

ACRYLIC



Call it instinct, call it awkwardness, but every time I find myself about to move, to address unknown, I also seem to be in the throes of completing one of my fanzines. This time, I am CHRISTINA LAKE, the fanzine is called, concisely, ACRYLIC

and the editorial address is 235 Iffley Rd., Oxford, OX4 1SQ until mid-august, whereafter it converts to something different which may or may not be hand-written in on the last page. Oh the joys of vagrancy!

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Now plead on... the contents

What do I have for you here this issue? Angst, sticking plaster and recycled anecdotes? Yes, all that and contributors too! I've structured the zine around two articles which I see as following up some of the themes of Snails Countdown. Tribunal! is an account of my experiences when I turned up as witness for my former supervisor who was sacked, unfairly I believed then, and still believe now, six months before I left Predicasts myself. I wrote about it because it affected me a lot at the time and because I've already gone into some of my feelings about the whole business of Predicasts in this fanzine. On the other side of the coin, I've decided to include an account of my travels around Europe after leaving full-time employment. It is re-written, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, edited, from two articles I wrote for The Women's Periodical soon after I returned. I then toyed with the idea of completing this game of consequences by talking about my changed life-style as a freelancer, which was working out remarkably well until about a month or so back when my main source of supply from that same Predicasts I complain so often about dried up, but I don't particularly want this fanzine to turn solely into a monument to the life and troubles of C.J. Lake, nor do I find the subject of me, my dictaphone and my bedroom window so interesting that I can be bothered to write about it as well as (previously) perform it. So, I shall just say, here and now, that I was much luckier than I expected in that for half a year after leaving full employment I was able to do quite well on the freelance work, and only now is the rat beginning to take his revenge and I see that I don't have much money coming in for the ever-increasing expenses of life, and yet I still seem to be short on time, and will no doubt get shorter as I prepare to move. But never mind, I never expected it to be easy...

So, on to the contributors. I suggested to Charles Stross that he might like to write something, and almost by return of post, there was this article! Suddenly I was forced to think of putting the zine out not some time in the indefinite and more than likely distant future, but, say, in the next month or three, now I had a contributor to feel responsible for! So, the thumb-screws were applied to Peter-Fred for his long-promised but never conceived article on something not about Buddhism or Franks Apa. It was a long process but eventually I tore him away from all the displacement activities he'd invented to distract himself from not doing work on his D. Phil (such as making job applications and going for job interviews, a pretty persistent displacement activity which eventually resulted in Inmos offering him in a job and certain potential changes in this fanzine's editorial address!) and locked him in his bedroom with a notebook to fantasise about telephones. The final contributor was, chronologically speaking at least, Nicola Columbo who supplied the cover, as she has done for my last three fanzines, and I hope will do for the next three, should they ever get written!

Right, I think that covers everything. Anything not otherwise attributed comes from me. This should be out in time for Beccon '85, the gods willing, or rather more pertinently, Maureen Porter and her magic Cats Dandruff press willing. It will be available for almost anything which comes roughly into the categories of show of interest or bribery, preferably the latter, but I'm not really that optimistic!

Read on, the sun has gone in but not down...

This especially made for Channel 4 television docu-drama, tells of four days of drama and tension in the low courts (as opposed to high courts), the quest of a woman wronged for justice and vengeance, the spirited defence by her superior of the right to dismiss whomsoever she wanted, the hatred, the anguish, the boredom and not very much about the workings of industrial tribunals. Our reporter is star witness CHRISTINA LAKE who tells of four days which didn't change anything much at all in:

TRIBUNAL !

It felt quite exciting when I first walked into the applicant's waiting room. I was a bit late and everyone was milling around getting in a last coffee, carrying out hasty last minute consultations or frantically looking for missing witnesses. Fleur was obviously in a state of expectant agitation. "I'm much calmer than I was last time," she said. In which case, I was glad I had been away in Austria to miss last time.

Then came the message that Predicasts' barrister couldn't come. "Can't come!" Fleur shrieked, "but we postponed for him in January. They're up to something!" Mr. Fisher from CAB and Fleur's four witnesses forcibly held her down so that she wouldn't go rushing off to the tribunal chairman, swearing loudly of foul play.

They began calling for the other cases: "Will the parties in Mr. L. Cooper vs Dayview Wire and Cable go to court 2D"; "Last call for the parties in Mrs. C. Madison and Mrs. K. Locke vs Nestle!" I realised with a thrill that I was a party in Jeremiah vs Predicasts. Would it be like being a party in Jarndyce vs Jarndyce in Dickens' Bleak House? Would old ladies point me out proudly in the street, saying "I've seen one of the witnesses in Jeremiah vs Predicasts!"? would we all waste our lives in the futility of pointless litigation?

It turned out that the barrister's mother-in-law was in hospital, dying of cancer. Even Fleur had to admit, very reluctantly, that Predicasts had probably not engineered that. Fortunately the chairman seemed to share Fleur's dismay at the prospect of yet another delay, and agreed that Mr. Fisher should continue cross-examining Ms. Graver while a representative from the barrister's chambers took notes.

We all went up to the 3rd floor where we stood round in two circles, one of Fleur's witnesses and one of Predicasts', each pointedly ignoring the other. Yet we'd all known each other for years. In a small company, after working in the same crowded office together day in day out you get as close to each other as a family, and quite as emotional. Besides, I still worked freelance for Predicasts and regularly received cheques signed by any of the three people standing not looking at us in the opposition's circle.

The Predicasts group were quiet, obviously disappointed they hadn't obtained a postponement. We stood around chatting, Mr. Fisher a tower of strength in our midst. When they let us into the tribunal court, we, Fleur's witnesses, went to sit in the fourth row, the Predicast party sat in the second and along the front sat the main protagonists, Fleur and Ms. Graver, separated by their respective representatives. Facing them at a raised table were the tribunal members, three sombre men in suits and glasses.

Judith Graver took the oath, standing at the front table, a doll-like, colourless figure, her hand on the holy bible, swearing solemnly that she would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

For the next day and a half she was to lie persistently, outrageously and without compunction.

The cross examination began with the quiet, gentle Mr. Fisher asking apparently innocuous questions and the octogenarian Sir Jocelyn, the tribunal chairman taking down the questions on his little portable typewriter, vocalising as he tapped away, and stopping to ask quick, sharp questions when Ms. Graver tied herself up in mendacious circumambulations. If Sir Jocelyn had been in the office to say "No, stop, first answer the question with yes or no," we might never have needed a tribunal in the first place.

I looked at the document they were discussing, a letter of the 22nd October 1982 from all the abstracting staff to the management in the USA complaining that we could not work with Ms. Graver. The photocopy in front of me looked remote and strange as if I'd never had anything to do with it, yet there was my signature, the clearest and most legible of them all, just below Fleur's plain in the centre. Of the 12 signatories, I calculated, only 2 still worked for the company, the rest had all been dismissed, harassed into resigning or left in disgust. Six of us were in that courtroom, five for Fleur, one for Predicasts.

The questioning continued. Each time Judith Graver said something we knew to be untrue, we four at the back exchanged incredulous looks or whispered comments. At one point there was an audible gasp. We tried to restrain ourselves, fearful that our Greek chorus would irritate the tribunal. Every so often we'd remember something useful and I'd slip forward with a note for Fleur and Mr. Fisher. Every document we'd ever had from the company suddenly became potentially useful to refute or prove and I regretted that I had kept hardly anything. At one point my neighbour, hard-headed Anne Goldsworthy said to me in all seriousness: "She'll go to hell, won't she?". But Ms. Graver obviously had no fear of hell, only of the consequences if she lost the case. Each question she answered on one criterion, and one only, which answer would be the most damaging to Fleur. Occasionally she hesitated because she couldn't work out which answer would be the best; basically she's not a very clever woman. But that first day, her lies were on the whole convincing, almost plausible if you hadn't lived through the truth. She probably believed them herself. I had just been reading Le Guin's *City of Illusions* and could see her as a Shing, a compulsive liar, lying because it's in her interest but also because she is out of touch with reality. I became strongly convinced that the only course left to find our way out of the maze of contradicting evidence was to tell the truth at all times, even when it might hurt us. I began to find my companions almost too partisan. Would their truth come out any less biased than Ms. Graver's in the end?

As the first day dragged on I could feel building up inside me the desire to stand up and testify, to tell the tribunal in words of one syllable precisely what had happened. But even in the relaxed atmosphere of the industrial tribunal court, procedure still ruled and there was nothing I could do. Instead I fantasised about killing Ms. Graver. I tried to do it with mind power. I don't believe in psychic powers, but if they exist, there was surely enough emotion in the court room to do it. I was full to overflowing with frustrated energy, it fizzed through my body like the emotional energy of P.M.T., if only I could focus it, send/after my thoughts, to twist her brain till she screamed in agony like they do in the X-Men. Nothing happened. Fleur said later that Graver's hands were beginning to shake towards the end; perhaps if we'd gone on another hour she would have cracked up.

I suppose if I had known Judith Graver socially I might have felt sorry for her. She is nervous and highly-strung, the spoiled darling of the elderly parents she still lives with. I'd know she was insincere and weak, but I wouldn't hold it against her. But now I can only see her as a criminal. The only criminal I've ever had close contact with. Her crime wasn't stealing people's jobs, but the mental torture she put them through to do it. She framed seven people with incompetence and I would guess that at least four of them still believe it. So I can't feel any compassion, only anger because she's still in a good job with the weight of the company behind her, and because, most of all, she can still believe she is right.

I don't know how Fleur's nerves stood up to those two and a half days of evidence against her. Mine were unhappy by the end of the first day. I stood in Fleur's Orpington living room that evening, taking deep breaths, trying to control a feeling of strangeness as if the whole world were pressing down on me. I couldn't sit and read and relax as I had planned, I could only walk up and down the room and tell myself I was all right. Then Fleur's nine year old daughter came back home and I could distract myself by talking to her. The strangeness gradually dissipated.

The second day was worse. Graver turned up with a pile of print-outs which had never been previously produced in evidence.

"You must have been very busy last night," the chairman opined as he sent the pile off to be bound together. Nobody seemed very keen to tackle the new evidence, even though the figure of mistakes in all but 41 off the 220 abstracts hung ominously in the air awaiting refutation or confirmation. Still, objectively speaking, the case seemed to go better that day, Ms. Graver was sounding less convincing, making mistakes, mucking things up - but I found I could stand it less well. The frustration and tension had built up to a higher level than the day before, and I was much more angry. Instead of letting it all out in indignant whispers to the others, I put my head in my hands when it grew too much and began to wish sincerely and intensely that I wasn't there, that I was anywhere but there. It didn't help. I had to look up eventually and sit through the rest. I began to understand the true meaning of mental torture.

At lunch we examined the pile of print-outs; most of the mistakes were legitimate changes made by Fleur at the proofing stage. It didn't look very convincing evidence of incompetence. Predicast's lawyer obviously wasn't entirely convinced either. He opened negotiations, offering £2,500, but threatening at the same time that Fleur could be liable for costs if she didn't accept. Then when this didn't work, they came back with a complete admission of unfair dismissal if Fleur settled. Mr. Fisher advised her to accept the offer, and Fleur reluctantly agreed, but only if the tribunal were allowed to determine the level of compensation. Predicast's barrister stated that in that case the company would plead contributory factors. The agreement foundered. We all trooped back in for another afternoon of mental torture.

That evening I left the tribunal for the women's meeting at the Griffin, relieved to get away from it all. I decided to walk from Victoria to Charing Cross as I had plenty of time, and strolled past Buckingham Palace and went to sit down in St. James's park. I tried consciously to relax, but the charged up feeling wouldn't leave me. I started writing about the first day of the tribunal in an attempt to exorcise it, there on the grass in front of the courting couples and behind the old people on the benches, but soon it was time to continue and there was so much left to be said. It wasn't till I was part/^{way}through my second pint at the Griffin that I noticed that I felt normal again.

When I got back to Fleur's at midnight, she was still going through the print-outs produced that morning. "Mr. Fisher thinks I should settle," she said. "It would be the sensible thing to do. I mustn't appear vindictive - at all costs!" She went on to tell me all the reasons why it was a good idea, more to convince herself than to inform me. I nodded encouragingly. I wanted a reprieve. I didn't want to see Judith Hibbins lying.

Judith Hibbins was my first friend at Predicasts. I stayed with her my first couple of days before I moved into my room in Chislehurst, and used her family's duplicator to produce my second fanzine. I like her now, even after the events surrounding Fleur's dismissal. She could have stood by Fleur, and in my opinion should have done, but she has a natural respect for authority and when Graver chose to favour her at the expense of her colleague, she let it happen. No more. Except that all the notes on the pile of print-outs, pointing out the mistakes were in Judith's hand-writing. Either she did them at the time of Fleur's dismissal, and her claim of not knowing what was going on at the time was untrue, or they were fabricated after Fleur left, perhaps even the night before as Fleur cynically suspected.

We all expected a settlement the following morning. I even had all my luggage with me in the hope of shortly leaping on a bus for Oxford. Then Predicasts refused at the last minute to sign the reference drawn up by Fleur and Mr. Fisher, as if they belatedly realised they still had some principles. Disappointed, we reluctantly filed out of our waiting rooms and up to court again, carefully making sure not to get in the same lift as the opposition..

Judith Hibbins swore her oath on the bible, a clear, solid figure by comparison with Ms. Graver, her long hair black and definite. She sat only a few feet away from Fleur. It must have been difficult for both of

them, they had once been firm friends, and now every word Judith said would be a betrayal of that friendship and the two years they had worked together. But, I suppose, it had already been betrayed, and Judith could only carry on with the consequences of the course she had chosen. However much I longed for her to say that there never had been any fair and just reason to dismiss Fleur, I knew, realistically, she wouldn't.

And she didn't. She duly repeated her script under the promptings of the Predicasts barrister, telling the court that Fleur was a poor manager and an unapproachable person. It wasn't outright lying; there were elements of truth in the assessment, it was just that she mentioned only the negative aspects. I still remembered her telling me how well she and Fleur could work together. I remembered how much we all went through together, struggling to make sense of the company's changing and ambiguous requirements. But I suppose Judith has long since labelled those days as managerial inexperience.

In the afternoon, Fleur herself began on her evidence. I thought I would feel better, but instead the tension was worse as I sat there worrying in case she said the wrong thing, watching Predicasts' barrister making copious notes. Fleur spoke very slowly, dictating to the speed of the chairman's typewriter. There was another problem I hadn't anticipated. Boredom. We were going back through the same facts, dissecting the same documents as we'd gone over in the preceding two days, and the truth held far less surprises than Ms. Graver's fertile inventions!

I began to wish I was answering the questions instead of Fleur. I kept thinking of lovely phrases which would make everything crystal clear to the chairman.

Fleur's truth was still a bit biased, but it was better than Judith's, either of the Judiths. She didn't totally restrict herself to saying what would be good for her case. This, I believe, was a strength in her testimony, not a weakness, because in the end, the tribunal will have to decide not on the conflicting and confusing details, but on the story they believe.

The fourth and last day was the easiest. Both sides knew we would reach no conclusion. They had booked three more days for November, thinking two would do, but three would make sure of concluding, but as Mr. Fisher and Fleur set to work refuting the mass of evidence Ms. Graver had introduced in the first place, it was decided we had better book a fourth day for the next session!

I managed to withdraw slightly, taking one step backwards and ceasing to agonise over every word Fleur said. Besides the story was beginning to come out. Bit by bit, a truer picture was emerging as Fleur and Mr. Fisher worked their way through the minute details of the documents on hand. In the afternoon, Fleur truly got into her stride, as she worked her way to the core of the injustice, the three months of mental torture Graver put her through from August 1983 when she first announced out of the blue that Fleur's work was inadequate till the 28th October when she dismissed her. Fleur's account of the scene of dismissal was truly dramatic, not in a showy sense, but like the climax of a good epic poem; she narrated it all without the prop of Mr. Fisher's questioning, telling the story with the painful, precise accuracy of one who has lived and relived the scene many times in her memory, storing it up so that one day she would be able to stretch out her arms and say "This is what they did to me!" The chairman transcribed it all in silence. The only movement was in the Predicasts camp as Judith Graver whispered frantic explanations to the barrister.

If Fleur receives not a penny in compensation, I'm sure she will retain a cathartic satisfaction from that day she was allowed to tell her story. When we wrote the much discussed letter of the 22nd October 1982 we only wanted to state our case; we thought an unbiased observer from the U.S. management would vindicate us. We've been wanting to state it ever since. I think this, more than any personal loyalty, is why so many ex-Predicasts employees turned up to support Fleur. The question is, will this court prove any more responsive than the others' we've tried, or are we subconsciously attributing an immortal understanding to three slightly bored men whose honest desire to get to the bottom of things has been confused by a plethora of information.

AN INNOCENT ABROAD

or

WHAT THE NEOPHYTE SAW

by CHARLES STROSS

I'm still waiting for my new typewriter. Apparently they requisitioned the last one from the warehouse only to discover that when switched on the print head travelled the length of the carriage and made strange grinding noises more appropriate to a document shredder than a Brother electronic. So I still rely on my trusty Adler manual, and I can't use the text memory of the new machine to run off thirty or so copies of each page of my first fanzine yet - which is probably a Good Thing. I doubt my own experience, confined to collecting a lever-arch file full of rejection slips (or sometimes letters); where's the relevance of writing 80,000-word novels to fan-scrivening? So I'm cutting my teeth on your nerves, and serve you right for asking me to write something, Chris.

Funny things, word processors. "Jam tomorrow.." is my watchword, having trawled the market hopelessly. With limited finances I decided to buy a flash typewriter rather than a fly-by-night computer; if you define as a typewriter a creature that has text-editing facilities, a liquid-crystal display and accepts disk drives. Last year my photocopying bill came to something over half the cost of my present typewriter, and the servicing bill matched it; my idea is to do a rough draft on paper, correct it, transfer the corrections to the typewriter and make it print out two or more corrected drafts from its memory. In this way, I calculate that the horrendous cost of the Brother will be reclaimed in about five years. Might it work out that way? Not a hope - Parkinson's law extends to typewriters too, I think. 'You always want another copy...' - ever since my first machine died of metal fatigue twenty years after the spares bin ran dry I've been trying to temper my expectations of mortal machinery with realism, a.k.a. pessimism. And failing. I suppose these thoughts are coming out now, a kind of post mortem on the formative years of my writing, a meditation on how the machines in my life have influenced my life among the machines. Machines -

I'm a technophile. I adore my pocket calculator, venerate my Hi-Fi, and would quite willingly sacrifice virgins to a word processor - if I knew any. The mystique of the exotic attracted me to science fiction in my infancy - a causative influence was watching the Apollo 11 landing live at the age of four years. "What do you want to be when you grow up, Charlie?"; "An astronaut." (I regained hope when I heard about a certain U.S. senator.) Once in I was hooked; what surprises me is the length of time it took me to gravitate from merely trying to write the stuff to participating in the culture. So it happens that Yorkon III was my first con, and in my home town at that.

First things first. My badge - so I'm the Prisoner; WHO FORGOT TO GIVE ME A NUMBER, EH? Having got over my shock, I discovered the elevators at the Dragonara. Someone had labelled the wrong floors, and the designers had mis-
sed their vocation - designing free-fall simulators/centrifuges for NASA. What with the random number generator behind the buttons and the uncertain (but vast) quantities of cheap beer, I had some close encounters with what a certain pharmaceutical firm fondly refers to as 'gastroesophagal reflux' on the labels of their products. They shall remain nameless, unlike the hapless people I inflicted myself upon, leech-like: Malcolm Edwards only detached himself by the drastic expedient of telling me that last time an author handed him a manuscript at a con he left it in the bedroom, and anyway the postal strike had been called off. Alan Dorey was conducting a membership drive for Frank's, into which I narrowly missed being press-ganged (although subsequent events may

invert this solution, if I have the guts). Bernard Smith has evidently obtained the services of Bob Shaw for the second Cassandra Workshop - hopefully the real one. Accept no substitutes, as the enigmatic graffiti on the walls of the (ex-) Chelsea College encourages me. Hmm; all these peculiar people I'd read about (or occasionally met) - and I had to leave at nine thirty to be sure of getting a bus home! The injustice of it all.

Last things last (maybe - if you're lucky and I decide to let you off the hook, squirming). The title of the last issue of this fanzine - "...And the Rat's Revenge" - brings back vile memories. I will always associate rats - and their nefarious revenge - with the summer in which my first typewriter gracefully passed away with a twig-like snapping of elderly keys. I spent five eternal weeks between 'O' levels and sixth form herding rats for a pharmaceutical firm - three hundred and fifty of them. Rats are inquisitive, like people, and they'll try anything once. They hate rubber gloves. So you handle them bare-handed. Five to a cage they were, beady-eyes and bald-tailed, and each identified by a tell-tale nick in each ear. Every second day I had to pick up each and every rat in my bare hands, identify it, put it in a margarine tub on an electronic balance that flickered, and weigh it to the nearest gram.

Rats bite.

Rats scratch.

Rats jump out of margarine tubs and scuttle away.

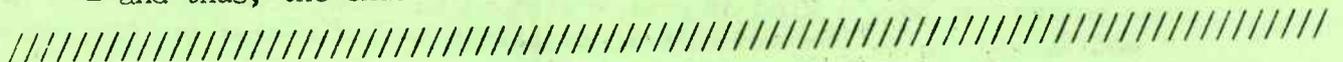
Rats are happily incontinent.

Rats...

It's enough to put you off rodents for life. Luckily the aversion therapy inherent in my situation - rats and typewriters - wasn't very effective, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this now. But the last thing I need is to read a certain trilogy by Frank Herbert...

There's a circularity to the above that I think I like. So this is just an attempt to spoil the symmetry; I think it would be rather unoriginal to end this screed at the last paragraph in the interests of a geometrical and abstract aesthete. Trust me to spoil things. Style is good; stylisation is the death of literature - at least for me. So I'm writing this in compensation for the nastier side of today; I learned that I failed a practical course in a vile and irrelevant subject that rejoices in the name of 'Pharmacognosy', from the lips of my beloved - whose bike was stolen while she was discovering my academic ineptitude. Thus leaving me speechless. 'That's right, take it out on your poor typewriter' I said to myself -

- and thus, the end.



Long time readers of my fanzines may remember how in the good old days it used to be brim full of exposes of my favourite television series, especially sci-fi 'classics', to the extent that I was even introduced on a panel as a media fan. So in the interest of the fanzine I thought I'd have a quick look at an episode of 'V' (I missed the original mega-series while I was away last summer) and assess its potential for put-down or two to keep up my media credibility. My sudden interest had of course no connection with Jenny Watson raving about Marc Singer's body in The Womens' Periodical whatsoever. I just need the odd page filler or two, that's all. (Bedfiller... now, who said that?) But the television gods are against me, after missing the first twenty minutes of the last episode of the Young Ones because I'd forgotten it was Monday and Peter-Fred had forgotten it started at 9.00 (the programme that is, Monday started at 7.30 worst luck), I turn eagerly to Channel 3 only to discover part three of an anonymous programme set in the home front World War 2. Is it another anniversary, or as seems more likely, has my inability to buy the TV Times lead me to miss all twelve episodes?

Well, there's nothing for it but to plunge into an in-depth analysis of 'Bleak House'. That book, or rather the programme of that book since I'm trying to talk of things media has such an intricate plot it makes the X?Men seem easy. It was fascinating watching it all unfold. But guess what, the very last episode we forgot all about it, and only remembered in time for the final ten minutes. Now you begin to see why I don't write about TV any more!

'Some day I'm gonna go away...' One day I did. This is the story of some of the things which happened to me last summer.

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o W A N D E R L U S T o
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Picture a girl sitting on her bedroom floor, surrounded by fanzines, comics and records, but staring into space, her eyes fixed on the spiderman poster on the wall, her mind fixed elsewhere... the romance of steamboats, the sigh of midnight trains in empty stations, the voyage out... From this bedroom, all the capitals of Europe feel the same, each name has a separate resonance, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Vienna, but a similar glamour. If she had an atlas she might play blind travel, open a page at random and place her finger on a spot. Dr. Doolittle got to the moon that way.

But we leave this girl stranded in time in her bedroom and travel blindly eastwards to Vienna, to early one hot summer morning when we watch another girl, slightly smelly & train-worn, her eyes heavy, standing bemused in the forecourt of the main railway station. As is her cautious way, she walks twice round the station looking for clues as to her best course of action before finally following the example of her peers and joining the queue in the travel agents. Her peers, though she hasn't quite taken in yet that they are her peers, all belong to the fellowship of the rucksack, and all have but one mutual language: English. This is a pity as she came here to learn German. But it's also reassuring, especially as the word 'Städtplan' is more than her abstractor's industrialised vocabulary can cope with at this juncture. Issued with the street map she retires to a bench to study it. It's only half past eight in the morning, she has time, or as she considers the 6 weeks virgin and empty ahead of her, maybe too much time.

Part 1: Some will pay for what others pay to avoid

The first week was the longest. Vienna was there, tantalisingly grand in the sunlight, but it was too hot to touch. When I came out of classes at mid-day - I was enrolled at the university summer school for foreigners - all I wanted was a cold shower and some shade to flop down in. I couldn't face the museums, the galleries, the hot stone streets. The evenings I sweated out in my heat-trap room, wondering if everyone else was out having fun. The weather broke at about the same time as my isolation. I gave up the unequal struggle to avoid the use of my mother tongue, a course which involved going around with a group of Italian girls, whom I soon found preferred to converse in Italian rather than struggle away at the German, and though they readily applauded my correct use of Italianism like 'ciao' and 'finito' I couldn't help feeling I was missing out on most of the conversation. Besides, I longed for the opportunity to talk freely, to get away from sounding like a retarded infant and say something of substance. So I joined the classes 'English community, which consisted of three girls from Manchester university, and a namesake of mine from Warwick university (where I studied), who professed to be interested in writing. The other Christna, as I mentally referred to her, was despite these coincidences not a bit like me. She was histrionic, simultaneously mature and childish, and frequently wouldn't stop talking. The other girls were less complicated; so like the language students I'd known in the past, or maybe like my current friends before we all grew neurotic and cynical.

The next three weeks passed quickly in a round of visiting museums, palaces, and baroque churches, eating apfelstrudel and going to 'heurigers', little wine gardens on the outskirts of the city. The baroque churches were everywhere. I soon developed a love-hate relationship with them. I thought they were gruesome and totally secular, but continued to visit them obsessively as if to prove a case against Austrian taste. But where the Baroque repelled in churches it was appropriate and even admirable in the palaces. Wherever a Hapsburg had once lodged, there sprang up a gorgeous, gilded stateroom fit for gawping at by

tourists as they were processed through the bedrooms, presence chambers and stairs at top speed to keep one step ahead of the next tour. In the end, one began to pity the Hapsburgs living in these great corridors of rooms so heavy, formal and public that perhaps after all they were content to retire to their ugly black coffins of iron in the vaults of one of Vienna's churches.

In the last week the sun returned and there was a flurry of desperate sun-bathing, accompanied by intermittent wasp stings and a constant countdown to the hour of departure. It would be wrong to say my English friends weren't enjoying themselves, but they hadn't come to Vienna entirely out of choice. Their universities had sent them and their boyfriends, fiances and families were awaiting them faithfully at home, except for Carolyn's who was sending himself bit by bit through the postal system and down the telephone. Finally it was a relief to see them leave; they were making me homesick by contagion and I could manage that quite well enough on my own.

So it was goodbye Vienna, goodbye Rathaus with the spires and the red flowers along the window ledges, goodbye ice cream shop where you got three flavours for only six shillings, goodbye homely microcosmic MY world of four weeks standing.

I set out for Prague, my next destination, frankly scared but determined to get there, convinced there would be some complication over my visa or changing money, convinced I wouldn't find anywhere to stay. I was wrong as usual; the hardest part was procuring a street map where there's no friendly tourist information or travel agents and the magic lingua franca English suddenly ceases to work. Where were my peers when I needed them?

I stayed in the Royal Hotel which had seen better days but now kept its clients awake with discos. The first morning I passed the maids cleaning the patch of carpet where someone had thrown up. Oh, the degenerate West! Outside Prague was golden and lovely, truly for me a city of perpetual sunshine. It was pleasant to wander around in, to look out across the river to the old town and the hills or to cross the Charles bridge and stop by the religious statues (art heritage, I suppose, to the government) to read the inscriptions in Latin which suddenly seemed such a friendly language after the alien Czech of the city. But I never stopped feeling uneasy. The first evening I walked around for over two hours looking for somewhere informal to eat; but all the informal places sold only drinks or ice cream. Finally in desperation I summoned the courage to enter one of the real restaurants; up two flights of stairs to a starchy, old fashioned room with white tablecloths and chandeliers. Only the clientele, as in the hotel, betrayed that we were all playing games, they were just people on holiday like me, not the people the restaurant was built to serve. To complete the sense of unreality and playacting, it happened that I was addressing the waiters in German, partly through habit and partly because it somehow made me feel less vulnerable to pretend I was something other than I was, one English woman alone in the city.

For all the loveliness of the city, after two nights there I was glad to leave. I felt very inadequate and vulnerable, I couldn't even count to three in the language, nor pick out words on the signs like I was later to do in Italy and the Netherlands. Something in the atmosphere of the city made me feel uneasy, the pretence at being a Western-style tourist centre coupled badly with the somewhat restrictive reality of the place and the men on the street corners offering to change your Western currency. Buying a ticket out was difficult too because tickets to the west could only be bought in one office which closed for the weekend at 12.30 on Saturday. Leaving Czechoslovakia proved more difficult still, or at least more time-consuming. Before I set out I thought that the eight hours the timetable gave for the journey from Prague to Nuremburg must be an oversetimate, as the geographical distance was no longer than from Vienna to Prague which had taken about six hours. What I had forgotten was the political distance symbolised by the Czech-German border. There the train waited while passports and visas were checked, money changed at unrealistic rates and the train searched for refugees.

When we finally crossed the German border, hearing the smiling Bavarian customs officer say 'Grüss Gott', it felt like I'd come home. When I reached Nuremburg and saw the Burger King and Macdonalds I knew I had. I booked in at the lovely modern hostel in the old centre of the city without any difficulty.

It was nearly nine and I was starving. Just outside on a little square was a pizza place, I strolled in confidently and ordered a lasagne. It seemed like the nicest thing I'd eaten for weeks.

Part 2: On the trail of the great European interrail experience

Safely in Nuremburg I began on a new phase of my travels, a phase which finally brought me into closer contact with the peers I mentioned, the rucksack fraternity, and turned me from the sort of honorary local I'd been in Vienna to a real tourist.

Nuremburg wasn't as I'd expected. The name had all sorts of Nazi associations in my mind - rallies, concentration camps, pogroms - and it was quite a shock to my expectations to find it as pretty a German town as one could wish, complete with castle, meandering river and those half-timbered houses from German fairy tales. No trace of horror.

By the afternoon I'd almost exhausted its points of interest, especially as all the museums and galleries were shut (Monday seemed to be museum closing day throughout Germany and Austria). Then I went to the post office and had a brilliant idea, so simple and brilliant I could scarcely credit it. I would look up my friend Robert in the local telephone directory. Robert lived in Fürth, a kind of sub-conurbation of Nuremburg. That much I knew, but for some reason I'd never transferred his particulars to my new address book, and so had thought, annoyed with myself, that I couldn't contact him. But the simple and brilliant idea worked, for there he was, the only Driver in the directory. I rang him up there and then.

"Hello, Robert. It's Christina. Guess where I am."

"Not here in Krautland, by any chance."

"Yes, in Nuremburg."

"Oh, shit!"

After Robert had conveyed other expressions of his surprise and delight, we arranged a rendez-vous for that evening. Robert looking broader, surlier and more disreputable than I remembered him, picked me up at the hostel and persuaded me to go over to Fürth for a Deutsche-Amerikanische evening, a social event designed to palliate antagonisms between locals and the American service men stationed there.

"It'll be a good atmosphere," Robert promised. "Last year there was a fun-fair, music, exotic food and lots of good bevy. You'll like it."

This was unusually close to enthusiasm for Robert, who likes to maintain a cynical profile, rather reminiscent of D. West, until he's got a pint or two inside him.

We travelled out on the local underground, just missed a bus connection and ended up walking through the American sector of Fürth, full of dubious bars and English cinemas. Robert pointed out the bar he normally frequented, then added that he wouldn't take me in there as I'd probably get picked up as a prostitute.

"Oh, so that's why you go there?" I asked archly.

"No," said Robert. "It's the only place that still gives me credit."

After quite a long walk we reached the area where we ought to have seen signs of things happening. Robert began to look worried.

"There were a lot more people around last year," he said. I could believe that. There were no lights, no action, nothing but a dark, locked hall.

"It must be the wrong week," Robert admitted finally, feebly.

The whole area was dead, apart from the prostitute bar, and we had no choice but to trudge back to the station and return to Nuremburg, one of us very hungry and the other very embarrassed. We salvaged the remains of the evening with ice cream and alcohol, to a running commentary from Robert on the extortionate tourist prices.

"Shut up," I told him. "I only changed my money yesterday and I don't know what it's worth. Don't disillusion me."

So we switched to the equally disillusioning subjects of the dying forests of Central Europe, the ill feeling in Germany over the news that Britain was spending more on the Falkland Islands than it puts into the EEC and the iniquities of the German government.

My general travel plan from Nuremburg was to head South back to Austria and eventually Italy. My choice of itinerary was determined by two factors: where the train went and where I could find decent sized hostels (as a sop to my neurotic conviction that the hostels would all be booked up). Otherwise it was pot luck. Regensburg, my next stop, was a dump. The train passed through some good scenery before pulling in at the station, but there it ran out rapidly, ousted by factories and goods yards. True, there was a cathedral with a big hole in the floor where the pews should have been, several Baroque churches and even that sine qua non of any decent town, a river, but the sun had deserted me and I'd seen all this medievalism done better in England. The hostel was a dump too, or at least a come-down from the professional luxury establishment of Nuremburg. The warden didn't turn up on time when he did, he couldn't get his flash cash-desk computer to work. We hung around in various states of impatience, amusement and incredulity, watching him press buttons, consult manuals, then finally drag a woman out of the kitchen to help. Miraculously, half an hour later, they had it going. I'd already decided that one night in Regensburg would suffice.

Passau, my next target, I'd feared might be a dump too, but being almost, very nearly, in Austria, it wasn't. (You could tell it was practically Austria by the way there was no street map in the station.) The sun had come out again, the river dominated and trisected the town, hills rose steep and forested on the farthest bank and the cathedral was not Gothic like the ones at home, but straight and painted, with onion shaped domes. I was favourably impressed, but first I had to work out how to find the hostel. A 20 minute walk my handbook said. I followed a sign to Veste Oberhaus, the only significant piece of address the hostel had, and soon found myself climbing a very steep hill. Shortly thereafter I passed signs indicating I'd just left Passau; I began to wonder. Pausing for breath and to admire the view, I reconsidered, and decided, signpost or no signpost, this was probably the wrong way. Then I saw two cyclists, a thin, pretty girl and a boy with punk leathers and hair cut, laboriously pushing their bikes up the hill.

"Is this the way to the hostel?" I asked in my best German.

"Oh yes," the girl assured me. "That's the way we're going."

So, I fell into step with them. The girl was finding pushing her bicycle hard work, but this didn't stop her from talking. She carried out the conversation for the three of us, first telling me about the boy, a taciturn anglophile she'd met on the road, then telling the boy about me. There was something surreal and ethereal about her, so I was not entirely surprised, as we struggled up the track some passing farmer had directed us on to, when she began asking me about my philosophy of life and whether I found life worthwhile. I tried to look wise and tell her that that was what being on the road was all about and give the impression I was on some profound search for truth, not just youth-hostelling, but it all sounded even triter and less plausible in German than when it first crawled into my mind in English. Especially as I knew that Ethereal worked with down and outs in Munich; I had the impression she saw too much real futility and depression to be deceived by platitudes.

Suddenly we reached a road, and Punk pointed out a distant building. It wasn't the hostel; it was the house of a friend, which apparently he had been looking for all along. Ethereal meanwhile mentioned casually that she was off to set campsite in much the same direction. They headed off with a nonchalant indication that the hostel was up the road the other way, leaving me standing in the middle of nowhere, gaping stupidly "but I thought that you were going to the hostel too..."

I walked and walked along the unpromising country road, looking at the occasional houses for any sign of a hostel, feeling less and less confident. Finally I found a coach party, a view, a fortress and an observatory. It was only when I decided to go and ask directions of the staff at the fortress museum that I discovered that the fort ess was the hostel. It had taken me an estimated two hours to get there. Only later did I discover where I had gone wrong. To get down to the town, you take steps and paths straight down the clifflike hillside. The sign I had been following was for the road way round for cars. Or bicycles.

After I had booked in, signing up in the copious ledger kept meticulously and efficiently by a local Bavarian Führer (no electronics here), I came out and saw Ethereal sitting on the hostel wall, talking with some of the girls who had been waiting around when I first arrived. She called out to me, but I wanted to get settled into my dorm before I forgot the bunk number allocated me by the Führer. When I came out later, Ethereal was gone.

The next day I pressed on to Salzburg, determined to get there before the weekend in the faint hope that I might beat the other tourists to it. Not a chance! It was full choc-a-bloc with Americans. I walked two kilometers to the hostel, across the river, past a small mountain or two and into the tourist rip-off zone, aka the old town - a mere stroll compared to the previous day's excursion. When I reached the hostel I felt so exhausted and fed up with hulking the rucksack around all the time I simply lay down and booked in for four nights, rationalising that if I didn't I would end up in the back of some beyond on Sunday with nothing to eat or do.

In Salzburg the rot definitely set in. I stopped speaking German and began consorting with my transatlantic peers. The first night I had a long, dreamy conversation with a Canadian girl who had been to Egypt alone for a month and was living out the philosophy I had only tentatively expressed: work as a necessary evil to finance new travels, not a way of life. Then there were Jean and Nancy from Pennsylvania who ended up having a row over their shared bar of soap, and split up, one to take the night train to Zurich and the other heading off north to Paris (moral: never share the soap!). And there was the Jewish-American lawyer who illegally shared wine with me in the hostel dorm while she explained how she'd lost the friends she'd come all the way to Europe to meet up with. They'd arranged to rendez-vous at the Salzburg youth hostel, not realising there were four of them!

For one short day Salzburg was idyllic and sunny. I even went swimming, though it had to be managed in short bursts and with me bobbing up at frequent intervals to check that no-one was running off with my bag. The next day I took a bus out to the lakes, Sound of Music country, and the sky turned from grey and threatening to active and wet. Crouching on the edge of a campsite to eat my sandwiches in the rain was not my idea of fun, so I caught the next bus back to Salzburg. By this time I was beginning to go off the place - I'd had two arguments in two separate bakers' shops - once because they'd overcharged me and once because they were trying to rip me off. The amounts in question were trivial, I just didn't like the attitude that because you were a foreign tourist you'd pay anything they said. On Sunday it rained all day. The hostel turned us out from nine to eleven and those two hours I spent visiting churches and going to mass, mostly simultaneously. I'd never been more grateful for organised religion! On the stroke of eleven, me and a stream of other wet hostellers were back banging on the hostel door. I spent the rest of the day reading the American novel I'd cadged from Nancy and Jean before they split up.

Monday morning and I was raring to be on the road again (why doesn't on the rails have the same ring to it?). The train took me through some of the best scenery I saw all trip. I'd deliberately taken the slow, stopping train so as not to pay a supplement, and was rewarded with a comfortable, uncrowded carriage and a magical unfolding view of mountains, rocks, gorges, streams and bright blue lakes. Besides I was in no hurry. It would probably only be raining when I reached Zell-Am-See. Sure enough, low clouds covered the mountains round the lakeside as I walked along the path to the hostel. The swirling cotton wool occasionally parted to give tantalising glimpses of the rock beneath then floated back. Every so often it drizzled a bit, but only half-heartedly. What I didn't realise was that the rain was saving itself for the evening. I was caught in it in the middle of town as I wandered around with two Americans from the hostel, and we sheltered on the post-office steps where we sat eating chocolate, drinking wine and swapping travel stories. The rain showed no sign of stopping, so at last we walked back round the lake, slopping through the puddles in the dark, chased onwards by the lightening at our back.

The next day I went on to Innsbruck which I liked immensely. Along by the river it looked like a real mountain village straight out of Heidi, and in the centre it was old and interesting. There I discovered Club Innsbruck, a wonderful tourist amenity available to anyone staying there three days or

 * THE READERS' REVENGE *

Or the latest in a long line of totally unpretentious titles for the letter column, none of which I can remember!!!

(sorry, Mal!)

The great problem with letter columns is knowing where to begin. Most editors seem to plunge in 'in media res', leaving you to sink or swim as you desperately grasp for context. This may be a consequence of selecting the strongest letter to open with - the one that begins 'I thoroughly sympathised with your views on baby-snatching and was SHOCKED and HORRIFIED at that awful experience you related in such vivid detail. I think this is a matter which deeply concerns all of fandom etc. etc.' It normally leaves me with the sinking feeling I never actually got around to reading the last issue, or that they're all talking about that article at the end that I never read because the back page fell off and I lost it. So, there's nothing to do but start skipping, and once I've started skipping it's hard to stop. I can quite happily do my getting through the letter column in two minutes. flat act, then sit back and think, well, that wasn't very exciting then! The only thing liable to halt my break-neck gallop down the page is a letter from someone I know quite well, or from some reliable crowd pleaser like Nigel Richardson or Mal Ashworth. Which brings me to the second approach to starting the letter column. Big names. The this week's star letter comes from ~~dara~~! Walt Willis ploy, then you herd all the lesser names into a corner and ~~you~~ there you have it, one successful letter column! Providing you've received any star quality locs. The final approach, which for the sake of convenience I shall call the Joy Hibbert method, though many others use it, is to name the theme and then reproduce in a fairly random order nearly every letter on the subject. This has the benefit of ensuring that even new readers soon know what we're talking about as they wade bravely through the topic - even skimmers like me may be defeated by the sheer weight of the material into assimilating a thought or two on the theme - but often has the serious drawback that every last word on the subject gets printed even if it's only to say that someone liked the article or to repeat a point made by previous writers. It's more like mailing comments in an apa, where people often do simply say they like something, and even more frequently end up responding to a particular contribution in the same way as everyone else (there's a peculiar form of tropism that leads everyone independently to be talking about the same not necessarily outstanding point, I've noticed).

By now you might be wondering how on earth (and, indeed, whether) I'm going to start this letter column, except that you, unlike me, can glance down the page and satisfy your curiosity. Having dismissed all the sensible approaches, I can see there's only one thing left for it: lucky dip! First out of the hat we have NIGEL RICHARDSON (ooh, you big cheat, Christina Lake, it wasn't Nigel at all, it was...). All right, cancel that, first out REALLY, was PETER SMITH ((so I shall vanish into double brackets and leave the page to him))

This is an epistolary of reflections on 'Snails Countdown and the Rat's Revenge' ((Look, context! What more could you want!)) Cover title great. I don't know what Racinian unities are (Racine of Phaedra?) ((yes)) so I won't expose them but to appear in your WAHF summary would be another step for me up the ladder of fandom and eternally grateful should be I. ((and so you should be. Take him to the WAHF pit slaves - no wait a minute, he has something nice to say about the fanzine article Simon Ounsley rejected!)) Fry, Sizzle and Crawl. Brilliant. I liked this. The highlight of this zine. Some paragraphs of this piece flowed very well - particularly the paragraph beginning 'The bus from Salisbury' ((Must look up which that one was some time!)) Part of my interest in writing is to achieve: levels of meaning/pattern/depth in English. Ever since my father introduced me to haikus I have been fascinated by them.

((for more synthaesia and experimental lay-out (genuine that is, and not just typing errors) see Peter's own fanzine Illyria.))

((Second out and perhaps the strangest letter I received last time is the following, strange not least because I was half way down the second side before I worked out who it was from - the signature was illegible. Internal evidence though showed it came from Roger Weddall and it began like this:))

How's things with you then? I just had a read of your latest fanzine and am writing to say hello and just talk about things such as - I don't know if you'll take this remark well or not, but congratulations (I think) on yours being the first fanzine I've read (part of) while stoned.

I thought that I'd pretty much left things like drugs of this sort behind a few years ago, but just recently I've come back to them and so here I am commenting on a first for me - reading while stoned. I tried it for the first time about a month ago when I quite by accident picked up a Van Vogt book (of all things) and found myself literally swimming in a kaleidoscopic sea of adjectives and nouns dealing with such things as space warps, time lines and all sorts of mind-bending stuff that normally nowadays is taken by me whole, mentally in huge scoops, much like some once favourite flavour of ice-cream that now seems ordinary and somewhat bland. Yes, I still have a sense of wonder (you bet) but it normally takes more than Van Vogt to excite it nowadays. Stoned, Van Vogt still doesn't say anything much but boy does he do it colourfully.

But onto your comments in summary of Seacon '84, and my reaction to them. Seems to me that you write reasonably incisively and concisely, summing up people's disaffection with the con rather better than did anyone manage here in the various post mortems on our most recent ((presumably one before last)) Natcon, 'Eurekacon'. But it was not your con commentary that tripped me up mentally but the mention of the beaches - ah, the beach - nice things to lie on, and at Brighton you've the wonderful sound of the sea shifting the pebbles along. I remember when I was in Brighton I spent lots of time sitting on the cliffs-edge, entranced by the rasping, grating sound of black rocks meeting blue water - and no drugs in those days (in case you wondered), just the pebbles and the sea. Lovely place Brighton.

((I was going to go on and quote Roger on the small-mindedness of some people in fandom, but on the whole, after all last years TAFF fiascos it doesn't really need saying, so on to a new subject from the editor of the 'big in Glasgow' fanzine Mince, IAN SORENGON))

I'm constantly fascinated by the reviews of Mince that keep appearing. Nobody comes right out and says they're rubbish, which is fair enough as they do have certain editorial standards, but all reviewers recognise there's something not quite right about them. I think you're closest when you say I'm not fascinated by the concept of fanzines. You also spotted that they don't have anything to say - you missed out the point that despite not having anything to say, they insist on saying it!

I thoroughly enjoyed your Seaconrep - possibly more than Seacon. I must say I hadn't realised you had to rehearse for the orgy scene. I only hope you didn't have to audition for it as well! I think the writing style you adopted for it was ^{readable} more than for either of the Holiday Supplement pieces. If I had the time I'd try rewriting the conrep I did for Jim Barker in a flagrant copy of your style. You should have been at the Bedford hotel - there the breakfasts were just like you imagined the Metropole ones to be. The famous Five would be hard put to finish off a breakfast in the Bedford.

The twelfth century hagiography almost had me fooled for the first twenty lines or so, but remember, I was reading it at 4am the day after Tynecon so my wits, such as they are, were not fully collected. I hate to say it, being your oldest and most ardent fan, but it wasn't as good as the other histories. I get the feeling that the 12th century has been milked dry. I only say this in the hope that you'll be encouraged to move on to the 13th or better still, 16th century where you can give the lowdown on Will Shakespeare's fanwriting before he turned pro. Was Columbus the first TAFF winner? What made Caxton want to pub his ish? I feel you are the one to tell us.

((No, no, I think hasn't James Burke just done a whole series on the subject? My historical analyses will resume when I've learnt some more history, though

there will be at least one man to mourn the passing of the 12th century -
PASCAL THOMAS))

Just finished the Snail. True enough, neither me nor the old Jansenist from Clermont-Ferrand ever loosed Problem Child. What about your favourite time, for instance, le douzieme? As usual, I found "Testament of Chaos" the best part of the zine. It's decided: I shall forthwith devote my life to an illuminated fannish reprint (on quarto sheepskin) of your works on the twelfth century.

((Hey, thanks! I shall look forward to it. But, what about the mathematics?))

More seriously, I really enjoyed the description you make of what's going on, back at the old job. Making a career sounds dull and boring, or rather too tiring for my taste and nocivious to fanac, but in the long run I wonder if it is not worth it, after all, to avoid getting stuck in dead end jobs. Jobs do take an awful part of our waking time. A sad state of affairs.

Which brings me right over to the points you make in your zine column, about personal writing vs elegant, humourous fluff. I would side with the fluff. Maybe because I try to write humourous fluff and always end up churning out graceless personal bitching. But try as I might, I could not enjoy Dragonbreath. Your stuff, though, I do. Probably then I have to have minimal acquaintance with the writer, on a personal basis, before I can enjoy his personal writing. Or maybe he/she has got to be good enough: we all know Langford can get away with publishing his shopping lists...

((There was a rather insolent P.S. to Pascal's letter:- 'Holiday supplement received. I looked at the pictures.' These French, think they can get away with anything!

Talking of Dragonbreath, I have just unearthed a very crumpled letter from OSCAR DALGLEISH which looks as if it must have gone half way round Europe with me, and indeed probably did...))

While I tarried many times over your kind words on the subject of DB, therin to gain strength for the days ahead, I must say that I was extremely impressed by your piece, "One Day, I'm Going..." Maybe part of my enthusiasm for it was based on the fact that I'm having to look seriously at what I want to do with my life just now myself, and, judging from the thought, both that went into the article, and behind the giving up of your job, you are obviously not rushing into this thing without thinking out the consequences of your actions. Because of this, I think you are probably doing the right thing, even if at first it doesn't feel that way.

((Actually, I had no doubts for the first few months that I'd done the right thing, it's only recently as the novelty begins to wear off, that I'm starting to wonder what the hell I should do next. But I expect I'll think of something!))

As to travelling, do not be afraid to go off on your own. Often it is in this way that you meet people whom you will never forget, as I did in Hong Kong, on my lonesome, about two years ago, or probably longer, now that I think.

((I noticed that as soon as I started travelling around with Peter-Fred, I stopped encountering people - simply because having company already I didn't spend nearly so much time hanging around by myself. I didn't have to. But I don't think any encounter ever made up for lack of permanent company.

Also on the subject of travel and adventures, here is MARGARET HALL))

I wish I'd travelled more, but the trouble is I want to do EVERYTHING. I want to be famous, to have a career, to have a family, to write, to go to sf conventions, to... But sadly, it's only too obvious that it's completely impossible to do half of what I'd like. I know what you mean about your younger self being more adventurous. Or rather, your younger self reckons that, when you get old enough to do adventurous things, you'll be far more adventurous than you actually are by the time you get to that age. Did that make sense? The crunch came for me when I thought I was being offered the chance to sail the Atlantic in a (fairly) small catamaran. My younger self would have reckoned I should have leapt at the chance. What I actually felt was GULP!!!! And I dithered. What happened was Graham (at the time a brand new fiance) had taken me to see his best friend Tim. Now Tim earned his living

by delivering boats. He had sailed regularly to Spain and even Greece - single handed often, in boats never designed for ocean going as their new owners had bought them to potter round the coast in. Tim had had the idea - inspired by Graham's fascination for Peru - of building a boat, sailing the Atlantic, finding some Inca ruins and smuggling the gold (or failing that something else lucrative) back to England and making our fortunes. Now I didn't know at that time that Tim was always having schemes to make money, some wilder than others. All I saw was that he had the plans of a catamaran on the table in front of him, that he had rented a shed in which to build it, that he had navigation charts for the route, that he was going to see the bank manager about a loan to buy materials. And I thought GULP!!! Graham seemed keen on the venture. It seemed my brand new fiance was likely to disappear over the ocean. And I didn't know if I was courageous (or stupid enough) to go with him. I suppose it's to my credit that I didn't dismiss the idea out of hand, because I didn't like it one little bit. However I was saved by the bank manager. You see, Tim couldn't explain to him that the purpose of the voyage was to smuggle back gold or drugs to pay for the venture, so the bank manager refused him a loan, on the grounds that it seemed unlikely that he'd get the money back. So I wasn't forced to decide whether to go with Graham or wait for him to come back - if he came back - the project was abandoned. PHEW!!!

((Peru by catamaran - crazy! But Peru by any other method, sigh! - (Since taking up O level Spanish I've been heard to sigh every time anybody mentions going anywhere where they speak Spanish.) MAUREEN PORTER also wonders if she's as adventurous as she'd like to be...))

I've often dreamed of really getting away, travelling, free-lancing, but I've no motivation to actually do it, the ties here are now too strongly forged, and I've no skills to sell. I'm probably frightened as well if I did but admit it, which I won't. I'm still trying to grasp the fact that I chucked Foreign Accessions - you'd have recognised the situation there, incidentally. I'm not used to a temporary, short-term existence, either in terms of housing or employment. I've been spoiled really. I probably have the mental papproach to independence, but do I have the practical approach? I suspect not, which is worrying for someone of my age. Good grief, I've never even had a holiday all on my own.

((It can be fun to move around, but I'm beginning to feel I'm taking it to extremes. It'd be nice to stay over a year in one place!

DARROLL PARDOE too seems to have recognised the situation I described in my office last time (depressingly, a lot of people seemed to).))

I especially liked your account of life at Predicasts. As you know, I once worked for Derwent Publications, who abstracted & coded patents in a rather similar manner. We too had a complex coding system which took people some time to learn and which some people never did manage to comprehend completely. I was in charge of the chemical coding department, with 7 or 8 people, and I was lucky in my immediate superiors, who knew how to manage properly - i.e. they left us alone so long as things were running well, and gave a nudge if something seemed to be going wrong, if possible well before it was beyond easy correction. No, our main bugbear was the Boss, the managing director. He had founded the company in the early fifties, initially by sitting in the patent office library all day and copying out the details of the new patents. As the company had grown its operations had grown more complex, and though he only owned a 20% interest when I was there (having sold the rest to the Thomson organisation) he remained in charge of operations. The trouble was he still tried to run the place as though it only had half a dozen employees instead of 250. He would conceive an idea and it would immediately have to be put into operation, whatever the cost to other things people might be doing. Once he had an idea for a new sort of explanatory brochure for customers, and I got landed with the tedious job of sticking bits of paper on to A3 sheets ready for the printers - not very demanding work, and it took me away from everything else for three days.

((It sounds like Predicasts had the opposite problem to your place - a company of a dozen employees run as if there were 250!))

Our managing director was a great one for silly rules, too. One day a directive came round that we were being too familiar with one another, and in future must all address our workmates by surname only. Needless to say this was totally ignored except when the boss was in the room! And another memo laid down that all male staff must wear ties at work. I obliged, but wore the tie under a sweater so that it couldn't be seen. He never complained, but I think he regarded me as odd, anyway. I know he didn't like my hair a bit. It was browner then than it is now, and quite a lot longer. He was going to send me to the USA visiting customers once, which I rather looked forward to because I could visit fans in the evenings - but then, after all the visas and so on were arranged and the plane tickets booked he told me I'd have to cut my hair before I could go. This I didn't like at all so I told him I wouldn't. I missed out on the trip but he never said another word about it and my career in the company never seemed to suffer.

((One of the silliest memos we had at Predicasts was one one Christmas to the effect that we must not give each other Christmas cards. I don't think the idea was bad in itself, but put in a memo it came over as petty and unpleasant. Darroll goes on to talk about some of the interesting characters in his coding department...))

There was Ian, who spent all his spare time rebuilding a 14th century timber-framed house, a listed building he'd been given by a farmer who wasn't allowed to destroy it but wanted it off his land. There was Ivy, who had a huge hoard of Mars bars in all 3 drawers of her desk, and spent most of her time at work nibbling them. There was Sidonie, who got into all sorts of scrapes - she was the most anecdote-worthy of them all, I think. She once conceived a child while lying in a bath at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford, which sounds a rather uncomfortable thing to do (I think it was an ordinary hotel bath, not a huge multi-person one with a jacuzzi such as you sometimes see in films).

((Just as well Mexican never ended up in the Randolph! Just think of it, all those fans innocently taking baths...))

I think now could be the time to embark on a fully annotated loc from one NIGEL E. RICHARDSON. Any missing notes indicate editorial excisions, carelessness, or irritation with the whole business. Here goes...))

Welcome to the land of self-imposed unemployment. Hints from Uncle Nigel: Keep your sense of humour, don't lose your temper in DHSS queues and remember all the tax and NI you and your family have paid will probably exceed what you'd get in dole if you were unemployed for the next 20 years. DO NOT LIE IN BED AFTER NINE A.M. - this is the secret of surviving unemployment, in my opinion. Oh, and pace yourself, don't try to do all those things you've vowed to do since you started work in one day (1). That'll be five pounds, next!

Don't stop putting out fanzines, whatever you do! Not merely because you print even my silliest loc (2) but because I like the way you mix comic and revelatory stuff without blurring the edges as I do. Comparing your Some day I'm gonna go away... with those "appalling picaresque adventures" in my zine, A Case of the Shi(f)ts, shows that you can deal with horrible experiences without playing up the laughs, or - alternately - making it a real drudge to read. I hope someone somewhere will write a fanzine article telling how much they enjoy their job...

I've always wanted to bum around Europe like you plan to, but I'm too disorganised to survive. I got on the wrong train coming back from Mexican! I got from Newcastle to York okay (mainly by following Steve Green and Paul Vincent) but - a mere dozen or so miles from Garforth - I got on the Sheffield train instead of the Leeds one... Thus my 20 minute trip through picturesque countryside turned into a four hour journey to hell on a train filled with drunks with nosebleeds, screaming children and a bunch of women from just outside Barnsley that even Joy Hibbert would call "stupid cows" who seemed

unable to comprehend that it is possible to talk to the person next to them without screaming themselves hoarse... Just another "appallingly picaresque adventure", I guess.

Shall I give one of my erudite quotations?(5) You might find this one pretty useful when people ask you why you quit your job:

'There is a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go.' Tennessee Williams, Camino Real, 1953.

It's a great conversation stopper that one; I've got a good deal of mileage out of it...

Onto SLUGS (6). I bet you didn't know that slugs were only given the name of slugs in 1704? You'd expect "a slow lazy fellow" to be called a slug in comparison with the slimy gastropod, but in fact slug was used as an unkind epithet 300 years before anyone thought of giving this name to those obscene critters.

A VOICE: So what were slugs called before 1704?

I dunno. It's always been a source of puzzlement for me wondering what things were called before they were called what they're called.

Another is... well, look

WINTER	- first mention in OED = 888 (wintra)
SPRING(8)	1547
SUMMER	825 (sumur)
AUTUMN(9)	1374 (Autumpne)

I always assumed they came into being at the same time. Fascinating eh? No? Please yourself...

Notes

1. I've still to open the collected works of Tobias Smollett that I bought the day I left BT.
2. Discounting those to Glen Warming, Chuck Connor, Lilian etc.
5. You have no choice really, kiddo.
6. This is not a command.
7. Slight exaggeration here.
8. Known as LENTEN between 1000 and 1310.
9. No idea what Autumn was called before this.
((And now for all you Nigel completists, the missing footnotes!))
3. Ha ha ha.
4. Portable manual typer trouble.
10. Letters with footnotes are this week's thing.
((From which you should be able to reconstruct the rest of the text and place an accurate date on the letter. Aren't I good to you? Coming next issue - Nigel's shopping list (written in conjunction with Dave Langford)

Now, to change the subject completely, PHIL PROBERT has a few boasts to make about Birmingham's top radio station...))

In Birmingham we have a local radio station called BMB. It has the worse D.J.s I have ever heard. Les Ross is the morning presenter and BMB claims that he is'nuttier than muesli and crisper than toast'. Listening to static is far more interesting than Les Ross. Then there is Tony Butler the sports presenter. Much has been said about this guy by Jasper Carrott. Recently in a phone-in, someone called to say that Tony was being a bit unfair by calling Aston Villa a bunch of puffters. All Tony could say was piss off, we don't want that sort of crap. And then told him to listen to another radio station if he wanted to hear how good Villa were.

The problem line is another classic late on Sunday night where people phone in with their problems. The D.J. just listens and gives no advice whatsoever.

"My wife is dead, I've just killed her because we had an argument."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"I phoned you to find out."

"Well, I really feel you shouldn't have done it in the first case."

"I know that but what can I do now?"

"We will now take a commercial break."

((Anything you say, Phil. The happy fan is the one who reads THIS NEVER HAPPENS, for fast action, comic relief subscribe now! And while you're about it why don't you buy your granny a BSFA membership for her birthday. Back to you Phil;))

CONFESSION TIME

Bunice loves Sons & Daughters. I hate it. When ever it is on she stops whatever she is doing and sits silently watching. I don't mind that much but when the Young Doctors comes on, I flee for the toilet to be sick.

Have you noticed how many times we are reminded that soap operas are just fantasy? We are told that the people we see on television in Dallas and Dysentry are pure fiction and there is no-one in the world like them. We all know this but why are we reminded.

((So that we don't try to copy any of their stunts without the correct training, I might be tempted to say. (In fact, I was; so tempted that I even typed it down) Hell, I even I have days when I wish I could be a young, rich American tart!

JOY HIBBERT has seen the Young Doctors too...))

It seems to have a lot of characters and a lot of problems. I don't watch it very often so I haven't been able to dissect it, but one particular woman seems to get all the trouble. She's a widow, working in the office at the hospital. Her daughter, when I first watched it, was going out with a married man whose wife had just been in an accident. He felt obliged to go back to her. Her son was in a rock band with someone called Georgie Saint. Georgie took to having fainting fits on stage, due to ear problems, due to being a rock musician. His agent was very abusive, Georgie had the "I'm Georgie Saint I can get away with anything" attitude, and the widow's son had to mediate. I watched an episode last week: the boy had broken his back, his girlfriend was professing eternal love and asking his mother to stay away in order to give her more time with him. His mother was trying to make the girl understand that he would never get better, but to no avail.

((It sounds like an average day on Simon Bates' our tune to me. How come no-one writes in analysing Grange Hill instead of all these soap operas I don't watch? Joy goes on to refute my theory that duplicated fanzines bring back the smell of long ago exam successes. Take it away, Joy!))

I don't remember whether our exam papers were duplicated, some must have been, and some were done on that purple thing. My own theory is that duplicated fanzines remind us of the first fanzines we ever read, when everything was bright and new and feuds were things that didn't happen. The smell of duplicated paper is pleasant, litho and photocopied paper don't have a smell usually, and when they do it's unpleasant. A duplicated fanzine also contains physical work, which we were brought up to respect. Anyone can write/edit a fanzine, but the effort of running it off and collating it is another matter - which is silly, of course, but that's the way we think. Photocopying is no effort, especially if you get the shop to do it for you, and particularly if the shop collated it too. I think there's also a tendency to expect a fanzine's production to reflect its content, if that makes sense. So a duplicated fanzine doesn't have to be as good as a photocopied fanzine to be considered as good.

((I've never known anyone like Joy for packing a paragraph full of so many things I could disagree with. I don't think all the first zines I read were duplicated, and since they dated from the Dorey/Nicholas KIF era, I never had this vision of a bright, feudless fandom. I think I was brought up to respect mental work over physical work (probably quite wrongly), and besides for many fanzines (like this one) the physical work of duplicating is done by someone else, not the editor. I would agree that duplicated zines smell better though. For ROB GREGG though this is one aspect of fandom he has to miss out on...))

So now I know what I've been missing about new zines - the smell. I have an unfortunate sinus disorder, and am still awaiting my first whiff of a duplicated zine! Life can be cruel!!

((It certainly can, especially as I'm not going to quote from the rest of your rather nice letter, but go straight on to MAL ASHWORTH.))

It occurred to me recently (probably three years after it occurred to everyone else, but that's about par) - shouldn't your zine be called EXCALIBUR?

I mean - when The Lady of the Lake sticks her paw out of the puddle and hands big Artie his pig-sticker... I'm sorry, I guess I'm just not in the mood for this sort of thing this morning; I'll try again --- when the Lady of the Lake advances her slender arm 'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful', through the limpid surface of those wondrous waters (that's better) to hand the future king that magic blade which is to forge a kingdom and ensure that his name will live to all future ages, she's hardly going to call out "Here y'are, Arfer boy, come and get yer Snails Countdahn and yer Kat's Revenge", is she? Or maybe you've read a different version of the story.

((Mal's only sulking because I've told him he's not official supplier of the letter column heading any more!))

Oh Lawks a' Lunky, yes, those magnificent Channelcon breakfasts, now, alas, gone the way of the Dodo. (In fact, maybe that's where the Dodo went, come to think of it. "Bacon? Mushrooms? Fried Dodd, sir?") I shall retain fond memories of those for many a year. (At least, I hope I shall; perhaps I'd better get a snappy addition to the Anglican Prayer book just to be on the safe side - "Please, Lord, spare me for many a long year so that I may remember the Channelcon breakfasts (Oh, and of course, all Your Other Good Works). Many thanks. Yours sincerely")

Your holiday supplement was pure magic, capturing the best of summer England. (Personally I hated Lymington (the place, that is, not the s-f author, whom I haven't yet read) And endless vistas of £50,000 yachts became all too claustrophobic and turned me around fast; and even by car it seemed to take a long time to get away from it.) I have yet to read AS I CROSSED A BRIDGE OF DREAMS; but from the sound of it you would love Basho's NARROW ROAD TO THE Deep North.

Ballerinas in slate mines was very nice too. A lovely juxtaposition for a start ("Bringing these two ideas together", as Bob Newhart says at the beginning of his King Kong sketch, and already you start laughing). Your actual underground expedition sounded terrifying and I don't wonder Kate was nearly petrified. I remember that she was terrified of heights from the fact that when there were about four and a half thousand of us grooving about on the balcony of her suite at that Sunday night Seacon party some unthinkable distance above planet Earth, Kate, in her elegant black gown, was trying hard to press herself through the wall and back to the safety of her room. She was having difficulty because -a) I was trying to do the same, b) I got to the wall first, and c) I'm bigger than she is. Hazel, commenting on Kate's bravery in coming out there in the first place with her fear of heights, tried to comfort her with the thought that if the balcony gave way and we were all splattered, the local paper would probably carry a headline: "Kate Davies - A Martyr" I said that that probably would depend on just how splattered we were; it might read: "Kate Davies - A Tomato". Soon after that we all went back inside.

((It's a wonder no-one pushed him over the edge! I'm not sure why I've chosen to end the letter column on a bad pun, but I'm sure it's suitable in some cosmically indecipherable fashion. The remaining letters were much appreciated and came to me from GEORGE BONDAR, ALAN DOREY, SIMON BERESFORD, JEREMY BALL, HELEN MCNABB, SUE THOMASON and JENNY WATSON.

Next, to continue the theme of tomatoes, we have an interview with a political can of tomatoes.

Interviewer: What do you think you have to offer the country, Mr. er Can?

Can: Tomatoes, tomato juice and more tomatoes. Oh, and a few pips.

Int: But what about your monetary policy?

Can: Pay everyone in tomatoes, good, healthy diet tomatoes, you know.

Int: And your attitude to nuclear disarmament?

Can: Who needs nukes when you can throw tomatoes at anyone what gets uppity.

Throw 'em at Thatcher, that'd son sort 'er out!

Int: This is hardly a mature, responsible attitude.

Can: Nayrr, but it'll get votes won't it? Vote me for a redder Thatcher today!

The interviewer draws out a can opener and calmly eats one of the candidates for Todton-under-Thursbury. The audience applauds. They've never seen a man eat a can before. It gets ten seconds on the 6 O'clock news.

Wouldn't you agree...

A GROOVY KIND OF LOVE

Late, as usual, in all things, I 'discovered' walkmans this March. That is to say, I was given one for my birthday - though only after I had elaborately explained that without a railcard I must perforce use the buses, and without a walkman I would find this perforcity (perforceness?) unbearable. So armed with il primitivo, Crown Japan model I set out to create havoc, annoyance and my own environment. And wow, wasn't it groovy!

Yes, archaic '60s word, groovy it was. Grooving down the street on my own private music power, grooving by the phone box, grooving on the bus to London, feeling... you've guessed it... groovy!

The best moment was when I first climbed off the bus and the music came with me. I couldn't get over that. I'm used to the music staying in one place and me moving on. Even though I knew I was carrying my walkman, subconsciously I had believed the music was attached to the bus and not to me. When it jumped off onto the pavement with me, I felt great, like I was someone really important and I was finally starring in the film of my own life. Me, Christina Lake, heroine. I walked up the road in a daze.

It was even better when I ran. Joggers with walkmans must get really high. It should be illegal. Running in the dark with Marc and the Mambas screaming in your head is definitely a pretty illegal state. It's a hell of a job slowing down to re-enter normal life!

I can never tell which cassettes will work well in the walkman. Some I think will really freak me out just come across as bland background noise, while others I haven't much rated on the flat stereo really take off, leaping along to the rhythm of the bus. It depends on the quality of the recording too, and the state of my batteries. But now when I get something new, I can't wait to consummate the affair on the walkman. The earphones internalise the music and cut out the distractions. Me and the music can really get intimate. I hear all the bits I don't notice in a room, even on a much higher quality stereo. I've had whole revelations about old favourites since the walkman! And for the first time in my life, my preference has switched from records to cassettes, since I can't take my records on the bus.

The very best effect I've ever achieved with my walkman was standing under the scaffolding on Paddington tube station, playing Peter Hammill. Every time he hit a high note, his voice would echo right across the arched ceiling. It was eery. I kept glancing at the other passengers to see if they could hear it too. I could imagine their accusing glares as they informed me that my walkman had got out of control and that Peter had escaped from his box and was climbing all over the ceiling. But I don't think they could hear anything. I wanted to move and see if it worked anywhere else, but didn't want to risk losing the effect altogether, so there I was still fascinated when the train came in. Peter climbed back into the box and off we went. I must try it again sometime...

I suspect that all these people wandering around with their walkmans say an awful lot about our society. I don't think they're really safe to wear in the streets - we rely so much on our ears, without realising it half the time, that it must be dangerous. Some people even wear them on their bikes! But what really gets me is that all these people need to block out one portion of their environment to plug in on a different one. All these people on trains desperately not wanting conversations, not even wanting to listen to other conversations. What's wrong with the world? We're all building walls around ourselves and carefully chosing our own reality. Is my beloved walkman then just a symbol of a society which can't cope with the world it's created, except by denying most of it? Who can say.

Five things you can do with your walkman on
 Hold conversations
 Have a bath
 Hear railway station announcements
 Spend a fortune on batteries
 Annoy your friends

Five things you can't do
 Ignore men chatting you up
 Have a shower
 Take your jumper off
 Brush your hair
 Hum without people hearing

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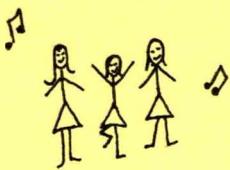
Completed 15th July 1985

In 1985, the average age of the con-going fan was 26...

At the Brighton world con it was

16

Their average age was 16!



SSSSSeacon!

SSSSSeacon!



None of them received a hero's welcome



Hugos!

Taff!

Purple jumpsuits!

After Brighton, the new congoer typically served 12 months, but was exposed to hostile comments almost every day

TAFF CANDIDATE CONFESSES! "Can't stand the brighters"

Get out of here! I'm a bright!

TRUFANDOM SWAMPED BY NEOS!

16

Brighton seemed like just another foreign con



None of them...



None of them...



Half of them are suffering from what psychologists call post-convention stress disorder



So many fanzines to loc!

suicidal thoughts



guilt

SSSSSeacon

SSSSSeacon

four years after the Beeb axed the series eight to ten thousand media fen are still discussing the last episode of Blake's 7



All those who remember the con won't forget what they've seen distractions! a roomful of neos! Their average age was 16!

