, state:

Tsiolkovsky was the first great pioneer of space research and the first real prophet of the myth of the conquest of space, which has played such a vital role in modern SF. The inscription on the obelisk marking his grave reads: “Man will not always stay on Earth; the pursuit of light and space will lead him to penetrate the bounds of

the atmosphere, timidly at first but in the end to conquer the whole of solar space.”

Tsiolkovsky is now considered the father of Soviet space programme having provided the theoretical basis for astronautics. But he also inspired “The Chief Designer”. The Chief Designer’s real name never appeared in any document and his every step was watched by the KGB – for his own security, lest the CIA assassinate or kidnap him.



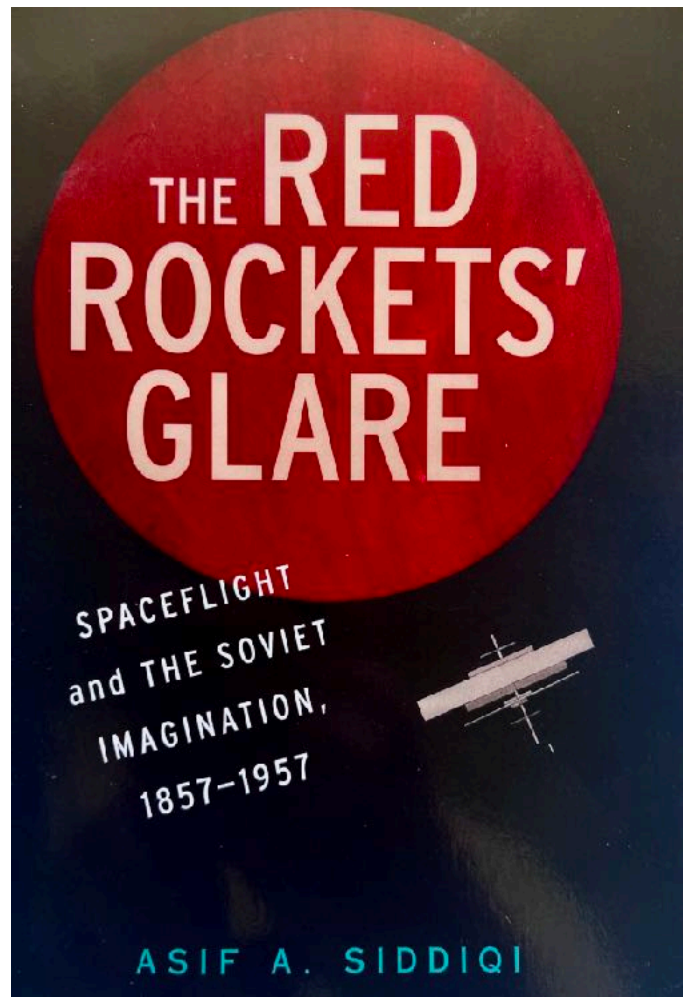
Only after his death was his true identity revealed: Sergei Korolev. He and Tsiolkovski (below) were the Oberth and Goddard of their countries.

Korolev was fascinated by flight from a very early age and was a member of a voluntary rocket association GIRD and launched the first liquid propellant rocket in 1933. It flew 400 yards. He was appointed senior engineer at the new Rocket Propulsion Institute RNII but fell foul of Stalin’s great terror in 1937 and spent 10 years in a gulag for ‘sabotage’, only released after de-Stalinisation. His preoccupation with rocketry continued apace and he was well-placed to pick up on the German technologically advanced V-2 technology.

As WWII ended, the US and Russian forces closed in on the assumed whereabouts of the V-2 factories and launch sites. The US got there first and nabbed 100 intact V-2s and 360 tonnes of equipment, enough to fill 16 Liberty ships, and

took them to White Sands, New Mexico.

Thousands of mostly Russian slave workers had died building the Nazi rockets, but thanks to a survivor, the Russians found enough parts to assemble 20 V-2s, and related equipment – enough to fill 58 rail cars and crucially, the detailed blueprints, not just of the V-2 but a proposal for a far more powerful version, to be built had Germany not been defeated. The A-10 was a long-range, two stage rocket that had one purpose – to strike New York and Washington. The US had the cream of the German rocket scientists including Werner von Braun, but the Russians had many of the technicians. The fascinating story of this race and the lead up to



the start of the space race with the launch of Sputnik, is told in 'Red Moon Rising' - Matthew Brzezinski or in much more detail in Asaf Siddiq's 'Red Rocket's Glare':

Korolev worked in NII-88 – the USSR's top-secret rocket research facility. This was near a tiny Czarist town called Podlipki - but this has been erased from maps. To get there, visitors had to take a series of right turns, along a maze of unmarked country roads and eventually through a narrow, automated steel gate called the Mousetrap.

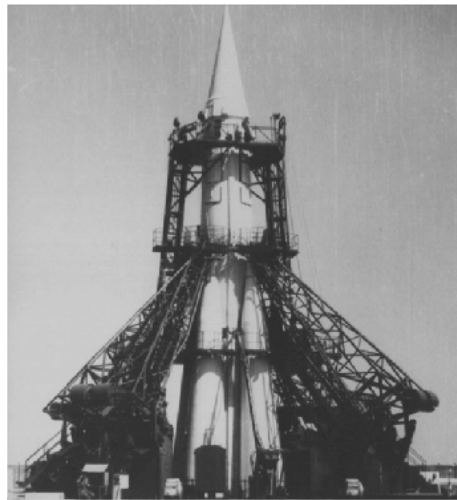
It took Korolev and his team 3 years to duplicate the V2, and by 1956 they had created a derivative but fully Russian R-5, which had a range of 800 miles and was the world's first missile to deliver a nuclear payload to a part of the Aral desert. It could strike any nation in Europe, except Spain and Portugal. The world's first ICBM – the R-7 followed:

It had a range of more than 5000 miles and could fly 4 times faster and 40 times further than its inspiration - the V-2. It could reach the Eastern seaboard of the US. The US having long-range B-47 bombers, flying from bases all around the geography of Russia, whereas the Soviets only had an aging Tupolev Tu4 bomber which could just about reach the US coast but not return. The ICBM was an economically affordable way to a balance of power.

But there was a problem. Korolev had no material that could survive the heat of re-entry into the atmosphere. So as a weapon, the R-7 was useless until a fix was available. In February 1956, there was an historic meeting between Korolev and

Khrushchev, accompanied by his engineer son Sergei (to ensure his uneducated dad wasn't being bullshitted!). This was reported by Sergei Khrushchev in his fascinating memoir.

In the meeting, Korolev audaciously suggested, "Why not put a satellite in space?" Re-entry was unnecessary. Khrushchev didn't want any delays in the programme, but when Korolev told him (with some exaggeration) that the Americans would very soon be ready to launch a satellite, he relented. Neither Khrushchev nor Eisenhower fully appreciated the political impact that this would have.



The *Prostreishy Sputnik* (Simple Satellite) was launched on October 4th, 1957. Its bleeps could be picked up by any amateur radio buff and be seen easily with the naked eye – because Korolev added a highly reflective canopy to the satellite. It was the canopy that the world could see, not the satellite. Eisenhower was on his farm in Gettysburg, so secretary of state Dulles had to make a statement, saying that it was "of considerable technical importance – but that this should not be

exaggerated". The press soon changed his mind and got Dwight back from the farm.

Their space 'firsts' came thick and fast: the first animal in space (Laika the dog), the first man and woman (Gargarin, Tereshkova), the first space station and space walk. With robotic craft, they were the first to reach the surface of the moon, created and deployed the first moon rover (Lunokhod) in 1966, the first probes to Venus and Mars.

I last visited Moscow on holiday in 2013 and finally got to see the Museum of Cosmonautics on the outskirts, which I'd failed to see on all my business trips back in the 90s. It's striking, has duplicates of all the key craft and still retains the Soviet aesthetic, from the extraordinary sculpture of Tsiolkovski outside, to the space exhibits inside and is never far from the Soviet iconography.

But this was not my first personal experience of Russia and the communist bloc.

The DDR (East Germany) – Orwellian Paranoia:

As part of my work, I visited East Germany in the 80s, attending a medical conference, and found it a bizarre and frightened place.



On a muggy July day in 1981, I got my first gawk behind the walls of organised socialism. I was on my way to Erfurt, in Thuringia – now part of the Soviet bloc. The entry and exit requirements for visitors speak eloquently of the paranoia (and empty shops):

You must not stand. You must sit on a seat or the floor and have your documentation ready.

I was sitting in a train in a heavily guarded barbed-wire compound cheerfully called 'Bad Hersfeld Transit Point'. This was a pseudopod of

East Germany sticking into a mile wide no-man's land. All trains crossing the border had to stop here for formalities. I was rather nervously reading a booklet of minatory instructions and restrictions.

Forbidden on Entry:

- Newspapers and periodicals, in as much as they are not permitted on the attached list.
- Literature and other publications whose contents are against the conservation of peace or whose importation contradicts in other ways the interests of the state and its people.
- Calendars, almanacs and yearbooks.
- Postage stamps and stamp catalogues.
- Invalidated tender and coins.
- Firearms, ammunition and explosives, including pyrotechnic products.
- Televisions, as well as any spares or accessories.
- Narcotics and other poisons.
- Children's toys of a military nature.
- Used items as gifts (excluding used textiles and shoes, if these have been washed or cleaned after last using).
- Photographic papers and sheets, films unexposed or exposed and developed, and transparencies if their content contradicts the interests of the state and its people.
- Magnetic tapes and other sound tapes.
- Records, in as much as they do not refer to the works of the Cultural Heritage or of present cultural work.

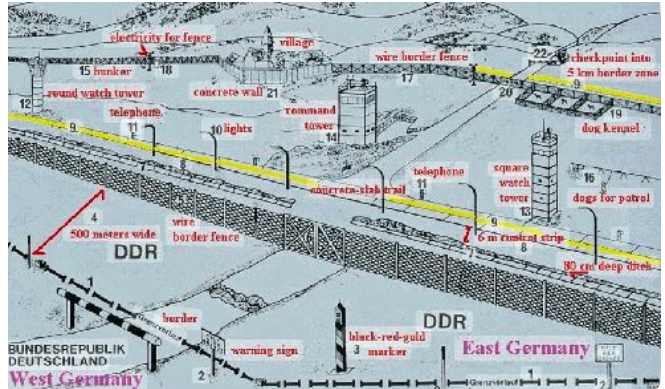
The formalities consisted of an epidemic of form and passport stamping.

However, the youthful, uniformed officials were friendly enough and seemed genuinely pleased to see visitors from the West, whom I suppose, weren't all that common at the time.

But the older generations, particularly those who remember times before the war, were a lot more cynical. In the compartment with myself and my three Scottish travelling companions, were four old folks. As soon as they realised that we were

Crossing over this real line on the map was a memorable experience. Newspapers and books told me that it existed, but then I saw it with my own eyes. These people had **BUILT A WALL AROUND THEIR COUNTRY.** Not just dividing Berlin, but the whole country, from the West.

magnificence of scope and imagination but made horrible by the fact that it was not colourful history.



Then we came to the first stop inside the East, Eisenach, and the next surprise. A platform full of young and middle-aged people, who proceeded to pile on to the train. They seemed ordinary enough. Reasonably well dressed, cheerful and noisy just like people anywhere else. What was so shocking, then? Nothing really. Just the realisation, that until this lot got on, we four Brits had been the only people on the train under the age of Sixty-five. It took the contrast to make me realise that we'd been travelling on a geriatric train. People under retirement age were not usually allowed out of the country, certainly not with spouse or children, as I was soon to have explained to me.

But there, just to add a touch of irony, looming over the town as the train pulled out, was the great castle of Wartburg, where Luther was given sanctuary in the sixteenth century. Just another guy who believed in division, and no doubt thought it was very much needed at the time. So,

in due course we arrived at Erfurt. The city where Luther studied, then decided to become a monk, then priest, then theologian, then ideologue. I guess he was hungry for power too.

Erfurt was an earnest and industrious town, and just a little dull. But in many ways very different. Back then it was like being The Time Traveller. The city had survived the war reasonably well, but apart from a few monumentally hideous new city buildings like the western class tourist hotels in the town centre, nothing had changed since well before the war. The old historic buildings were not museums but were still being lived in, including some obviously bomb damaged houses, the rubble from which had just been-swept to one side. It was like stepping into some sepia tinted postcard dated 1946. Despite this, the state tourist board tries hard with their brochures depicting the marvellous downtown civic buildings and hotels.

I stayed in the ugly jerry-built Hotel Kosmos, reserved for westerners by the state travel organisation Reiseburo. There, after a second rash of frenzied passport stamping, I got to my tiny room which, apart from making me wish for the comforts of a university hall of residence, was distinguished by two things, the toilet paper and the radio. The radio-had no knobs and couldn't be turned off nor on. I wondered if, in fact, it was a radio. The toilet paper had possessed all the old world charm of woodchip wallpaper. There was a man smoking and reading a newspaper down the corridor. I began to think of Winston Smith.

In the foyer was a foreign currency shop – stacked high with western goods, which the locals were forbidden to purchase. These shops sold everything from Persil Washing Powder to Japanese hi-fis and cameras. Products that were not available anywhere else in the town. I wondered what the locals thought about this situation. Did they get very angry about it, or just shrug? Shrug in public maybe but angry at home. They were missing out on something.

Some of the other Brits attending the conference, stayed one of the older downtown hotels- the Erfurter Hof - a great crumbling gothic Gormenghast of mirrors with sweeping staircases and decades of dust and decay. Walking down the cobbled streets surrounded by decaying splendour and the occasional pile of rubble, I saw myself back in post war Vienna, Holly Martin stalking Harry Lime. The atmosphere was just right. The air reeked of intrigue. Each person I met seemed to have a story.

The conference interpreter was West German but had been forced to live in the East, by his employers - the Catholic Church. The Church was still very strong there, despite all that Luther and the State could do. But he hated the country venomously and just couldn't wait to tell me the fact. He hated it not specifically because it was Communist or repressive (in fact, he said, "within limits there was a good deal of freedom and equality - the limits are of course defined by Party membership."). He hated it because it divided his beloved country. He went on to say that in his opinion, the primary fear of the Soviets, was not of the West as a whole, but of a unified Germany. "You have to remember", he said with a hint of unchristian pride, "that in two World Wars, the Germans killed 19 million Russians".

At an open-air barbeque, I found myself chatting to a rather lovely Czech lady – one of the professional oral surgeons at the conference. She spoke excellent though heavily accented English... and there I was, back in 'The Third Man'. Not being quite as cool as Joseph Cotten, I racked my brain for some knowledge of things Czechoslovakian. My years in the university film society, came to my aid - and I discoursed (I thought) engagingly about Czech film directors, Milos Foreman and Jiri Menzel. Luckily, she was a film fan.

But it soon turned back to harsh realities. She had a young daughter and was separated from her

husband. She'd been transferred to a town in the far east of the country Kosice, where things were very bad and she wanted to get out. She'd finally obtained permission to go to the next international conference, which was to be held in Zurich - though she would under no circumstances be permitted to take her child. She openly, and probably incautiously, admitted to me that she was seeking a marriage of convenience in Switzerland, so that she could get herself and her daughter out of Czechoslovakia permanently.

The place just bred drama and intrigue – thrived on it.

One of the few cheery sights of my week behind the curtain, was a drunken would-be punk reeling about, outside a bar from which issued loud music. We joined in and had a good time - at least for a half hour until four young, very drunk uniformed Russian soldiers stumbled in and began ordering people about.

The very last day of the conference and the farewell dinner, was held back at Luther's old pad – Wartburg Castle. We were met by blaring cornets and two youths clad in moth-eaten heraldic gear toting cardboard halberds and trying not to yawn.

The closing speech by the Mayor of Erfurt completed the insanity of the whole week.



He achieved the seemingly impossible, in succeeding in one sentence to proceed from tooth decay (the subject of the conference) to the threat of the Imperialist hoards and the nuclear holocaust. We went home...

Forbidden on Exit:

- Meat and meat products of any type
- Woollen undergarments of all types
- Work and professional clothing made of fabric and leather materials
- Shoes and hosiery of all types.
- Children's and baby's clothing made of all types of materials, bedlinen, towels, tea towels and tablecloths.
- Magnetic and other sound tapes (except records). Photo and cine films.
- Carpets and carpet adhesives
- Sugar
- Bulbs, fruit and vegetables.
- All types of spices.
- Almonds, sultanas, currants and raisins
- Lemon Peel
- Shredded coconut
- Wallpaper Paste

The TV series 'Deutschland 83-89' is billed as a spy thriller – but it communicates well the paranoia and chaos as the economy collapsed prior to the fall of the Berlin wall in '89.

Russia in the 90s

In the 90s after the fall of the Soviet Union, my job took me to other Warsaw Pact countries, but mostly to Russia.

In Ukraine, there was a strong feeling of optimism, prospects and opportunities. My work colleagues based there, were having a ball. They occupied a drafty, purple, onion-domed building, most of them in one huge room. The GM sat in one corner with the marketing, sales, legal, IT etc. groups scattered about the room. The GM met with the British ambassador and the GMs of other companies for breakfast every Monday

morning to share learnings about emerging opportunities. It was an exciting time.

In Russia, I found the professional classes, friendly, engaging, very open to western stuff, even if you felt that it was an emerging frontier country, with everyone scrambling to get ahead with the huge changes that were occurring. Western companies were piling in, and it seemed to me as if the optimism of the Khrushchev era was returning.

In Moscow, street lights were being installed in the previously dark and gloomy capital, everyone who had a car suddenly became a taxi driver - you just had to stand in the middle of the road and hold your hand out, and some rattle-trap Lada or Trabant or if you were lucky a government Zil limo (based on a 1956 Cadillac), would pull up, belching blue fumes. Then you haggled the fare before getting in.

The public spaces were aging, soiled marbled hallways. The wood-panelled rooms with huge solid wood desks, big plastic phones and large switchboards. In the offices, numbers of head-scarfed babushka wheeled trolleys around with strong tea, vodka, piroshki, blinis, and the driest biscuits I have ever experienced. Permanent huge queues formed outside the couple of McDonalds that had opened. The few western-style restaurants that had opened only took dollars, were guarded by heavies with Kalashnikov's. Dodge city.

I made a presentation to assembled scientists and medics at a conference in the vast marbled hall of the Russian Army and got stuck in a tiny clanking lift with a few of our hosts, on the way to the compulsory shot-of-vodka-with-every-course, reception. They were good people, sound scientists, very keen to get on in the rapidly westernising, capitalising environment. These were heady times. It was an exciting place of opportunity, and the people I worked with were welcoming the changes with open arms.

Sadly, thanks to Putin the Russian disease has returned. Since he effectively took control in 1999, he has projected to the Russian people an image of Russia as a global power and turned this nascent democratic state into an autocratic one, again.

Russia is a vast country and what we see is the view from the cities. One interesting coda to the Russian Space programme shows that outside the cities, the country hasn't really changed:

Cargo Cults and the Russian Space Programme

In one of his essays Alfred Bester lists some ideas for stories that he hadn't written yet. One of these goes as follows:

When the railroad was pushed west across the American plains, it was accompanied by telegraph wires. These were frequently damaged by native American tribes, who sought the ceramic condensers that connected the wires at the top of the poles, to make arrow heads and other useful items. This was impossible to effectively police, so the builders' left piles of broken condensers at the base of the poles to satisfy the local needs.

Bester was intrigued by this idea – an 'advanced' civilisation discards material which may not be understood but is investigated and employed by the less-advanced peoples. It is a concept called a Cargo Cult.

He incorporated it in 'The Stars my Destination', where Gully Foyle, abandoned in space, is found by people occupying a rock in the Asteroid Belt (the Tiger face, forced marriage and escape, follow). The asteroid's inhabitants: 'The Scientific People' are obsessed with doing everything 'scientifically', which includes reciting chemical formulae they don't understand, or turning on laboratory equipment as part of a ritual ceremony. They were a Cargo Cult.

The idea of a Cargo Cult has its roots in colonialism, when technologically superior people arrived and distributed ideas and materials unknown to the native population.

After WWII, when many of the Pacific islands had been invaded or used by either the US or Japanese forces, huge quantities of foreign materiel were left behind such as shoes, canned meat, knives, rifles, ammunition and vehicles. These were objects of great curiosity to the locals and could possibly bring drastic changes to the lifestyle of the islanders.

Charismatic leaders morphed the idea into a cult, with the thought that an ancestor would mysteriously send cargoes for their benefit and encouraged through rituals such as “marching and drilling, flags and pole, and flowers.”

Some cargo cults are still active to this day on Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

But is there also one in Kazakhstan?

Kazak Cargo Cult

“Who else do you know in the world that lives under paths of rockets, where pieces are designed to fall from the sky, or blow up entirely, and are told things are OK?” (Kazak environmentalist in Kopak 2019).

Soviet and Russian era rocket launches have been made from Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Since 1994, the area has been leased to Russia. Unlike the US and European launch site, adjacent to oceans, the lower stages of Baikonur rockets fall into the vast Kazak steppe. The steppe has a harsh and unpredictable climate and is a rural territory of animal husbandry and agriculture. A world often looked down upon by city dwellers. The fact that this is considered ‘downrange’ of the spaceport has more than a hint of colonial attitude, with planners referring to it as bleak, deserted, dead and most importantly, empty.

The rocket debris frequently contain residual toxic material and fuel. While Russian mobile teams move into the steppe to recover rocket stages, scrap metal dealers compete with them for debris in the hope of salvaging valuable metals. But the rocket parts also find other local uses as building materials, such as roofs, tools and even children’s toboggans!

An endlessly fascinating country. Would be nice to visit again. But when?



References/Further reading:

‘Red Plenty’ – Francis Spufford – Faber & Faber 2010

‘Red Moon Rising’ - Matthew Brzezinski, Bloomsbury 2007

‘Red Rocket’s Glare’ – Asaf Siddiqi - Cambridge UP 2010

Khrushchev on Khrushchev - Sergei Khrushchev: Little, Brown & Co 1990

‘Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of desire from Melanesia and beyond’ - Lamont Lindstrom 2019.

RECONSIDER PHLEBAS

IAN SALES

Consider Phlebas (1987, UK) was Iain M Banks's first novel — but not Iain Banks's first novel. Which was *The Wasp Factory* (1984, UK). Two more novels followed before Banks added the middle initial M (for Menzies, pronounced “mingis”, and adopted purely for the “pseudonym”) for his first science fiction novel. He'd always identified as a sf writer but had failed to find a publisher until writing the mainstream *The Wasp Factory*.

This read of *Consider Phlebas* was a reread, a second reread in fact, as I'd first read it a few years after it was originally published, and then again twenty-five years ago; and while I'd remembered the plot — a war between the Idirans and the Culture, Bora Horza Gobuchul leading a team of mercenaries into a sealed train-system deep underground to find a hidden Mind — some of the set-pieces along the way had slipped away. As had a lot of the supporting narratives. Not that it really matters.

I'd always felt *Take Back Plenty* (1990, UK) by Colin Greenland actually kicked off New British Space Opera, but it's now generally accepted *Consider Phlebas* was the first work. It makes sense — *Take Back Plenty* was followed by two sequels, but inspired no works by other hands; UK writers are still churning out warmed-over Banksian space operas even now thirty-eight years later.

Soon after, the US began producing its own version, calling it New Space Opera, and claiming New British Space Opera was merely a part of it — an argument advanced unconvincingly in the introduction to *The Space Opera Renaissance* (2006, USA), edited by David G Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, a humungous anthology which contained several stories which were not, in fact, space opera (the one by David Weber, I seem to remember, being the most egregious example). A similar

argument had been used twenty years earlier with the New Wave — and has failed to convince in every decade since.

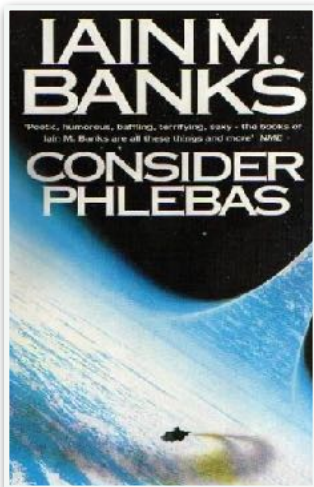
New British Space Opera wasn't just *Consider Phlebas*. It was also Radical Hard SF, it was post-cyberpunk. It was some of the short fiction and criticism and commentary published in *Interzone*, the UK's only professional short fiction magazine, which nevertheless had a circulation so small by US standards the Hugo Awards redefined the professional magazine award criteria near a dozen times throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Plus, also

possibly commentary and criticism from small US magazines, such as *SF Eye* and *Journal Wired*. Back then we used to joke what a short story needed to feature in order to be accepted by *Interzone*. I know of two writers who used that “formula” (much too strong a word, but never mind) to sell stories to the magazine.

Looking back at space opera, on both sides of the Atlantic, over the last four decades, there's certainly a resemblance between recent works and *Consider Phlebas*. Space opera was not originally a serious subgenre —

the name was coined as a pejorative by Wilson Tucker in 1941 — although I'd argue CL Moore's *Judgment Night* (1943, USA), was both a serious work and a template space opera. Of course, the definition is... malleable, and some popular works, or series, which might be considered space opera adjacent, from the 1940s through to the 1980s, were often described in terms that distanced them from the label, a distance which only increased with the release of *Star Wars* in 1977, and its sequels and imitators.

Before I read *Consider Phlebas* that first time, I'd been reading Delany and Cherryh and EC Tubb and Le Guin, among many others, and they all featured interstellar, often even galactic, politics;



and if Delany's *Nova* (1968, USA) was overtly space opera, it also subverted the subgenre's tropes and conventions, as did *Empire Star* (1966, USA), a personal favourite, and 'The Star Pit' (1967, USA); and much as Delany did later with epic fantasy in his Return to Nevèrÿon quartet (1979–1987, USA).

Consider Phlebas had the spaceships and the galactic politics — and galactic war! — and boasted a much greater scale than the works of those other writers: its history stretched back hundreds of thousands of years, it boasted an Orbital vaster than Larry Niven's ringworld, indeed its spaceships were themselves ersatz worlds with millions of residents...

But the novel's characters were also human — even when they were alien — and flawed, not the lantern-jawed heroes of old (and some of them were even female, gasp). Bora Horza Gobuchul wasn't even on the right side. He fought for the enemy, the Idirans, who were alien religious zealots.

Then there was the Culture, a post-scarcity progressive society and a complete antidote to the authoritarian empires which normally featured in space opera. Not only was the Culture not authoritarian, and reluctant combatants in the war, but Banks goes into great detail about how progressive and non-authoritarian it is (I had, I admit, not remembered some of these info-dumps/lectures from previous reads). It's probably worth noting US space opera writers seem incapable of imagining a universe in which chattel slavery is not an institution, and yet it doesn't appear anywhere in *Consider Phlebas*.

I'd vaguely remembered the desert island cult whose leader tries to eat Horza, and while I'd also recalled the Megaship I'd forgotten what happened aboard it (very little, in fact). I had completely forgotten Damage, the card game, with its "celebrity" players, and it is, I confess, one of the least satisfying parts of the novel, not only

because it seems to promise more than it delivers. And then the mad escape from the GSV, which certainly showcases Banks's sense of *grand scale*, and how much it transcends earlier space operas, but the sequence actually reads a little over-long and unnecessary.

Oh, and I'd *definitely* forgotten the first chapter opens with Horza drowning in shit — a tongue-in-cheek wickedness present in all of the Culture novels.

Back in 2013, in the novella *The Eye With Which the Universe Beholds Itself* (2013, UK), I hid the resolution of the story in a coda behind the glossary. I'd taken the idea from Banks's *Matter* (2008, UK), although I was later informed Tolkien had used the technique in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955, UK). I'd completely forgotten Banks does the same here, in *Consider Phlebas*. There are a couple of essays about the universe of the book, and then a coda, which... doesn't really impact the resolution of the story. (I seem to remember the one in *Matter* did do that, but I may be wrong.)

Looking back from more than three decades later, I still think *Take Back Plenty* was more inventive than *Consider Phlebas*, made a more *knowing* use of space opera tropes, and is the better book. But there's no denying the impact of Iain M Banks's first novel was vastly greater than that of Greenland's. I can think of only a handful of novels that pastiched traditional space opera as *Take Back Plenty* did; you only need to pick up a random twenty-first century space opera to see Banks's footprints.

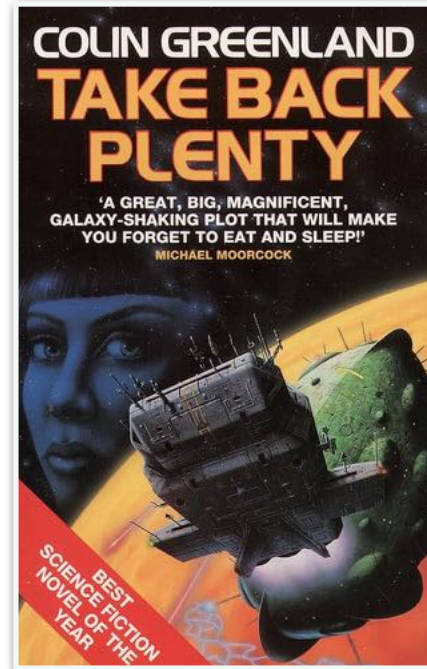
Most US new space opera these days is pretty much indistinguishable from military science fiction. Banks's grand scale is still there, but the Overton window has shifted right as much in space opera as it has in Western politics. Body-counts increase by orders of magnitude with each year, more and more fascist dog-whistles are used as shorthand for the universe's politics — and not always for the bad guys. Banks, I suspect, would

have wanted his legacy to be political, not just “blowing shit up”, a phrase I seem to recall him using in an interview. Even worse, there’s little or no commentary. It’s like role-playing stormtroopers (Nazi or Star Wars).

New Space Opera is not New British Space Opera — Hartwell and Kramer were right about that — and it has evolved since they published their anthology. I’d sooner it had followed Banks’s trajectory, rather than simply co-opting the term and incorporating a handful of elements into mil sf.

On the other hand, New British Space Opera could have been a very different beast — and it’s interesting to imagine what it might have been — had *Take Back Plenty* been the defining work.

Maybe it was... in another universe.



A time-binding (2025)

The first sf convention I attended was Westercon 30 in Vancouver BC, in July 1977, where I first heard the Goons. The most recent, and probably last, was the Worldcon in Seattle this last August, and there I had an experience that echoed a passing moment at my first con.

My legs aren’t what they used to, and the escalators at Worldcon though lovely necessitated a lot of extra walking so I preferred the elevators. On one occasion the elevator doors opened and out popped Robert Silverberg in a motorized chair. Entering, I met a young woman of color and exclaimed (as is my wont) something on the order of “wow, that was one of the last of the great sf writers of the 1960s!”

She replied, “I just helped him into the elevator,” and that reminded me that I had let him in through a locked door at the Westercon in 1977. And while we ascended, I marveled at the parallel. Nothing particularly special, just a momentary helping hand, and a odd kind of sharing.

I wonder if it was her first convention.

carl juarez

THOUGHTS FROM TARANAKI

LEE WOOD

It's been a tough week, and then some. On the same day that my two newest chicks were happily eating chick crumble with their mother, Buffy – a tiny bantam fluffball who had unknowingly just hatched a couple of very definitely barred rock crosses – Trump launched a full scale bombardment on Caracas, kidnapped Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and flew them to the States. The next day, the two chicks vanished. No bodies, no feathers, just... gone. As if they too had been abducted and disappeared. Buffy didn't seem to be too grief-stricken, back to being just a normal hen. I took the last egg still in her nest and put it under another broody chicken, currently sitting on six eggs, all laid by the same barred rock hen who is definitely not mother material. Two are overdue, but the other four are due any day now.

On January 7, Mojo the Goldfish died. Same day that Renee Good was murdered by an ICE agent in Minnesota. I'd had Mojo for about five years, a lone goldfish who had once been destined for my garden pond but had become an aquarium pet in my kitchen because the ducks were back. I like the ducks, but they ate all the fish and shat in the pond and turned it into murky green soup, so I'm still "getting around to" cleaning out the pond and trying to restore the water lilies to their former glory. Mojo was pretty cool, for a goldfish. Would swim back and forth at the front of his tank watching me cook dinner and knew when I tapped a fingernail on the glass to go look for his own dinner. I probably had a hand in his death – algae had become a nuisance in the tank, so I tried to clean it out, which altered the water balance to a point Mojo didn't cope with it. So I buried Mojo in front of George the cat's grave, with a little white brick for a headstone, emptied the tank and scrubbed everything clean. Sat down and watched Renee Good's cheerful smiling face as she said her final words, "It's okay, dude. I'm not mad at you." And cried in rage and guilt until

my eyes felt like sandpaper and my sinuses crammed with cement.

My ex-husband, Norman, is in hospital in Paris. I visited him in October for three weeks, and I promised I'd come back as soon as I could manage it. The last time I went, it was a bit rushed and I wasn't prepared. This time, I've gotten my first credit card in decades (France doesn't like foreign debit cards, so paying for meals and metro tickets was a constant exercise in frustration), and a new mobile phone (my beloved Galaxy Pro is eleven years old and 3G doesn't work anymore). A small, refurbished laptop I can take with me on this trip to work on. Norman and I are collaborating on his last novel together. It's summer here – it's winter in Paris. I'm finding myself both obsessively watching what is happening in the States with one half of my brain while the other half tries to get organised for another gruelling 48 hour trip halfway around the world.

I have my own life that needs constant sorting – Bailey the cat just had her second operation on her nose for skin cancer, spent a couple days showing just how mad at me she was by pissing on the laundry room floor (cold and disgusting to step in at 2:00 am on my way to the bathroom). I've found someone who is happy to graze a half dozen sheep on my land to get the tall grass and weeds down, poor Trixie the goat can't do it all on her own. The neighbours next door have cows and he's been happy to let them into my paddocks to chew it down as well; sheep don't like eating tall grass, they prefer the younger short grass to nibble on. We're still on term break, but classes will start up again soon, and I'm looking forward to getting back to teaching. And, for some insane reason... I decided to set up my first real fishtank in decades, but not for another goldfish.

I used to have a huge 100 gallon tropical tank with Angelfish and Gouramis and Jack Dempseys and Corydoras and Oscars. It had a very sophisticated

undergravel filter, top of the line heaters and gadgets galore. But this was back when I lived in the States, and every winter, the power would inevitably go out during an ice storm. Every blanket and duvet went over the top of the fishtank while I shivered in an old sleeping bag, the water temperature falling slowly enough – and raising it very carefully when the power came back on – that I never lost a single fish. I sold the lot when I moved to California and haven't had a fishtank since, except for Mojo's tiny 28 litre tank (around seven gallons for you Americans). I spent half the time on the internet watching the latest atrocities being committed in the States and researching aquarium set-ups. Sometime between Luis David Nino Moncada and Yorlenys Betzabeth Zambrano-Contreras being shot by ICE in Portland, Oregon (where I had my 100 gallon fish tank) and Julio Cesar Sosa-Celis being shot by ICE in Minneapolis, I decided to have a go at something called the Walstad method for more natural tanks.

It's also called a "dirted" tank because it uses dirt. Plain old ordinary garden soil. You just have to be careful not to use anything that has fertilizer or pesticides in it. You can use dirt right out of your back garden, but I opted to get a bag of organic topsoil from the local garden centre. Put about a half inch worth on the bottom of the tank and used an old grocery loyalty card to push it away from the edges into a nice little flattened mound. Then poured clean aquarium safe sand around the edges to hide the dirt and over the top by about an inch until the dirt was completely covered. Followed by another inch of polished fine river gravel. Set up my hardscape, three nice looking slabs of dragon stone in a sort of "fallen arch" at the back of the tank. Time for plants.

The principle behind this method is that it eventually will create a symbiotic balanced ecosystem between animals and plants and beneficial bacteria and everything thing else in the

water. The plants are a natural "filter" that absorb all the toxins fish poo produces – ammonia, nitrites, and so on – to keep the water clean for the fish. But it needs a lot of plants to do this. Like A LOT. I ordered some plants and a variety of snails off TradeMe (New Zealand's answer to eBay) then made the pilgrimage to the big pet store in New Plymouth to both buy another bunch of plants and have a look at what fish they had. I bought a lot of plants, but no fish. Not yet. Slowly filled the tank with water, set up the small filter to help keep the water moving until the tank fully cycles.

Sometime between when ICE officer Jonathan Ross's Gofundme passed \$1million and when Trump yelled "Fuck you," as he flipped off TJ Sabula, the Ford plant worker since suspended without pay for calling Trump a "paedophile protector," I planted up my tank. Tall and elegant Cryptocorynes and Pogostemon in the back behind the dragon stones, Echinodorus, Bolbitis heudelotii and Cyperus helferi just around the edges, Anubias and Ludwigia and Microsorium pteropus Java Ferns in the middle with Micranthemum Umbrosum and a sprinkling of delicate Eleocharis Acicularis hairgrass teased apart and planted just in the front where they will grow into a low carpet. The Malaysian trumpet snails and apple snails and ramshorn snails and bladder snails are loving it.



Yesterday, while Trump's DOJ threatened to arrest Jerome Powell, Hegseth docked Sen. Kelly's pension and Democratic representatives Deluzio, Houlahan, Goodlander, Slotkin and Crow were being "investigated" while receiving death threats, while Trump sold off confiscated Venezuelan oil and stashed \$500 million in a Qatari bank, while Trump is still blaming Volodymyr Zelenskyy for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, while the Epstein files have STILL not been released, I was having some really cute holders 3D printed to hang sweet potatoes over the side of the aquarium for their roots to grow into the water while they send lovely leafy shoots over the top.

Now, as President Donald Trump threatens to invoke the Insurrection Act in Minnesota and Denmark's Danish MP Anders Vistisen tells Trump to "fuck off" over his plan to conquer Greenland (German and French troops joining Danish military gearing up for an invasion), I'm compulsively Googling White Cloud Mountain minnows and zebra danios, trying to decide if I could have both species in the same tank, and should I get a bristlenose pleco as well. NATO is about to be destroyed the moment American troops set a single boot in Nuuk, not only losing us all our traditional allies but creating a unified enemy who hates us. Every US military base in Europe will be evicted. Europe will call in the US debt and dump their dollar reserves, tanking the

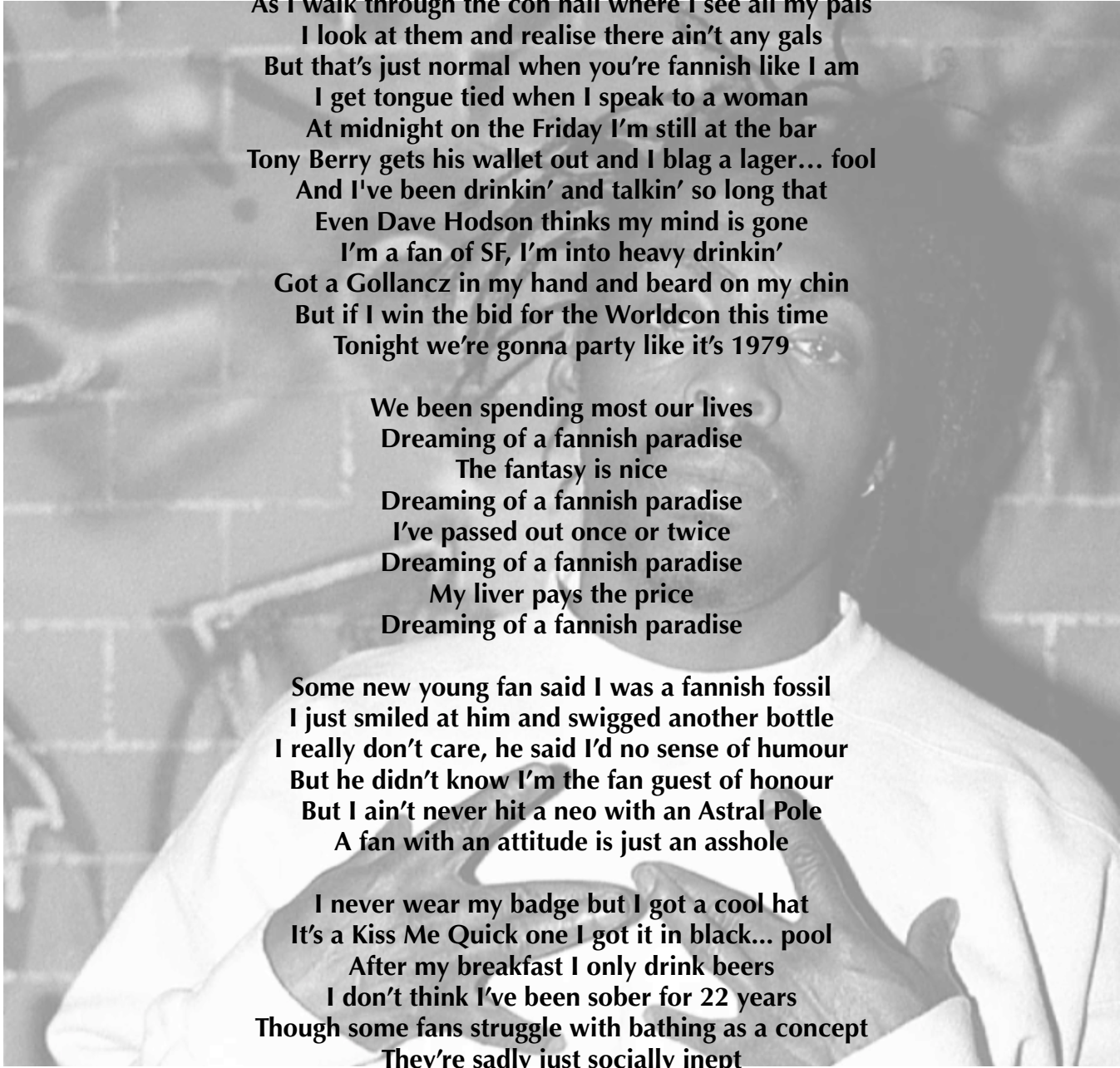
value of US dollar as the global reserve currency. US companies will be frozen out of the European market – Apple, Google, McDonalds, Microsoft, Meta, Netflix – all their European assets seized, and their European markets gone, American industries cut off from the richest consumers on the planet. NASDAQ and the Dow Jones will crash and burn to the ground. Boeing jets grounded, US airlines banned from European airspace. Americans abroad who don't have dual citizenship will lose their residency visas and legal protections, unemployed and unemployable, deported and shunned, while internally, an increasingly repressive regime abducts, disappears, beats and murders its own citizens for daring to question Trump's authority...

... as I sit here, safe on an island country just about every American billionaire is trying to buy land in for their Doomsday bunkers, far away from the madness infecting the country of my birth, listening to distant thunder fade from a welcome storm feeding my thirsty garden, Bailey the cat curled up on my lap, looking at aquarium heaters and another LED lighting system, might need to set it up with a timer, thinking about a second tank in my office. Something quiet and peaceful to watch while I listen to jazz and doomscroll through Pinterest. Because the world has gone insane, and I just can't take it anymore.



FANNISH PARADISE

NOT COOLIO (OR WEIRD AL YANKOVIC)



As I walk through the con hall where I see all my pals
I look at them and realise there ain't any gals
But that's just normal when you're fannish like I am
I get tongue tied when I speak to a woman
At midnight on the Friday I'm still at the bar
Tony Berry gets his wallet out and I blag a lager... fool
And I've been drinkin' and talkin' so long that
Even Dave Hodson thinks my mind is gone
I'm a fan of SF, I'm into heavy drinkin'
Got a Gollancz in my hand and beard on my chin
But if I win the bid for the Worldcon this time
Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1979

We been spending most our lives
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
The fantasy is nice
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
I've passed out once or twice
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
My liver pays the price
Dreaming of a fannish paradise

Some new young fan said I was a fannish fossil
I just smiled at him and swigged another bottle
I really don't care, he said I'd no sense of humour
But he didn't know I'm the fan guest of honour
But I ain't never hit a neo with an Astral Pole
A fan with an attitude is just an asshole

I never wear my badge but I got a cool hat
It's a Kiss Me Quick one I got it in black... pool
After my breakfast I only drink beers
I don't think I've been sober for 22 years
Though some fans struggle with bathing as a concept
They're sadly just socially inept

NOT COOLIO (OR WEIRD AL YANKOVIC)

There's no suits, no ties, no shiny shoes
Only single men like me
Without my mates to drink with
I'm as lonely as can be

We been spending most our lives
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
We're just plain ugly guys
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
It's how we rolled the dice
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
We don't eat nice
Dreaming of a fannish paradise

Novacon's a good laugh, Eastercon is better
Left it on a Monday, soon there'll be another
Like to watch the telly? Ever play guitar?
Well, I can do all of that standing at the bar
I'm the SF fan who can read 3 books a day
I don't have a girlfriend and no time to be gay
So don't you judge me and think I'm a poor neighbour
Or else, my friend, I will hit you with my lightsaber

We been spending most our lives
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
Can't see cos I've got blurry eyes
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
My legs feel paralysed
Dreaming of a fannish paradise
I think I'm eating spice
Dreaming of a fannish paradise

Oh, oh oh oh, oh
Oh, oh oh oh, oh
Yeucccchhhh!

Lyrical manipulation by **Ian Sorensen**

Original song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPO76Jlnz6c>
Original Weird Al parody: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOfZLb33uGg>

THE CORFLU 50 INTERVIEW

DAVID HODSON QUIZZES JEN & NIC FAREY

Corflu 50 fan fund delegates are typically subject to grueling interview at the hosting convention, and the 42nd iteration of the fanzine fans convention was no exception. Transcribed by J L Farey.

DH: Nic and I met each other in the mid-1980s.

NF: '84 or '85.

DH: Yeah, about that.

NF: Is what we more or less can't quite remember.

[Audience member speaks]

DH: Now you're stealing my script, because I was going to say, Nic and I have actually tried to compare notes about this, and we can't remember when we met each other. We just seemed to be in the same place at the same time. It's very similar to being a hippy in the 1960s, isn't it? If you can remember it, you weren't there. And an awful lot of the people that would be able to verify that we were drinking together in the 1980s have died. Mostly of liver cancer. So, tell us about your fannish career, Nic. Because I'm probably going to learn stuff about you.

NF: No.

DH: What do you mean, no?

NF: No.

DH: What do you mean, no?

NF: All right... Give me a couple of guidelines Dave. Don't say "your fannish career." What do you want me to do? Start at like—

DH: Where did you come from?

JF: Oh boy.

NF: You're not helping.

DH: No.

NF: You're not helping here, are ya? Gordon Bennett. Well...

DH: What was it that attracted you to something called fandom and what flavor of fandom was it?

NF: All right, here we go. When I started work for Scholl UK, 1979 — No, I actually started

with them in 1980, after I left LSE. Done a couple of things there and I met a bloke at work called Stuart McGregor who was a massive Doctor Who fan, amongst other things, that was his number one, Doctor Who fan. And McGregor was the one who told me about the First Thursdays. So that's when I started going to that, was in the very early '80s. And it was there that I met a lot of the Star Trek people and got involved with Star Trek and running Star Trek conventions. As a result of doing the tech desk for Star Trek conventions I got asked by Rog Peyton to do the tech for the Novacons. And so I did that, I think it was probably 1984, might have been '83, but round about then, the first time I did tech for a Novacon. I remember it well, for bad reasons as well as good reasons. Because me and this bloke, Dave Liddle, he was working on the Star Trek stuff. So my then-wife, Kim, and Dave's wife, Roz, decided they wanted to come to the Novacon as well. But the ladies were Star Trek fans so they never left the fucking room. They nicked the bed. So there were four of us in one room, with me working all day on the tech, and I had to sleep on the fucking floor. So I remember that very well indeed, apart from the getting drunk bits. But yeah, through that and through the Novacons I met my first friends in what I call like, "real fandom", which is a bit naughty to say that, because it denigrates the media fans. So I got to be very friendly with a lot of the BSFG people. Martin Tudor has been one of my best mates to this day. Tony Berry, Chris Murphy, Roger Peyton, Dave Holmes, (motions to Dave Hodson) this twat, who was there as well.

DH: Were you at Con3? Eastercon in '85? Or was it just Novacon at that point?

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NF: Nah, it was really just Novacons. I haven't really done a lot of Eastercons ever. Done about maybe three.

DH: But then you started doing tech on lots of other conventions for us as you went along, didn't you?

NF: No. I did Novacons and I did a couple of Mexicons.

DH: Because you did a Mexican for me.

NF: Yeah.

DH: And that's where I found out after, Mark Plummer told me, I was on the tech desk at Mexicon 4

with Nic. And I'm going, I don't remember you being — I haven't got a clue about this. And this is indicative — I didn't even remember Nic being in there. And this is indicative of our entire friendship at the time. We were absolutely blathered. We just have no recollection at all.

[Audience member speaks]

NF: Vix remembers everything. You should just have her up here and I can piss off back to the bar. So yeah, that's how I got into the fandom that we know. The Brum group at the time was, nearly everybody was doing a fanzine at the time. Tony Berry was doing his, Martin was doing his... And so I got into that as well. And funnily enough, since you asked, which you didn't, but I might consider the very start of my fanzine career in 1977 when I was a student at LSE and we put together a little gossip sheet for the Halls of Residence and whatnot. Very scurrilous, shamelessly based off Private Eye. I wish I still had copies of that and see how shit I probably was back then. But yeah, it was a little gossip sheet called "Saunders Skandal" after

Carr-Saunders, which was the name of the hall of residence. We did a bunch of issues of that until we actually got shut down by the management.

DH: So how many Novacons did you work on?

NF: Oh my good gawd. Ah, well, all of them from, like I said, '84, '85, until '92 would have

been my last one as a UK resident. I came back for a few after that but didn't work them after I moved to the states. I went to the states in '93. The last convention I did was a Star Trek one in Telford. That was the autumn convention of 1993.

Star Trek, there used to be two a year, two main ones a year. One in the spring that was kind of a bigger one, and the one in the autumn which was a bit smaller. Basically, I did this last convention, a Holodeck convention, and pissed off to the states a week after.

DH: And the Mexican, was it 3 and 4 or 4 and 5?

NF: (looks to audience) 3 and 4, Mark?

Mark Plummer: [indistinct] 4 and 5.

NF: Oh yeah, all right.

DH: I was at 3.

NF: 4 was Spinrad, right?

DH: No. 4 was Howard Waldrop and Paul Williams.

NF: Was 5 Spinrad?

DH: Yeah.

NF: Oh, all right.

Mark Plummer: Nic, so 5 was the one with Spinrad. And a bit of background about this.



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Because I'm often asked how I first met Nic Farey. And this was not the occasion-

DH: You don't remember, do you?

Mark Plummer: I do remember, yes. Because we were running the tech desk at that particular Novacon, sorry, Mexican. And sometimes we were both there, sometimes it would be one or the other, but we sat behind a tech desk all weekend. It was a very good program, which was kind of useful. And then on the last night, Nic hosted one of his traditional fundraising parties. And this one was actually in the bar. It was a masterpiece of fundraising because what they did was, they bought a case of Corona, you know, the Mexican beer, and a bottle of tequila from the bar and then sold it to other people in the bar at a markup. And they paid it. This was a fundraiser for Fans Across the World or TAFF or something like that. So there was a case of Corona and a bottle of tequila. Now, in fairness, quite a lot of the bottle of tequila was drunk by Nic and after a while he passed out in the bar, just completely zonked out. And Norman Spinrad, who was the guest of honor that year, who had come over and was drinking with us with his then wife, Lee Wood, I heard Norman explaining to someone that actually the reason why Nic had been drinking so heavily and why he'd passed out in the bar was because he'd been behind the tech desk all weekend and actually hadn't been able to have a drink at all until this point. When in fact he'd been going through beer at the rate of about a pint an hour the previous three days solid. But Norman was quite convinced that was the only reason you got hammered in the bar was because you hadn't been able to have a drink up until that point. And then Norman and Lee Wood carried you back to your room.

NF: Yeah, carried to bed by the guest of honor at a Mexican. I think that's one of my proudest

and most unique achievements in this fannish career of which you speak.

DH: So when did you move into fan writing? You know, you said about the things you did at LSE.

NF: Oh right.

DH: Actual organized fan writing. Producing fanzines. Having opinions.

NF: Well, early on. I think when I started going to the Novacons, I did the first issue of *Arrows of Desire*, which I just wrote myself, so it was probably one of the best ones. (Waits for a laugh, looks in the crowd, doesn't get one.) Well, thanks for that fucking reaction. It turned into a pretty decent genzine after that. I got a lot of other people that I got to know at the Novacons and stuff writing stuff for it. Some didn't always have stuff from other fans. So yeah, from thereon I concentrated on that. And that was, I suppose, the start of the fan writing. I don't know, it all sounds a bit wishy-washy, doesn't it?

[Audience member speaks]

NF: With that we did themed issues, except for the first one, which was just a mish-mash bunch of shit off of me, but all the ones after that we themed up. What was it, the Love, Lust, and Like issue. The Rock & Roll stories. Then there was Hate, Fear, and Loathing. There was an issue themed on death. Yeah, that was a lot of really up front, on point writing from various people. Thank you for saying that, actually. Makes it seem all very worthwhile. And we had, like, three little, I don't know if you would call



them running jokes, running things going through just about every issue, except for the first one and the very last one. Was that every issue would actually have a contribution from a professionally published writer. So I actually got contributions from, oh, I had one from Langford, I had Storm Constantine did something for me, Paul DiFilippo was in a couple of times. Who else, Steve, do you remember? Oh, Graham Joyce, I had something off Graham Joyce, a nice bit off him. In the bloody foreigners issue I got a really nice bit from Graham Joyce on the Greeks. And the two other things was, somewhere in the issue would be a mention of Bernie Evans. Also somewhere in every issue would be a little dig at Ian Banks. And we carried that through, like I say, except for the very first one and the very last one, which was kind of a different kettle altogether.

DH: Why were you having a dig at Ian? He was one of our regular drinking buddies.

NF: Don't you remember when he took me to task over that letter I wrote to *Private Eye*?

DH: No. Tell me about it.

NF: That's because you were pissed.

DH: Well, I was also skint and couldn't afford a subscription to *Private Eye* at the time.

NF: You could just buy it off the fucking rack.

DH: Yeah, but I had kids I was bringing up. I was skint.

NF: All right. They done *Private Eye*, in the literary review in the back, they done one issue where they reviewed this time travel piece of shit by I think it was Salman Rushdie. Silly old fraud he is. But they reviewed that, not favorably as they do, so I'd actually written a letter in saying, well, here's a bunch of other stuff that Rushdie could basically have nicked all of this off in science fiction, like Let's Go to Golgotha and mentioning a couple of other things like that

going through. And just at the end of it I put, oh, PS, when is Bookworm going to have a go at Ian Banks? And of course, Banksy read that. And so we're up at the bar at the Novacon, Banksy raising himself up to his full Scottish height of ferocity, "What's this I'm reading in *Private Eye* in this bloody letter from you?" That's probably a terrible Ian Banks accent.

DH: I was going to say.

NF: I'm just trying to be ferociously Scottish with that. You know, it was this tremendous exhibit of mock anger and I was fucking terrified. I thought he was really going to hit me. So I'm shrinking back, shrinking back. But yeah, he did that.

DH: So-

NF: Ask her something. (Points at Jen)

DH: I'm going to get there. I'm trying to build up the sympathy for her.

NF: All right, I see what you're doing there. All right.

DH: So how do we get to *This Here...* and *Beam?* So, *Arrows of Desire*, what happens next?

NF: Okay. Oh, fucking hell. When I did the very last issue of *Arrows of Desire*, came out as, it was basically after I lost my second wife to breast cancer. So I was widowed. And I kind of wanted to really get into, well — try and just put it out there, relieve myself of a lot of the shit that was going on in my head. So I thought, all right, I want to write down this year, the story of this year. And I was trying to figure out how I was going to do that and I remember I was actually having a conversation with Paul Kincaid about how I was struggling with this a bit about how to put it together. So what I ended up deciding on was doing it in two separate voices. Which, one was, well, for anybody under the age of 93 in here would probably not remember that the *Arrows of Desire* fanzine that I did I actually did

under a pseudonym. I wrote under the pseudonym of S V O'Jay. Which, if you want to know where that comes from, it basically stands for Seven Views of Jerusalem, which is a really, really excellent fucking song by The Teardrop Explodes. So I wrote everything under a pseudonym but it wasn't like I hid, everyone knew it was me but writing under that name. It was, S V O'Jay had a, what do I call it? I call it a contrived voice. A manufactured voice. It wasn't really. It was my genuine voice, like you would see in stuff I'd write in the day, I suppose. So I split up that last issue which was *Arrows of Desire*, broadly titled 'This Time Next Year' and— Oh, sorry. Tearing up a bit. And so I did, the narrative portions of it were done as S V O'Jay and the kind of reactive, emotional parts I wrote as Nic Farey. And I've got to say that Kincaid afterwards — because he kind of knew what was coming, like I said, we discussed this format — he actually said it was one of the best things he'd ever fucking read. So I felt seriously vindicated on that one. And I got a submission from somebody I'd never heard from before or since. A young lady called Tracey Twyman, and I have no idea whatever happened to her. But she sent me this little piece of writing about from when she was a kid entitled "The Day I Found Out What Fuck Meant." And you know, that was pretty much in-your-face writing, but some not entirely pleasant stuff. So that actually went with what I wrote. Just those two things in that issue. Quite different, but somehow they kind of fit together for being in there. So after I done that final issue of *Arrows of Desire* I kind of started writing what was going to be the next chapter of that. And it was like, yeah, I have no idea what I'm fucking doing with this

now. So with that I ended up, instead of continuing with *Arrows of Desire*, kind of segueing that into *This Here...* And that's what followed, was the first issue of *This Here...* Which has run for like three series now. We did bits of it. You know, I did that first bit and then stopped. And then that little second series. And then what's going on now has been the third series of it. So I translated that into *This Here...* And I think if anyone's really arsed about doing this kind of thing you can almost see — you look at those very, very early issues of *This Here...* — and you can see how it's transitional. It's very transitional between the S V O'Jay voice and me writing more like I talk. So, I don't know... Can I leave it now for a minute? Leave it there. Ask her something.

JF: He might not be ready to.

DH: You see, the question I want to ask Jen is, first of all, how did you meet Nic?

JF: Oh boy.

NF: In a fucking bar, what do you think?

JF: In a bar.

DH: In a bar?

JF: In a bar.

DH: And how did this smooth talking chap woo you? Because we know on the written page he can be absolutely wonderful.

JF: Oh yeah.

DH: But in person...

JF: He's absolutely wonderful.

DH: You're not trying to con me now, are you?

JF: [laughs]

NF: Oy, pay attention lads, you might fucking learn something.

JF: All right, so, yes, we met at a bar which was weird for me because, half



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of you already know by now, I don't drink. We had this conversation. But I went with friends. And I had been divorced for about ten months. So under a year, but long enough. I wasn't looking for anything, but there he was at the same bar, playing pool, and the people that brought me knew him. They did not bring me to set us up. They didn't know he was going to be there. Had they known, we may have gone somewhere else, I don't know. But anyway, there we were and I had worn a miniskirt that night



and I was sitting on a tall stool, so my legs were available. Nic is a leg man, and by the end of the night he had come over and asked if he could hug my legs. That was the smooth talk.

DH: That is actually quite smooth of Nic.

JF: And I said yes. And, you know, nice accent. Nice smile, with not as many teeth as I was used to. How many did you have? Ten? I think he had ten teeth at that point.

NF: My own teeth?

JF: Of your own.

NF: Eight.

JF: Eight, yeah. But they were in the right spots, so it worked. So yeah, that's how we met that night and by the end of the night we'd exchanged contact information and then... Because he was split up too so we were just both looking for, you know, some fun.

DH: So were the mutual friends that you went with, were they fannish friends?

JF: No. No, I knew nothing about fandom at this point. Can I go back a little bit?

DH: Yeah.

JF: Okay, so my story starts in Hollywood where I was born and lived over a mortuary for ten years with my family because my grandmother ran the mortuary. So we were one block down from Hollywood and Vine. That's where we lived, Hollywood and Argyle, above this mortuary. The reason this is interesting is because, okay, probably my earliest fandomy kind of experience would be 'Dark Shadows', the gothic soap opera that was on. Started in, like, '66. I was born in '64. I remember sitting on my mom's back and watching that show when I was little. And one of the reasons why vampires were so important to us was because my grandfather had been a concert violinist in Hungary where he had known Bela Lugosi. And they knew each other when they both came over to America and they stayed in contact and commiserated over the fact that neither one of them could get the career that they hoped to have. Bela obviously became famous but not for what he wanted to be famous for. So anyway, vampires were very dear to my family. So Barnabus was my first fandom and I have - My mom got me an autographed picture of him that I still have, it's on our bookcase. We also have an autographed picture of Bela. I had an LP, the soundtrack from the show, and I took it to kindergarten with me for show and tell one time

and the teacher wouldn't let us play it because it was scary for the other kids. She was like, have her bring another record. It'll be fine. And when we would go to the playground, I would make graveyards in the sandbox. So yeah, that was me growing up. Anyway, so I kind of had, I guess, a media fandom, would that be what you'd call it? I didn't know anything about fanzines. I didn't know anything about fan conventions. I've had people ask me, well, you must have been in LosCon... Is it LosCon? LASFS?

NF: Yeah, LASFS.

JF: LAS something or other.

NF: LASFS had LosCon.

JF: LASFS. Okay, either one, I didn't even know about them. So when I met him [points to Nic] he showed me a fanzine and I went, what the heck is this? I didn't understand any of it because it was all very... it was, like, all circular. It was in-jokes, and it was this refers to something that was three issues ago, or something that's been going on for a while. And I said, does this make sense to people who read it? And he went, yeah. Anyway, the longer we stayed together, the more I found out about what that was. And when we first were together he was running the Corflu in Richmond — he was in Las Vegas but running the Richmond Corflu — so I kind of got to see how that worked. I didn't go to that one. But since then, now I write a fanzine of my own and I've been involved in the running of two other cons. This is the first one I've gotten to go to and not been involved in the planning. Thank you.

DH: So how did the publishing part come about?

JF: My publishing? So I, in 2017, decided I was starting a publishing company. Because I had been traditionally published. I had about twelve books that were out under my previous name. And I'll just shock everybody now, they were

Christian fiction. They were not crazy Christian fiction, I'm not that kind. But, you know, sweet romance kind of thing, relationship kind of stories, those type of things. And I was working on a career and then all of a sudden two or three of the places that were publishing me decided, we're getting rid of our fiction divisions. So that sucks. So basically then I had nothing and I said, I'm going to start my own company because I knew a couple of people that I thought, they should be published, but they're not. And this is just general fiction. So I started that. Found out that it's hard. The marketing. The marketing is the hard part. We had really good books, the people who read them really enjoyed them, we got good reviews. The problem is people knowing they exist. So the company is kind of in a hibernation period right now. It's not closed but it's also not highly active. There's two people that I probably will publish for the rest of my life because they're like family now. And I do hope to get back to my own stuff this year.

DH: And of course, you've published another British fan, Simon Ounsley.

JF: Yes, I did. I published Simon Ounsley, two books. 'Strange Days on Peculiar Hill' and, I'm sorry Simon, I-

NF: 'The Shop on Peculiar Hill'.

JF: 'The Shop on Peculiar Hill'. Thanks. Yes. That was the first one, 'The Shop on Peculiar Hill'. And I was so excited about that book, because it was really good, and we had a cover that Pete Lyons did. They were great. But again, it was, how do you get people to know that these books are here. And he did as much as he could. But then also, COVID came in 2020 and that was shortly after his book came out. So there were in-person things that we had planned that he couldn't do. The same with some of my other authors. They had in-person events that they were going to do and all of a sudden, they couldn't do them. So it kind of just sucked the

enthusiasm out of everybody. Then by the time we could do things, it was like [makes sad sound]. So yeah... It was a good learning experience for all of us, I think.

DH: And you've started publishing your own fanzine. *JenZine*.

JF: Yes.

DH: How has Nic's fanzine career that you've seen firsthand, how has that influenced that?

JF: Well, I wouldn't have done one without knowing him, obviously. And when I was trying to think of what to call mine, I almost called it *That There*, because of *This Here*..., but I thought that might be a little too on the nose and on the coattails, so I was like, yeah... Then *JenZine*... It's a perzine, but I'm Jen, so it's *JenZine*. I got word play, so that's why that happened. But my main reason for doing a fanzine was that I wanted to document some stuff. Because, you know, I'm sixty now and I'm thinking about what am I leaving behind. And I wanted to start writing some things about, okay, this is what I feel about stuff, this is what I like, this is what I don't like. I put some memories in there from when I was a kid. And every issue I send to my son, who is 32, because whether he reads them or not, I want him to have them so that he has this history from his mother. So that was part of it too.

DH: As I said earlier in the weekend... I went along with Nic to watch Watford play earlier in the week, and his son and two grandchildren were there. I didn't realize at the time, this was Nic's first time physically meeting his son and his grandchildren. I thought you'd actually met your son physically before.

NF: No, only over FaceTime.

DH: So I felt it was a privilege to be there at the period, but it also felt a little intrusive. Are you making sure that your children are seeing your writing? I mean, because Jen started writing her

zine because she wanted to put some personal stuff down, she wants to communicate with family. What are your motivations? You've been doing this stuff for so long, what keeps you doing it? What keeps *This Here*... coming out on that monthly schedule?

NF: That's a bloody good question, isn't it?

Well... When I first started doing it, like I said, it ended up being a continuation of the stuff I was doing in *Arrows of Desire*, but, you know, just me, just as a perzine. And then, I ran out of steam after eight issues. Then, whenever I picked it back up - I can't even remember why I fucking picked it back up again when I did for the second time. Oh yeah, well, that first series, I was working at Computer Applications Specialists in Maryland at the time. So I'd go in early, nick their photocopier, run all the copies off and all of that, and then mail everything out because it was still going out on paper. Then basically, I run out of job and run out of money, so I stopped doing it. I must have picked it up, yeah, I picked up the second series, it was PDF I'm pretty sure. I might be getting this totally fucking wrong, but I'm just saying this on the basis that nobody's going to be arsed to check. Then that kind of petered out and I was like, yeah, I ain't got that much more to say. But you may probably be aware that I was spurred into getting back at it by Michael Dobson, and not for good reasons. Because essentially, well, not too fine a point upon it, I'd administered the FAAn awards for the first time the year before Dobson's Corflu. He'd asked me to do it again and we had a fundamental disagreement, which was basically over whether people could recuse from the awards. Because Steve Stiles, at the time, was making shit tons of noise, like, oh no, you can't vote for me in the awards, and, I don't want you to vote for me, and stuff like that, vote for somebody else. Which he's perfectly entitled to do that but I did not consider that to be a reason

to discount votes. Because if people want to vote for you, they'll vote for you. And Dobson took the opposite view, so in the end I said, well look, I'll stand down and you do it however you want to do it. Because I've really always seen the FAAn award administrator's job, technically, as a Corflu staff position, basically through the virtue of the fact that Corflu sponsors the awards in the sense that Corflu makes up nice trophies, or whatever, it provides a venue for the presentation, so it's a Corflu sponsored award but you don't have to be in Corflu to vote for it etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. My position is, I would defer to the wishes of whoever the Corflu chair is. Now, we've had continuity over the last three years so I really [don't have a lot of argument (36:41)] So I stepped down, and what I hadn't realized at the time was that what Mike Dodson wanted to do was to completely tear the fucking things up. And instead of the six or seven awards that we'd had he gave 30 different awards. Some were considered trophy level, so up there, and a bunch of certificates. There were 30 awards given. The awards weren't publicized like they should have been. He didn't even send me a fucking ballot. I had to go and find one and then looked at that and decided I didn't - It's the only FAAN awards that I haven't voted in. And after the previous actual record year of, although for strange reasons, where we actually got 70-something ballots the year before when I had administered it, because I was going around, fucking whipping people up. And some people were trying to stuff the ballot, so that got a few more in. So after that, which was great. But the efforts the following year returned 19 ballots. There were 19 voters who gave out 30 awards. They were fucking busy. So after that I thought to myself, I have something to say about this. So I revived *This Here*... and a lot of those early issues were continued kind of to and fro about me really kind of bitching and complaining about saying what load of old nonsense this is

and talking about some other stuff. But I retained the format that I'd had with previous issues of how there were separate columns on separate topics. So I'd talk about music, I'd have a little music column, which was just called 'Tunes' back then, but it's now called 'Radio Winston', for reasons that I would not explain over a public microphone. And I talk about, I used to write about professional wrestling but now that's kind of switched over to writing about football. I would do a column about TV and movies and that kind of shit. So a lot of that - [COMMENT FROM THE AUDIENCE]

NF: Trains is recent. That's actually a recent addition. The 'Anorak' column. Yeah, so bits and pieces like that. But a lot of it was really kind of fannish discussion on fannish topics. Fannish politics, really, if you will, which is I know something a lot of people recoil and shun all of that. But I'm also including news about what's the latest TAFF race and stuff like that because it's stuff of interest to me. And, lo and behold, quite a bit of it emerging from the Antipodes, for some strange reason, I got a load of response. Getting a ton of, loads of LOCs from all these various people weighing in, telling me what an asshole I was in some parts. I print all that. I mean, yeah, you can disagree with me all you like and I'll print it. To be honest, a lot of it, I still feature that same kind of stuff, fannish commentary. Now you've got football, now you've got train spotting as well, but I'm still getting all that- [COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE]. Yeah. I'm still getting that reaction of feedback. There's a little community, you know, the people there now, and the letters of comment is what makes the fanzine. It's that conversation. And I've really got to thank all those people for continuing to provide impetus to do another one.

JF: Can I say something?

NF: No.

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JF: Okay.

NF: Yes. Please do. They're sick of me already.

JF: No, no, no. It's funny, because he will send an issue out and he'll come into the room and say to me ten minutes later, "I've got my first LOC."

And I'm like [indistinct muttering] because

sometimes it takes me forever to get one. And I appreciate the people who do send them. But yeah, he just immediately starts getting LOCs as soon as he sends it out.

DH: You haven't thought of saying to him, where's my column in it?

JF: No.

DH: Why not?

JF: You know what, I like keeping our stuff separate. Early on I offered, oh, if you want I'll look at it before you send it out, I'll give it an edit. Well, I realized that an American editor editing something written by a British writer, very different, because there are certain grammar and punctuation things that aren't the same. There are things that he spells wrong on purpose. You know how fandom is. There's all these weird words for stuff. So I'd come to him with, all proud, look, I found all these typos for you honey. And he's like, no, I meant that. So, you know... We do have a book that we are trying to write together. Maybe that will happen. Y'all need to keep bugging him about it so it'll actually happen. We've been working on it for ten years.

DH: Tell us about it.

JF: Go ahead.

NF: Ah, Gordon Bennett.



JF: Well, he's got his elevator pitch down. I meander too much when I talk about it. Go ahead honey.

NF: I think the funniest bit was, she's looking over an issue of *This Here*... and she'll come back and, like, "Who is Nigel Molesworth?"

JF: I still don't know.

DH: Still don't know?

JF: Who is Nigel - I don't even remember that. Who is Nigel Whosey-face?

NF: I just made that up.

JF: Oh! All right. I was going to say, I don't remember that at all. No, I'm always asking who is this person? What is this? Is this a thing? You made that up, didn't you?

NF: With any typical issue of *This Here*... There will be some

Molesworth spellings in there on occasion.

[COMMENT FROM THE AUDIENCE]

DH: Say something about this book you're writing.

NF: I was going to have a chance to nip out for a smoke.

JF: Just do the real short-

NF: Oh Gordon Bennett. Okay, it's...

JF: Alternative history.

NF: Well, it's an alternative history setting. It's not so much about the mechanics of the alternative history. So if you think something like 'Fatherland', which is an alternative history setting but it's basically a police procedural. This is an alternative history setting but it is a royal drama and the point of divergence in the history is that Edward VIII marries Wallace and does not abdicate. He gets his way with that and agrees to a Morganatic union in which, for

anyone who doesn't know, means that any heirs are not actually in the line of succession. It takes them out of the line of succession.

DH: And who came up with the initial idea?

JF: Nic did.

DH: So why does it appeal to you, Jen?

JF: I like the idea of doing an alternative history. I like that. I haven't written anything sci-fi, yet. I've kind of written fantasy-ish things. I have a series of three novellas that I wrote in another author's universe. It's Kristen Painter's 'Nocturne Falls' universe, and I wrote three books about a nymph. Not a nympho, a nymph. I've had people ask me that too. So anyway, I have those, really enjoyed doing those. And I wrote those as J.L. Farey. That was the first thing I wrote that was under my new name, not my old writing. And I would like to write something like this that has that "what if" kind of thing. I will say that my goal in life, which I probably won't achieve, but what I want to do, is to write a time travel story that does not loop back on itself and that actually makes sense. Don't know if that's possible. But I love time travel.

DH: And you said there, "Being a British writer." Do you still actually... Because Nic's been in the states a good long time. Do you think he's a British writer?

JF: I think so. I consider him a British writer. Because the way that he approaches things is much different. So, he wrote a preface and I realized that when he wrote that, the stuff that I was then writing to come around to add to it, when I was kind of writing the synopsis for our story, my writing is very different than his. In the way we word things and we approach things. So to be able to knit those together seamlessly is going to be a challenge. It may be more of Nic writing the main book but me coming up with more plot details and ideas and things that are going to come over here. We've already done

that. There are several things where I said, what if we do this and this, that he hadn't originally thought of. So I think probably he'll end up writing most of it and then I'll come in and do other things.

DH: Would you publish it yourself?

JF: You know, I mean, if we could find a traditional publisher that would be great, but there's no reason not to. I would, sure.

DH: So Nic, when did you develop this ambition to become a professional science fiction writer?

JF: Is it true, did you decide to write a book after you met me because I was a book writer?

NF: No.

JF: Okay. Well see, then that had nothing to do with it.

NF: Well actually, it is utterly fair to say that you certainly revived my interest into possibly going back into this novel. Because I've had that idea in the back of me head for probably twenty years for this book, and done nothing with it.

JF: He'd done more with it now than he ever did before. We have a notebook.

NF: Yeah.

JF: We have an actual notebook.

NF: A notebook of the first two semi-chapters. The preface.

DH: Is it possible that you've got used to writing a certain length in a certain form and Jen has influenced you to stretch a little more?

NF: Yeah, you could say that I suppose.

DH: I just did.

JF: Very nice.

NF: Are you sure?

DH: I can't even remember what I said.

NF: 'Cause you were pissed. But yeah, I mean, the notebook's sitting there. I had that little flurry and wrote two opening scenes, one with

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the main characters and one with Edward VIII having a bang at the Prime Minister, basically-

DH: Doing what to the Prime Minister?

JF: No, he's not banging him.

NF: He's having a go at, basically, he challenges the Prime Minister, who's, oh no, you're going to have to abdicate, blah blah. The people this, the people that. And Edward says to him, essentially, you know, this is not exactly how it's written. So Edward essentially says to him, you think so?

They're my people mate, so bring it the fuck on. And the Prime Minister backs down. All right, how do we do this? Morganatic union, all right.

DH: You were going to say something Jen.

JF: I think what may happen with this book, I'm just starting to realize it now, is that I'm going to go home at some point and I'm going to start writing it on my own and then I'm going to show it to him and he's going to go, that's not right, no no no no no. And then he'll fix it and he'll take over. Which would be fine.

DH: But it'll get the wordage on the page.

NF: Well, yeah, we'll get the wordage on the page. The other point is, that is just the scene that explains the point of divergence in the history. The actual novel is set in the 1960s.

DH: So you're developing a real working partnership as well. I mean, you've met this science fiction man who's publishing these weird little things, these fanzines, that's influenced you. And you've fed back in and you're becoming this sort of...

JF: It's like The Fly. Like I've stepped into that fly chamber and, ah, we've

morphed.

DH: You've morphed.

NF: We definitely complement each other.

DH: You are a very nice couple. The first thing that went through my mind when I met you Jen is, what has this poor woman let herself into?

JF: [laughs] Stockholm Syndrome.

NF: You've said that about every single one of my fucking wives.

JF: Okay, you didn't need-

NF: Okay, everybody said that.

JF: I would also like to add that, when Nic and I got together, it was my idea to get married. I said, you need to marry me. And he goes, no, I can't. I'm like, why? Because I cannot say I've been married four times. And I was like, well, what difference does that make? I said, look, I'm not your fourth wife, I'm your last wife. And that's true. I wore him down.

DH: Perhaps you realized he's going to drink himself to death before...

JF: That's true. He's not going to have time to groom anybody else.

NF: So far, so good.

JF: So far, so good.

DH: He does like a beer, doesn't he?

JF: Oh yeah, he does.

DH: And a Tequila. And a vodka.

JF: Do not give him Champagne. Never.

DH: Don't give anyone Champagne.

JF: He had Champagne- He had a drink. He didn't even have a full glass of Champagne, but I think



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that was the thing that put him over. He did a speech at our wedding that was unbelievable. And there were people there, that was the first time for meeting him, from my family, and they were just looking at this man, ranting and going back and forth, doing his profanity-laden speech. And I'm grinning at him, but I'm also dying a little inside, because I'm like, I love him so much, but did he have to do this? So yeah, Champagne. I blame it on the Champagne.

NF: And the several beers and whiskeys I'd had before the glass of Champagne.

JF: And no food. Literally no food all day. So there were issues.

DH: I don't really want to talk about Nic and food because he's been telling me about his ring piece all this-

NF: Oh yeah.

JF: I think we should just skip that entirely.

DH: I just wanted to let you know, don't mention food to Nic. You're going to get horrible, colorful conversation.

NF: I'm like three confined episodes of [? 53:32] That's what, I'm telling you.

DH: Sore.

NF: Oh yeah. This has happened before. I don't know if you have this over here, but Office Depot ran this advertising campaign over in the states. And this big red button that says EASY on it. And I'm like, it's not easy, but that's what it feels like down there. Ooo! Very scatological. [AUDIENCE COMMENT] I've talked about that. My entire con report for Corflu Pangloss in Vancouver was basically, oh, I've had the shits all weekend because of all the Guinness I was drinking.

DH: I think I'm going to end it there. To be honest.

NF: [points at Jen]

DH: No. We've run out of time.

JF: My bum is fine.

NF: It's the sweetest bum in the entire known universe. In my opinion.

DH: That's been Nic and Jen Farey, Corflu 50 Delegates this year.

JF: Oh, and we didn't say it, but thank you for letting us be the delegates. This has been wonderful. We really, really, really appreciate it.

NF: Absolutely. Eternal thanks to the Corflu 50 and to various other people who made donations to make the Far-Flung Farey Safari into a trip of a lifetime, really for both of us. And on that note, there will be a joint trip report which will be published probably not too long after we get back, we'll get to work on that. And we will have print copies of that trip report and that will be sold to raise money to give back to Corflu 50. All the proceeds from that will go back to Corflu 50.

JF: There will be as little information in it about his bum as possible.

NF: Thanks everybody! Can I go have a pint now?



THE ROAD TO JOY

ULRIKA O'BRIEN

I know what my favorite song was when I was tiny. How I thrilled whenever the opening notes played on my grandparents' radio! It captivated me from the first slow, measured paces of the bouzouki, through the building layers: sprightly arpeggios skirling over a base tempo that sped faster, ever faster. The melody danced along, growing more joyous and frenetic as it hurtled toward some tantalizing climax. There's a breathless pause in the rising arc of the tune, a little tease, where the melody drops away and the base tempo slows, anticipating, hanging on the cusp of something momentous, when suddenly the melody leaps back in and the tempo goes completely mad: the instruments erupt into a series of delirious, ecstatic crescendos, finally peak, and lingeringly diminish out. The song is "Zorba's Dance." I first heard it when I was three.

It says something about the potency of music that an unsophisticated toddler can become so utterly, inexhaustibly enthralled by a single song. (Parents

of more recent tykes may be less impressed with the originality of my insight, having had to endure "Let It Go," from *Frozen*, on brain-melting endless repeat from kiddy iPads.) Maybe if I'd had some power over my music, able to choose what I heard, and when, and how often, it might have been different. If I'd had "Zorba's Dance," on a 45 record and the means to play it over and over (and over) 'til my elders' ears bled and they were ready to murder me in my cot, then perhaps the magic would have worn itself out. Maybe. But I was at the total mercy of Sverige's Radio, a broadcast service that, in the 1960s, was trying to be all things to all people and therefore not playing even the most popular songs or genres on heavy rotation. It was a rare, serendipitous delight when I heard "Zorba's Dance," and felt that effervescent bubble of excitement pop into my chest. It's astounding that after 60 years I so clearly remember that feeling. It speaks to the power of music.

Music is mysterious. Music is magic.



Emotion lives in music. I've heard it claimed that various indigenous peoples don't know how to process Western classical music the first time they hear it. Maybe that's true, although contemporary YouTube channels suggest maybe not. But once you have even the most basic grounding in Western instrumentation and orchestration, you can hear the emotion right from the first. Musical emotion is not subjective. It is not dependent on your mood or experience.

No matter how upbeat you feel when you hear the opening notes, the Pentatonix version of "Hallelujah," is sad. Even Pakistani tribal people can hear that immediately. Pachelbel's "Canon in D" is joyful. It is so profoundly, unalterably, definitively joyful that LASFAn Matthew B. Tepper once anathemized it as "mind control music," because of its inexorable, irresistible ecstatic mood. Carl Orff's "Gassenhauer" expresses much the same mood, but more playfully.

These feelings inhabit the music, not just the listener. How is that even possible? A philosophy professor at UCLA (whose name I have, alas, forgotten) theorized that the magic lies in the vocal qualities of musical instruments. Human brains are wired to respond to the emotional freight of the human voice. That wiring grows stronger during normal brain development: as we mature we develop a "theory of mind," learn what another person feels in a given situation.

Certain tones signal happiness, or anger, or sadness. We learn to distinguish different ones and attribute the appropriate emotion to the speaker. (At least, we do if we're neurotypical. One of the signs of Asperger Syndrome can be an inability to interpret tone of voice.) Musical instruments imitate different vocal moods – think of the characters in "Peter and the Wolf." Some musical voices -- pianos, violins -- can portray a variety of emotion; some always the same emotion.

Andean pipes are eternally sad: they have a mournful voice. Which is why the poignant bravery of a happy melody played on Andean pipes can break your heart.

(Another place we can spot the emotional power of non-human sounds is in the meowing of cats. Cats do not meow at each other. They only meow at people, seemingly an evolved strategy for getting human attention. Cats have a wide vocal range, so the fact that a meow sounds like a baby's cry is suggestive. It gets us where we live. A crying baby is an emergency so deeply programmed in human biology that even non-parents feel traumatized by trying to ignore a squalling infant. Thus we have one of the recurring horrors of long-distance air travel.

Because apparently infanticide is frowned on, even on international flights. Much like drowning your roommate's lonely, hyper-vocal Siamese in the dishwasher is bad form. But you can't tell me you never considered it, especially at three in the morning when the meower is enacting the tragedy of the empty food dish.)

The emotion in music can change your mood, or enhance it. The cliché of the bad break-up in romcoms as in life is an orgy of wallowing in sad songs to cry out the pain and loss. And who hasn't turned on the radio in search of happy music to dispel a bad mood?

Rhythm propels the emotional power of music. You have only once to experience a sports arena thundering with the opening beats of Queen's "We Will Rock You" – the booming Clap! Clap! THUMP!! Clap! Clap! THUMP!! that resonates through your body, vibrates your sternum – to know the transportive power of rhythm. It's almost impossible to resist clapping and stomping along. And why would you want to? You don't have to be a Sufi dervish or a swaying gospel choir singer to feel the tribal, communal, altered state of getting lost in a driving beat.

Rhythm transforms music into religious experience.

Barbara Ehrenreich calls that experience “collective joy.” It’s her more evocative version of Émile Durkheim’s rather dry phrase, “collective effervescence.” Both refer to a kind of ecstatic sociological episode where whole groups of people come together in shared emotional and psychological states, often as a kind of religious worship. Ehrenreich’s rather marvelous book, *Dancing in the Streets* is a history of collective joy, of people dancing together in heightened emotional states, from the fierce maenads of the Dionysus cults through tribal dance rituals and carnival and tarantella crazes right up to the packaged and sold collective joy of mass sports events and rock concerts. People have been yearning for this ecstatic transport via group dance since the dawn of time. Perhaps even since the dawn of mankind.

Ehrenreich tantalizingly hypothesizes that the impulse may be an ancient survival mechanism. She considers the common features of many tribal group dances -- the broad, ferocious gestures, the often massive masks and costumes that make the dancers seem larger than life, the

grandiose athleticism, and the choreographed synchrony – and wonders if these patterns may not have evolved as a hunting- or defense strategy. Group dance of this type is unique to human beings – other animals that “dance” do not do it en masse. So perhaps the synchrony of collective dance would frighten other species into thinking the dancers are a single, very large, fierce, athletic animal – a multiplied version of the advice to “make yourself big” if faced with a bear in the wild. You only have to watch a Maori haka to find this idea believable. Hakas are meant to terrorize enemy warriors, who understand what dance is. What chance would a passing predator have?

We need music. We need rhythm and dance transport us, to unite us in collective joy. When we hurt we seek music to ease our hearts. Music helps us feel our feelings, and share in the feelings of others. It feels eternal, with us always, since before history began. Music is primal, a vital part of what makes us human. Little wonder then that I remember the music that first transported me when I was three. It put my feet on the road to joy.



THE READERSHIP

Edited mostly by Ulrika, as usual

The editors wish to apologize to Jerry Kaufman, whose letter, below, to BEAM 18 was lamentably omitted from the loccol last issue. Since this was the second time in a row that we somehow misplaced a letter from Jerry, the oversight was especially egregious. Gosh we're sorry. The responsible parties have been sacked.

Jerry Kaufman

(Re *BEAM* 17)

Thanks as always for the print copy of this new *Beam*. The front cover by Alan White is excellent, and looks as though it's the cover of a professionally published book or magazine. You could have put teasers with author names down one side and completely fooled me. Did Alan also do the back cover? I couldn't find a credit for it inside.

Ulrika: The back-cover art for #17 was a photo by Morgan Fisher. Credit was cleverly hidden behind the cryptic title "Bacover" under the "On Other Pages..." rubric, p.7.

Let me start in the middle, with Justin Busch's article on Numbered Fandoms. It was bittersweet reading because of Justin's death coinciding with receipt of my copy and hearing of his death during Corflu. Suzle and I exchanged fanzines, emails, and postal letters (Justin's preference) during our short acquaintance, and I had hoped to meet him some day. He also sent me a CD that included some of his art songs.

Ulrika: Fandom is the poorer for the loss of Justin Busch. He was a smart and insightful reader and analyst, a brief and pretty flash of color and light across the fannish firmament and alas, I fear we'll not see his like again.

As for the article itself, though Justin makes good points about the over-simplification that the notion of Numbered Fandoms forces on fan history, I expect that the small number of historians among us will continue to try to impose a similar structure on fandom after the 1950s. Justin may not have come across Arnie Katz's version that continued the scheme into the 1970s, culminating in his and Joyce's Brooklyn circle of friends as the focal point of X Fandom. (The "X" represents whatever number Arnie assigned it - I don't remember the actual numeral.) Later, Andy Hooper also tried to bring this Outline of Fan History even further.

Ulrika: I can't see the utility in numbering fandoms. It doesn't have any explanatory power that I can tell, but seemingly serves as just another fannish in-joke or shibboleth to distinguish us from those benighted folk over there who haven't the wisdom to number their fandoms. Pfffffft.

Here's another pair of coincidences, and one that goes off on a tangent from Justin's study. He includes the cover of Bob Madle's *A Fake Fan in London*. The first coincidence is Madle's very recent passing. The second is my purchase of *A Bas* #11 (1958) from the Corflu auction. Boyd Raeburn, the editor, includes both a letter from Madle and an article by Walt Willis (who was given an advance look at the letter). These are reminders that Madle's fan career was not without controversy. Madle won the TAFF race and attended the LonCon in 1957, but his win was attacked by a number of fanzine fans who felt that convention fans didn't deserve to win because they could not have the international backing that the complainants felt was necessary. Madle's letter argues in part that con fans do the hard work while fanzine fans sit in a corner and comment. Willis' article presents him arguing Madle's case against a fictive young Irish fan, though Willis'

defense of Madle carries a biting tone of irony to it.

[...]

About Ulrika's editorial, I have to say that I've lost some faith in the ideal of complete freedom of speech. I think that convention Codes of Conduct have become useful, even necessary, if we want conventions to be welcoming and safe for people of color and other minorities.

Ulrika: *When were fans of color ever at risk of physical harm from other fans in the parlous times before "codes of conduct" somehow rendered them "safe"? What untold horrors of convention mob lynchings, beatings, stonings, or burnings at the stake have only now been ended? None. Codes of conduct do nothing whatever to make anyone actually safer than they already were. It's pernicious nonsense to suppose they do. Pernicious because it perpetuates the spectacularly dumb idea that you can allow harm to be adjudicated not by observable fact, but just the alleged feelings of a supposedly wronged party. If fans (or real people) are given the power to punish others for their feelings of distress (real, or imagined) then you end up very quickly with the modern equivalent of the Salem witch trials, where the most neurotic and unstable dictate the fate of others. It's a good way to break communities and sow chaos, but it's not a formula for good governance.*

Nic: *Quite so, in my opinion also. Much as I cringe at the phrase "back in my day", in those so benighted olden times "code of conduct" was simply enforced by peer pressure to please stop if you were being an arsehole, as I can readily confirm since I very occasionally (ahem) was.*

But I also think there can be problems when convention staff, generally volunteer, don't have some kind of training in applying the code to real-life instances. (You've pointed out some well-publicized examples of poor judgement by convention workers.) I presume there are people who specialize in this kind of training, but I also presume they would charge large sums of money for such training. I would further presume it would be hard to get all volunteers to take the training (for a multitude of practical and attitudinal reasons). (I further presume that I'm not likely to do research to test my presumptions, so it's presumptuous of me to presume.)

Ulrika: *Quite. As you have heard me say before, even if universally fair enforcement of codes of conduct were possible in the abstract (I don't see how), it is absolutely not practical. So what you get instead is rule by crybullies.*

Nic: *"Codes of conduct" = conrunners' HOA.*

As for my loss of faith, I am coming to an opinion that bad speech in sufficient quantity drives out good speech. I need to do further thinking to explain this. Despite the parallel with "bad money drives out good," the reasons might be different. My instinct is that it has somewhat to do with modern technology allowing a huge amount of speech, the bad faith of much of Internet speech that doesn't present as argument but abuse, and a third factor I haven't come up with yet. (I like things that come in threes, don't you?)

Ulrika: *I think that the problems with online speech are many, and complex, and unlikely to be resolved here, but they are also a completely different kettle of fish from in-person interactions at conventions. But even if you're right that "bad speech drives out good*



speech," and justifies censorship or exclusion, we are still left with a huge problem: who decides? Who is going to be given the power to decide which speech is bad, which good, and what the universally agreed standards of 'good' and 'bad' are? And quis custodiet Ipsos custodes? Who watches the watchmen? How do we guarantee that the censors are making objective moral decisions and not simply pursuing their own personal agenda, ideology, or financial interest? The opportunity for corruption seems obvious (and historically observable at all scales.) To my mind free speech is much like the old quip about democracy: it's the worst system, except for all the others.

John Hertz

Thanks for NF's editorial in B18. I'd say, rather than that fanziners are marginalized, we don't make friends, and the folks who pour in nowadays are, like most Earthers, too sluggish to look around and see what might be going on besides what they already know. We and they are, like most Earthers, too inclined to "That has nothing to do with me."

Ulrika: Robert Lichtman was fan guest of honor at a Seattle convention some years back, and spent a lot of time reminiscing about the older fans of his neohood who had mentored him in fandom, befriending him, giving him rides to events, introducing him to other fans, lending him fanzines to read. What struck me at the time was that he did not have any stories at all about how he had paid that gift



forward, whom he had befriended and given rides and introductions to. It seems that is the mechanism that broke at some point: people in fandom continuously introducing new people to their enthusiasms, interests, connections and events in a proactive way. I know it's work, and requires a certain real or well-faked extroversion, but it's the only effective means of perpetuating the culture that I can think of.

Nic: Perhaps also interesting to note that Lichtman once remarked (on a much older issue

of BEAM), that he did not read anything by anyone he did not know, which forces one to ask how you get started reading anything at all. At the time I attempted to construct the following issue with pieces all by people he'd never heard of, and almost succeeded. I can provide one personal example of the Mighty Robt "paying it forward": when I was looking to expand my mailing list for *Arrows of Desire into the Americas* he helpfully provided me with a copy of his.

Glad to see Terry Karney. You well describe him as a LASFSan although he's been living on the other coast awhile. Once he and I were driving a few hundred miles and, it being his turn to choose music, he put on *Irish Songs of Rebellion* (Clancy Bros. and T. Makem, 1993). I said, "Isn't that title redundant?" He said, "We also have laments."

I've written elsewhere about George Mardikian, his San Francisco restaurant, "Omar Khayam's" (another thing Mr. Fitzgerald has to answer for), and his 1944 cookbook *Dinner at Omar Khayam's*. Avedon, do you know it? The restaurant was, I believe, the first Armenian place intended to be good for non-Armenians. Had it been called, say, Sayat Nova's, it might not have succeeded so well

– although I myself ate at the Sayat Nova restaurant in Chicago while living there for law school, that was decades later. Wouldn't be the first time a cookbook helped with heartbreak.

Garth Spencer

So the Balkanization of fandom is still a current topic?

[...]as Ulrika O'Brien pointed out, that nothing serves the role of a focal point fanzine these days. Perhaps nothing can.

[...]Of course that means that different fandoms simply *don't* share the same points of reference. It has come to the point where I have to explain what "fannish" fandom means.

[...] Ulrika O'Brien does a service by naming journalists who haven't gone along with pandering to a demographic segment's biases; I am still trying to find such sources in order to make informed judgments, in my odd neck of the woods. Maybe she has offered a clue.

Ulrika: *In case it's helpful, a tiny selection of alternative sources of news and information (warning: openminded consumption of any or all of these alternative sources may give you brain cooties and get you branded as "far right"): The Epoch Times: theepochtimes.com ; Jeff Childers: coffeeandcovid@substack.com; Racket News: taibbi@substack.com ; The Dark Horse Podcasts (Brett Weinstein and Heather Heying): darkhorsepodcast.org; and of course, the 500 lb. gorilla of alternative sources, The Joe Rogan Experience, wherever you listen to podcasts.*

Something related to demographics occurs to me, while reading Ulrika's article. Do we form biases

and prejudices and stereotypes because it just seems like too much *work* to actually meet all kinds of people, in all kinds of occupations or from all kinds of backgrounds, and actually find out what they're actually like?

Ulrika: *People do things for lots of reasons. The social forces that keep people in their epistemic bubbles are many, and form complex interactions with each other. The social rewards in most groups (including fandom) do not favor heterodoxy. Entertaining heresies will be punished with shunning. We go along to get along, as the saying goes.*



[...] Ian Sales' profile of Scandinavian fandom is very welcome, after receiving a long string of Ahrvid Engholm's apazines but, somehow, not acquiring a lot of context.

It is interesting that Ian Sales' lactose intolerance disappeared sometime after he moved to Sweden. I have heard a rumour that North Americans who suffer from gluten intolerance have no

problem with wheat products from Europe. Reasoning by analogy, I have to wonder whether Swedish dairy products are processed differently than British dairy products.

[...] Heath Row's letter ... move[d] me to look up the previous issue of *Beam* and find Justin Busch's article on fanhistory. When the celebrated and much-missed Harry Warner Jr. was alive, he wrote (somewhere) about redefining fanhistory, not in terms of numbered fandoms, but in terms of different phases: as in sercon fandom, and later fannish fandom, and later the emergency of media fandom. (~~And then the deluge.~~) It sounds as though Justin Busch was alive to the same thing.

William Breiding

I've been battling my way through all my reactions to Jose Sanchez' cover. I have this same response to a lot of what they call "folk art." I keep going back to the cover and studying it. Like much folk art I find portions of it irritating. The placement of the zine name and author signature, for instance. But the choice of angle from above and the feckless little grey men, parachuting, of all things, and the odd choice of a warehouse district, and the, what, white circles representing radar BEAMs, or is its center supposed to be the top of a saucer? We have the tidy shrubbery landscape alongside the warehouses and empty streets, except for three parked cars. Then I ask, in what medium was it created? It all keeps me looking, thinking, and wondering. What are these little buggers up to?

Nic's piece on Aldiss and van Vogt caused me to want to read the stories under discussion. I checked my shelves and located the Aldiss but none of my van Vogt collections included "The Monster." Fortunately the very interesting *Prospero's Isle*, the French website that Nic called "critical," has 83 stories and 14 novels by van Vogt posted in English. I put quotes on "critical" because, while this person is interestingly literate, the thumbnails are a combination of personal reaction and brief synopsis. *Prospero's Isle* is a very cool website.

I think the thing that struck me most about Aldiss' "Our Kind of Knowledge" and van Vogt's "The Monster" was the similarity in prose style, rather than the similar plot points. There is a crystal lucidity in van Vogt's prose that I felt Aldiss had somehow channelled. Aldiss frequently tends towards the droll in his short works from the fifties and sixties and "Our Kind of Knowledge" was no exception. Van Vogt always feels a little grim to me and tends more towards irony. The manipulative and unsparing upstart "monster" was merely a portent reflection of the self satisfied

and self-aggrandizing aliens. The adversarial nature of the story seemed pure Campbell to me. Aldiss' story had kindness and amusement at its base. I do agree that these are both classics in their way. I do, however, fail to see how Nic could say some of Aldiss's work was pretentiously "up its own arse." I have yet to read anything by Aldiss that frustrated me on this level.

Nic: I'd certainly cite most of Aldiss' "Three Enigmas" series which ran in volumes of 'New Writings in SF' which became progressively oblique and, to me, unreadable. In a prior issue of This Here... I reviewed his collection of "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long" and sequels. The sequel stories were, in my opinion, increasingly up their own arses.

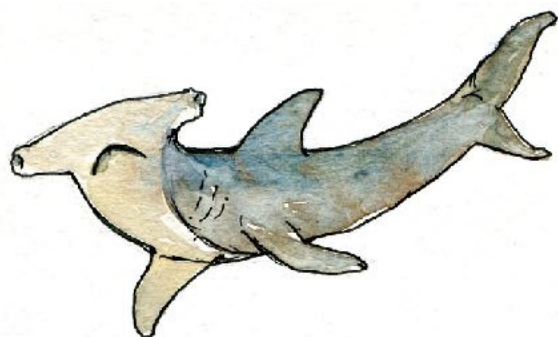
Lee Wood's report from Chickadoodle Farm was excellent. I learned a lot. I'd never heard of the Chumash Indian and researched this central California coastal tribe. California had a lot of varied and interesting small tribes ranging from the eastern desert hardscrabble nomads to the prosperous laid back agricultural tribes along the coast and in the rich deltas.

I loved Rich Coad's tribute to movie posters. I had a brief moment where I thought to collect them myself. Once upon a time in the mid-1980s San Francisco's Strand Theater on Market Street (three new films every day!) decided to have a poster sale. Many of these posters were well worn but it sort of added to their charm. I picked up maybe a dozen posters for a couple of bucks a piece. But having lived in small studio apartments for the majority of my life I soon came to realize that I didn't want large movie posters dominating my walls and they quickly came down and remained folded in boxes. That box finally got misplaced (probably overlooked when clearing my stuff out of an ex's basement) in the Aughts.

The letter column was absolutely awesome. Ulrika creates a fierce dialog. I was particularly taken by Gary Mattingly's letter. I completely identified

with his solitary nature and feel much the same. I only theoretically understand why most people need social interaction. However I think Gary, like myself, is not entirely a-social, but more of a one-on-one kinda guy.

Ulrika: Sports will always crop up, of course, and both you and Gary appear prone to "socializing" mediated by the written word (you're soaking in it) which is one of the many technologies available to us precisely because most of humanity, throughout its history, is intensely social and cooperative. If you look



around your immediate surroundings I think you'll be stumped to find an object that would be there without the many hands that touched it before it got to you. Even a fruit you grew in your yard is a cultivar produced by generations of social, cooperative humans.

The entire issue was excellent, just no hooks upon which to further comment.

Rich Lynch

I haven't been ignoring what you've been publishing, but I've been so involved in digital archiving that it's become (for now) my #1 fan activity. Nevertheless, I should have written you a letter of comment before now on the issue, and I apologize for that.

Nic's "Living in the Past" opening comments asks an interesting question for all of us who publish

and read fanzines: "Where is the 'unity' in 'community'?" In the broadest sense I do think it's there. For example, Bill Burns has done an excellent job of overseeing a "big tent" website that welcomes fanzines of all types - it's arguably a community in its own right. Prior to that there were dead tree publications (most notably Mike Gunderloy's *Factsheet Five*) that did the same. Nic mentions that: "Both Bob Jennings and Heath Row in their letters this issue note the highly fractured and insular nature of the fannish archipelago." But that's kinda been the case for many decades, hasn't it? Throughout the history of fandom there have been sercon fanzines like *ERBdom* and *Fantasy Commentator*; newszines like *Ansible* and *File 770*; clubzines like *De Profundis* and *The WSEF Journal*; general interest fanzines like Geri Sullivan's *Idea* and Guy Lillian's *Challenger*; personalzines like Nic's *This Here...* and Perry Middlemiss's *Perryscope*. And many different kinds of specialty-zines that serve as focal points for media and other sub-fandoms. This has been going on, probably, ever since the very first science fiction fanzines were published back in the 1930s.

The point of all this is that I can't completely agree with Nic's observation, after looking back at the fractious history of fandom past, that: "I strongly doubt there was anything like unity in the community, a situation which doesn't just persist but has observably got worse." Considering the state of fandom back in the late 1930s New Fandom vs. The Futurians era where there was some politics-inspired major league fracturing on display, what we have now actually doesn't seem as bad as that. Fandom survived that period of our history and thrived afterwards. I think we're thriving now as well. There doesn't really need to be a tight-knit monolithic fanzine community. We've found ways to be aware of what everybody else is publishing, for the most part, and that's a pretty good place to be.

Moving on to Ulrika's "Bungle in the Jungle" essay, she points out that we're (as a society) now

so societally polarized that even demonstrably false beliefs can become ingrained in people to the point where they're in peril of descending below the la-la land event horizon. I agree with her *Matrix*-inspired observation that: "A person has been 'red-pillled' if they have experienced a satori about the true nature of the world, perceiving that what previously seemed real was illusion." and that: "Once you start questioning the narrative, all sorts of beliefs may unravel." But in the end that unfortunately seems like wishful thinking, and I know this from personal experience. I was dismayed to see that an in-law relative had descended so far down the MAGA rabbit hole, in terms of easily disprovable crapola he espouses, that visiting where he lived almost seemed like dropping in on a Trump rally. For him, and I guess for others of that same political incline, there probably isn't and may never be a 'red pill'.

Ulrika: I'm glad we have points of agreement. It's a good place to start. It's a little finicky figuring out where to proceed from there, though. To me the road to enlightenment is an entirely personal one, that starts not with the criticism of other people's beliefs, but continual re-evaluation of my own, trying to find not what I agree with, but what is true. That's a really fucking hard row to hoe, and I let myself down all the time, but it's really the only path to intellectual honesty. I take it that your in-law's beliefs about what's true and provable don't align with yours. But what does that actually prove about the state of his beliefs or knowledge? I see a number of people have found reason to Walk Away from the Democrats, discovered things they believed about the party and its policies that have not proved out. Is it possible that he has experienced a red pill moment that you have

not?

This is a really good issue, and I'm sorry that I'll mostly comment-in-passing on some of the rest of the contents. I liked Rich Coad's homage to the colorful and often garish movie posters from past decades. I think they actually transcend their original promotional purpose and are now their own art form. Ian Sales' article about Nordic fandom makes me wish I'd got to one of the Scandinavian conventions. Although I've been to Norway several times and have fan friends from the region, that's been an experience that's so far escaped me. Same goes for visiting New Zealand - I've only been there vicariously with TV shows and video productions set there, so I'm maybe a little bit envious of Lee Wood's full immersion relocation there. (Or maybe not - it would take a lot to get me to leave Maryland.)

And then there's Nic's essay, "Twenty Decimal Similarity", where he begins by mentioning that: "It's a very sad thing, isn't it, that for the last several years I've rarely had the time or even the inclination to actually read anything other than internet news feeds, due generally to the exigencies of working long and unsociable hours as well as devoting much of my free time to fanzine fanac." I can relate to that. Over the decades of my life I've devolved into becoming a very slow reader, and that's been compounded by

the relatively short amount of time (generally the hour or so before lights out each night) that's available for reading. Which means that it can sometimes take me three weeks or even longer to finish a novel. There are shelves filled with books I know I'll never get around to reading, and I'm dead certain of that because for the past decade or so the entirety of my fiction reading has been e-books that I've downloaded from local libraries. It's not an exaggeration to say that I've already got access



to a lifetime supply of unread books. And I'm taking that as a good thing.

Carry on, sir and lady. Looking forward to your next issue.

Steve Jeffery

(On issues #13 and #14 - acquired at auction)

I noticed in your reply to Mark Plummer's mention of seeing Here and Now at the Marquee, where he mentions they were very much his band of the mid 90s, and that you comment you either you weren't aware of them or that you couldn't recall any of their tracks without recourse to Google.

"I'm addicted to coffee, I'm addicted to tea, and I think cigarettes are addicted to ME" (Addicted).

Here and Now were very much my band a bit earlier in the mid 70s after I was left Uni and was working and living in bedsit-land in West London (Ealing) and used to hang around with them and various support/satellite/scratch bands when they were playing around Westbourne Grove/Notting Hill.

I think I first came across them when a mate (Mang) and I hitched from Reading to Oxford Brooks Poly (as it was then) sometime in '76 to see Daavid Allen's Planet Gong with Tim Blake's Crystal Machine. Planet Gong, at that time (it had an every changing lineup) was largely drawn from members of Here and Now. I can't remember if Here and Now also played a support set as themselves. (There was another psychedelic band, Zorch, who I've never heard of since.) I also picked up my first fanzine at that gig, a mimeo affair titled *Psychodelia in the UK* (I assume the Pistol's "Anarchy in the UK" had recently been released.)



Post Uni, though, I spend a lot of the summer weekends in and around Westbourne Grove when Here and Now were playing in places like the Acklam Hall, Meanwhile Gardens or under the arches at Portobello Road. As Mark mentions, Perry's Alternative TV were often playing the same bill (the back cover of Here and Now's album *What You See is What You Are* features a group shot of both bands plus extended entourage). There were a host of other bands, including the Androids of Mu, and scratch bands like Vince Pie and the Crumbs, often thrown together for a couple of numbers on the day. Somewhere I have a wallet of photographs from those gigs. I got to know them - or Grant Showbiz at least - enough to hang out as unofficial

photographer and part time roadie. I think Grant ended up manager of The Orb. Fun times. I remember one gig under the arches that featured Here and Now, Chelsea, ATV, Vermilion and Aces and Nik Turner's Inner City Unit. I'm sure I have a photo of Bob Calvert declaiming through a megaphone to a bewildered audience (which may have had

less people than were on stage at any one time).

Fun times

Nic: I too ended up as a part-time roadie, for a band called Screens (yes, three "e"s). I wonder how many of our other mates have roadied at one time or another?

I think it was Mark P who emailed me to say that one of Here and Now's backing singers, Suze da Blues, sadly died a while ago.

Cy Chauvin

Thanks for *Beam* #18. This is my second attempt at a loc: the first lost due to a botched flash drive

that I saved it to for 'safekeeping', since I always suspect my computers of failing me.

Re: "Twenty Decimal Smilarity": doing fanac and working full time can put you off reading, especially fiction. I also find that science fiction from the 1950's seems to have a certain appeal and attraction that current sf lacks (at least the small amount I've dipped into). I'm not sure why; I suspect bad ideas, and an inability to take good ideas seriously. I went and looked through some of the boxes of sf paperbacks I have, since it seemed certain that I have the collections by Brian Aldiss and A.E. Van Vogt that you cite, but no luck so far. I thought, however, that "The Enchanted Village" by Van Vogt was generally considered his best story. That's the one about the spaceman who crash lands on Mars, finds an intact but empty Martian village, complete with automatic dispensing machines, etc. But he can't digest the food or find any substitute. He starts to starve to death, and die. But then he wakes up, tries the machines again, and the food is delicious. Then you gradually realize, that he has been changed, and has scaly skin, and reptilian features, like the original Martians. A lot of trouble to go through – you would have thought it would have been easier for the Village to change the food dispensed from the machine!

Nic: Van himself considered "The Monster" to be his best work.

I also remember from my childhood a story I thought was by Van Vogt, called something like "My Dear Monster." It was told in letters, and basically someone unknowingly befriended a 'monster' (an alien), and rather than be an aggressive man eating monster, it turned out to be nice. Of course, for my ten year old self that

seemed like a new idea. But it is nothing like the story by Van Vogt "The Monster" that you describe.

Nic: The one you're thinking of there is "Dear Pen Pal" and the alien wasn't nice at all, it turned out, but gets a serious comeuppance.

I enjoyed William Breiding's review of *Bunnyman* by Will Sergeant. I've heard of Echo and the Bunnymen before (after all, I was in *Apa-50* with William for years!), but I don't know if I've heard any of their actual songs. That brings up the question, what might motivate me to read an autobiography by a member of a band I've never actually heard? A few years ago, I might have said "Nothing." But in the

last two years I read *Ariel*, a biography of Shelley by Andre Maurios. I read it for the reason I was going through a box of books I inherited, expecting to find it a worthless discard, but instead it was engaging. Shelley came across as personable and interesting (he's be arguing with one of his Oxford university friends about poetry, then come to a stream and start making paper boats to float! – A fan type, certainly). I've since attempted to read a book of his poetry, without much success. So William has convinced me to give the book a try, at least if I can borrow from a library.

I'm right with him when William expresses his disappointment that Sergeant doesn't write about the songwriting process, since that would be exactly what would interest me most in an autobiography by a musician. (I would also be greatly handicapped reading it, since I'm unfamiliar with Echo and the Bunnymen's music.) In many biographies I've read of writers, I often skip ahead or look through the index, reading what sparked the genesis of my favorite stories,



rather than read about their parents, or affairs of their wife or husband. Publishing history fascinates me. The more difficult, intricate and delayed the road to publication, or release of a song, the more interesting the story of how it happened, to my way of thinking. The fact that so much of Echo and the Bunnymen's success appears to have been accidental sounds fascinating.

Lucy: That's an odd take to me since I want biographies and autobiographies to fill in all the background details of the trajectory from nobody to somebody, particularly if all I've ever known is the glamorous public-facing performance. I've read lots of musicians' autobiographies where I haven't necessarily listened to their music much. I read for the milieu that created the artist.

William writes that this particular line in the autobiography "floored" him: "Outside, the

brutalist skin of the YMCA building sours into the London sky." Yes, good, but the crucial word "sours" is almost certainly a typo for *soars*, which makes more sense.

Just another one of Sergeant's lucky accidents.

WAHF

John Purcell : "Two years? That's not too many." ; **Perry Middlemiss** ; **George Phillis** ; **Lee Wood** ; **R-Laurraine Tutihasi** ; **Jose Sanchez** : "Looks phenomenal ! What a nice gloss on the cover. I've never seen such a professional fanzine before and I've seen many. Congratulations on such a well made product !" ; **Teddy Harvia** : "The fillos by Lee Wood were worth the price of admission." **Nic** : *Lee Wood?* *Alan White will be miffed...* ; **Guy Lillian** : "Looks spiffy!" ; **Paul di Filippo** : "Fantabulous! Many thanks!"



HOW NIC CONNED ME INTO THIS

LUCY HUNTZINGER

It was at Corflu 43 in Santa Rosa, of course. I was high on fanac and egoboo, reveling in the bonhomie that goes along with seeing a few dozen of one's closest friends all at once. I was continually amazed by how grey we all were. I'm sure we were non-numbered fandom's most recent bad boys and convention girls only a few years ago. But here we all were still!

It didn't hurt that Nic kept giving me bourbon and talking about his latest plans for a small new zine. I think that's what he was planning. It might have been world domination, they're hard to distinguish with Nic. Anyway, I was feeling both sentimental and aware of time's passage when he said, "Ulrika and I've been thinking you'd make an ace co-editor of *BEAM*."

I have not put out my own personal zine (*Southern Gothic*) in thirty years. I do not plan to do another since these

days I pour that impulse to overshare into social media. I have co-edited three fanzines (*Rude Bitch*, *Abbatoir*, *Convention Girl's Digest*). I write articles for any fan-ed who asks me and have contributed to several special convention publications (*Dancing to Architecture*, *Bay Fan Scrapbook*). Most importantly, I have never edited a

genzine. It's a flattering idea, but surely it's misguided.

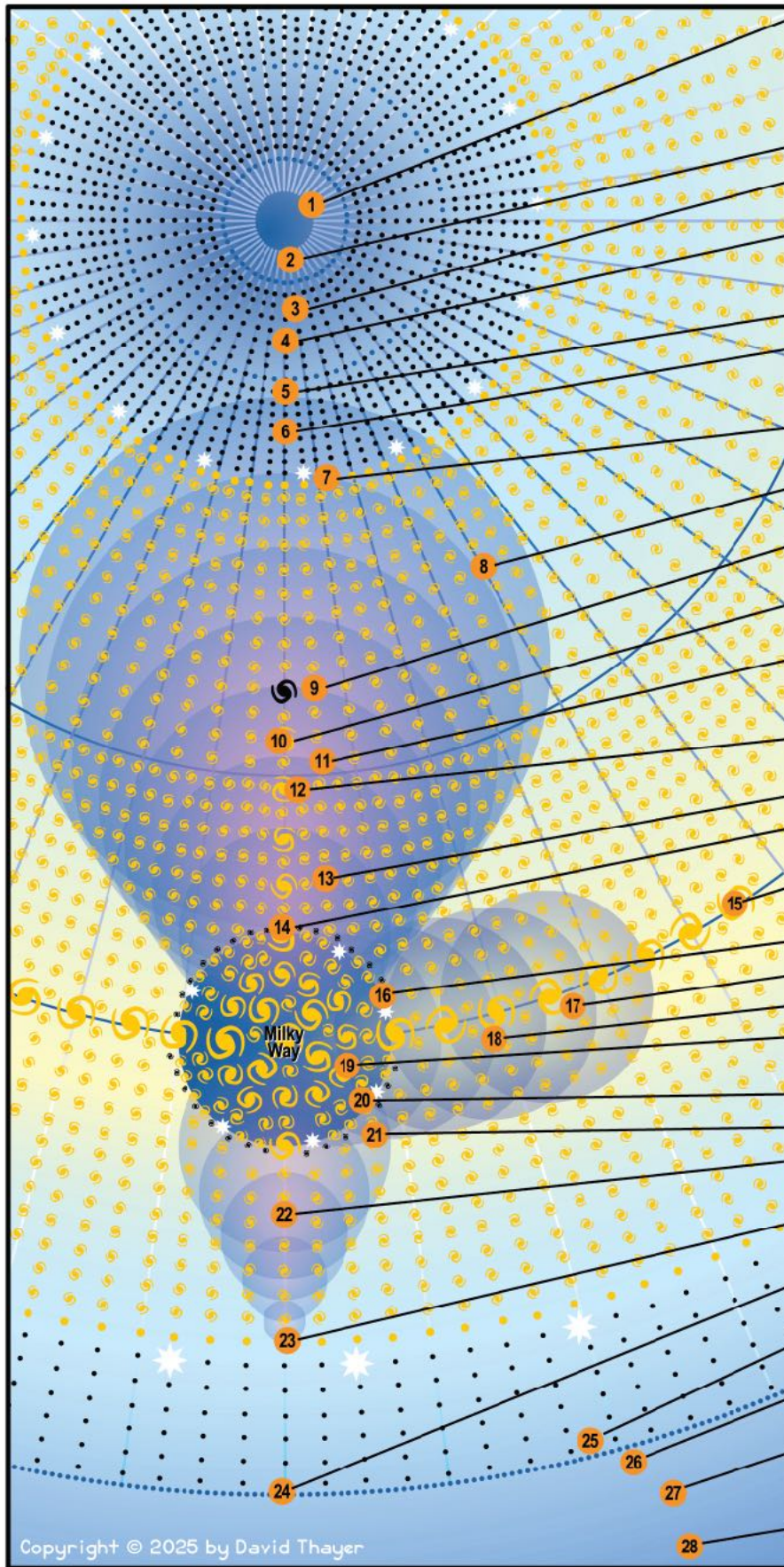
And yet, is it? We worked really well together on Corflu 39. Check. I love the idea of working on a big, sprawling genzine because it's a challenge to make it all work together, much like putting

on a show. Check. None of us live in the same state so we won't suffer from too much proximity. Check. I really thrive on co-editing work in any field. Gosh. Maybe it could work.

We're all going to find out.



A Simple Timeline beyond the Visible Universe by *Teddy Harvia*



- 1 In a simple universe, trillions of massive photon-size particles rush out in an instant at the speed of light in every direction of the three-dimensional space. Immediately after the Big Bang, particles begin to decay, fall below the speed of light, emit vast amounts of photons and other radiation.
- 2 Particles decay for trillions of years, emitting radiation.
- 3 Space itself neither inflates nor expands. The particles have a half-life of trillions of years. Galaxies form inside out.
- 4 After 10 trillion years of decaying, particles explode with photons and create countless atoms, expanding and leaving a black hole in the center.
- 5 Atoms coalesce into stars that burn for millions of years.
- 6 Stars explode, creating more atoms that form planets and stars that burn for billions of years. Over time, all galaxies slow down but newer ones always travel faster than older.
- 7 The Milky Way particle begins to decay trillions of years after the Big Bang.
- 8 The visible universe of a galaxy expands as it ages and light more distant ones reaches it.
- 9 Light from distant galaxies may reach a galaxy long after its own stars die.
- 10 The particle expands into the Milky Way 10 trillion years after its start to decay.
- 11 Particles that become the galaxies in the visible universe of the Milky Way start decaying within a few thousand lightyears of each other.
- 12 Over trillions of years, gravity between particles arranges them into strings and clusters.
- 13 Closer to the Big Bang, the older the actual age of a galaxy.
- 14 The oldest stars and galaxies visible from Earth are not the oldest in the universe.
- 15 All galaxies the age of the Milky Way are the same distance from the center of the universe.
- 16 The visible universe from Earth is the thinnest slice.
- 17 Different visible universes overlap but have different space.
- 18 All galaxies the age of ours have same size visible universes.
- 19 Despite how they appear from Earth, only a few thousand years separate the age of all galaxies in the visible universe.
- 20 Galaxies that appear youngest are farthest from Earth.
- 21 Radiation from other galaxies reaches Earth before starlight.
- 22 Earth cannot see light from distant galaxies even with a telescope of infinite power.
- 23 The visible universe of a new galaxy is only its own light, too soon for others to reach it.
- 24 Ten trillion lightyears separate galaxies the age of the Milky Way from the physical edge of the universe.
- 25 At the edge of the physical universe, particles continue to decay, slow down, and form galaxies.
- 26 Particles yet to decay continue to expand the universe at speed of light.
- 27 After the last massive first particles decay, photons and other radiation continue to expand the universe at the speed of light.
- 28 Beyond the particles, space is in complete darkness at absolute zero temperature.