



BEER CAT SCRATCHINGS

25 Special quarter century double issue



The original footnote purrzone

This is your...error

Down amongst the small print of the *Not Ansible* was a note from Fred Clarke, exhorting everyone to watch **This is Your Life** in the first week of the new year¹. A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse², so we duly sat down to watch it. It wasn't who we expected³. Perhaps the ansible technology works even better than real life⁴, or maybe the BBC changed their minds at the last minute. The following week, however, the spotlight did indeed shine on Arthur C Clarke, who was pounced upon by Buzz Aldrin in the Science Museum. Now, with some of the lives that have been shown, it has been almost a precession of those who are currently working with the celeb, until it has become a distinctly 'luvvy' affair⁵. It also seems to be a really long half hour. Not this time. It seemed as though Michael Aspel had barely started, before the end credits were about to roll. Indeed, he barely had time to mention the SF books Clarke had written, such as the amount he has packed into his life so far. The crowning glory was when it was announced that Arthur had been awarded the Nobel prize⁶. Definitely one of the best of the series.

On the subject of errors and omissions, my brain was clearly somewhere else⁷ when it came to describing the owner of the badge collection⁸. Marcus Rowland kindly pointed out that it was actually Mike Cule, and not anyone else⁹.

Marcus also had the *Tabloid Journalism Map of the World*,

¹ I know that it's now March (and may even be April by the time you read this), but time travels more slowly where we are. This is due to relativistic effects...unless your son counts as kin, and not a relative, in which case it is because of kinetic effects.

² or is that "a hob is as good as a sink to a blind horse"

³ well, if you had been expecting Lesley Joseph, then it was who you would have expected. On the other hand, since Fred is rumoured to have a fairly famous brother...

⁴ what do you mean, you thought that Dave Langford made up the name himself? It refers to an instantaneous communication device, mentioned in *The Word for World is Forest* by Ursula K LeGuin.

⁵ For example, with Lesley Joseph, half the guests seemed to be the cast of *Birds of a Feather*.

⁶ The words "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!" seemed to float through my mind. It was either too much *Wayne's World* or else the substances were taking effect again.

⁷ I mean, it's usually somewhere else, metaphorically, but this time, I didn't know where...

⁸ at least, the rapidly becoming ex-owner, as he was giving them all away

⁹ Names? what's a name except a handle anyway. (Usually I'm lucky if I can remember someone as 'you there') what's a handle except something to pick something up with. what's philosophy, except a four syllable word.

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which showed only those things of real relevance, such as Nessie, UFO crash sites, the ruins of Atlantis¹⁰, Hitler clones, crop circles... but no Elvis¹¹. Not even the "guy works down our chip shop". It's probably all a big cover up¹².

From time to time, people even summon up reserves of energy and write to me. Bridget felt cheated that I hadn't said exactly *which* Tube station had the *Stargate* adverts round the tunnel mouth¹³. All can now be revealed, if only to prevent further calls of lack of akkrasy. Oxford Circus, both on the Central and Bakerloo lines, had such an advert; the Victoria line may have had, but I'm not the kind of obsessive that would go and check, unless I happened to be going that way. The really keen will no doubt go out, armed only with a Travelcard, and find any other occurrences. On the other hand, it the posters have now been removed, so finding them could be a *little* bit difficult...

Still, it would make for a different programme item for Picocon, which will be held not a million miles away^{14 15}, namely, "hunt the SF advertising hoarding". If it stops Iain Banks attempting to abseil down the Imperial College Union building, then it can only be a good thing.

¹⁰ in several places; it's good to see a city getting out and about a bit...

¹¹ not even Elvis Costello, although he isn't dead yet, and hasn't been seen working in a bar in Luton wearing a rhinestone suit. Maybe he has, but it hasn't made the papers...

¹² I am reliably informed (by those who know... trust me), that the particular office that receives UFO sightings in this country reckons to get 5 calls per day, and 2 or 3 letters per month on the lines of "it's all a cover-up, and the government is in league with them". Interestingly enough, this person claimed never to have heard of any of the recent "Black Projects" (secret developments with unlimited budgets. eg, the F-117 Stealth Fighter and the B-2 Stealth Bomber), such as Aurora and Black Mamba. Personally, I do not believe that anyone working in that position could be that ignorant.

¹³ The postcard itself was appropriate, as it showed a packed tube train, with the caption "the easiest way to get around London is by Tube..."

¹⁴ It would be strange if it *was* held a million miles away, as this would place it somewhere beyond the moon. Travelling there might be a touch tricky, but who knows, *Galacticon 1* may be held at a Lagrange point near you...

¹⁵ What would the 'con reports be like? *Food: don't go outside, make do with the hotel (space station?) stuff. Bar Prices: a captive audience really, so they can charge what they like... "sky high prices", even. Programme Items: the 'sex in zero-g' seminar was well attended, although the 'I-spy' was a bit monotonous - "S": stars, space station, er, that's it...*

Cinematic Overload¹⁶

For some strange reason, we don't get out much these days. This isn't quite true. We manage to step outside on a fairly large number of occasions, but usually this is encumbered with all the baby paraphernalia^{17 18}. However, on one of those rare times, we left Calum with his Granny and headed for the multiplex. First on the agenda was *Star Trek: Generations*. Now we aren't Trekkers. Honest. Oh, all right then, we do exhibit slight Trek tendencies^{19 20}, but probably wouldn't go to a specific Trek con^{21 22}. Even if we have seen all the films. And most of the TV series. Including the last ever TNG episodes. And Allison reckons that she could listen to Patrick Stewart reading from the telephone directory²³.

After all that preamble what was the film like? Very good actually²⁴. For the first time, ship crews are shown as being only a part of a greater whole, with them being subjected to news hounds reporting back to those on Earth. For all that the Federation is mentioned, this is really the first time that there is actually, an entire population out there who *aren't* out

¹⁶ this isn't a reference to a new video game in the "Doomenstein" mould, although it could be... The scenario: you are the last sane person trying to escape the multiplex. Armed only with this month's copy of *Flicks*, you must beat off the ravaging hordes of film buffs. *Gasp!* as you dodge their "and why not" bullets. *Thrill!* to the chase, in 70mm Dolby surround sound, past the popcorn stand. *Groan!* as they catch you and subject you to another dud, like *North*. ... Hmm. Perhaps not.

¹⁷ It is reckoned that babies travel with at least three times their own weight in stuff.

¹⁸ George Carlin points out that people only live in houses because they are a place for all the stuff you accumulate. In effect, a house is just a pile of stuff with a roof on it.

¹⁹ Oh no! On top of everything else, they're closet *Meejah* fans. What will the world come to next?

²⁰ What's more, we even have our own copy of the *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* version of *Star Trek V*.

²¹ Fiona Anderson, who was at *UFP* found it an illuminating experience. Unlike most general conventions, where the programme is generally something that gets in the way of propping up the bar or visiting the dealers' room (unless it's something like "the Owls are not what they seem" or one of Bob Shaw's "serious scientific talks"). Here, the programme and the dealers' room were, apparently, the only reasons to be there. This meant that large parts of the venue were practically empty, despite the convention having an attendance similar to that of the Eastercon. Going to programme items? Sounds too much like hard work to me.

²² Fiona Anderson has a paranoid theory that every fresh mountain stream has a dead sheep in it. Like the proverbial elephants' graveyard, sheep would wander the hills, seeking out a suitable stream to die in. As a result of this, she would never drink from the stream, just in case. So sure is she that such an event will happen, that she would even be prepared to carry her own dead sheep around, just to prove her theory. In fact, the world may be full of people doing the same thing. Behavioural scientists have dubbed this "the sheep death of the universe"

²³ I happened to notice that his opening words at the big Trek do at the Albert Hall were reported as being along the lines of "I'm sorry we couldn't find a better building for this event..."

²⁴ Jim Samuel reckoned that there were a few plot holes, such as when Picard meets Kirk in a timeless zone, why do they have to hurry back to the real world. After all, if time has no meaning, why rush anywhere... Still, Jim's probably been reading the *Nitpickers' Guides to Star Trek*. One of these days, he may even turn up at a con with a T-shirt saying "It's Jim, but not life as we know it"

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conquering the galaxy. A nice touch. Plot lines from TNG are also tied up neatly, with the rogue Klingons²⁵ back with their own agenda again. And still wearing their exotic leather gear²⁶. After a nifty bit of espionage, they decide to fire on the *Enterprise*, despite its superior strength. When they said "fire at will", I wondered why they had singled out Riker for special treatment...

The special effects, though were amazing. When items blew up, the resulting shock wave was spherical, as expected, and not circular²⁷. One of the best parts was just after a spectacular crash landing, which seemed realistic, and then a shock wave destroyed the whole planet in an entirely convincing manner.

All in all, the film had it all: Kirk, Picard, two different *Enterprises*, saucer separation, Klingons, holodeck adventures, character development...

Oh yes, the character development. Data decides, after failing to spot humour properly, that he will plug in an emotion chip. This initially causes havoc, and he becomes an Android on Acid. One example is when he bursts into uncontrollable laughter, because he has finally got a joke that Geordi told on the Farpoint mission. All very self-referential, but another aspect of the detail that the makers have gone to.

Intermission

A few months back, there was a programme on television which hinted that the pyramids at Giza were built to a plan to match the pattern of the constellation of Orion. To be precise, the three pyramids there are laid out in the same pattern as the three stars of Orion's belt; two bright, with the third, smaller one offset slightly. This also coincided with Rudolf Gantenbrink's exploration of the shafts constructed inside the great pyramid of Cheops²⁸. This suggested that the shafts, far from being constructed for ventilation, were minutely finished using dressed stone. Many "experts" claimed that anything could be fitted to anything, if you tried hard enough.

Allison happened to notice a book called *The Orion Mystery*²⁹, which explored the hypothesis further. Bauval suggested that, not only were the Giza pyramids part of a plan, but other pyramids at Dashour, to the south, were also part of some grand strategy for mapping the sky on the ground. Such is the accuracy of the construction of these monuments that it stretches belief that they were sited haphazardly. Furthermore, the shafts that Gantenbrink filmed and measured would have pointed exactly at the stars of Orion and Sirius. To avoid being labelled as a crank, he astutely avoids the "why" aspect other than in religious tones; there are several theories which try and relate the pyramids to extraterrestrial activity, which may or may not be correct. Only someone incredibly naïve, gullible or thick-skinned would push

²⁵ "Euch. Earth women are just so *disgusting*"

²⁶ How long before similar garments are seen on the Saturday night at a con? Probably as long as it takes to diminish the European Leather Mountain; ie, not long.

²⁷ OK, so I'm nitpicking. But flat circular ripples would only be seen on the surface of something like water, and not something meant to be in space.

²⁸ Actually, the exploration was by robot with a video camera, as the shafts are not large.

²⁹ by Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert.

the ET theories in a serious book³⁰. Does the theory hold water? Well, it sounds a great deal more plausible than many.

It's just a jump...through space

Which brings us back to *Stargate*. The film starts off with a maverick egyptologist who reckons that some of the pyramid texts have been mistranslated; his audience loses interest when he questions their theories, but doesn't have anything to put in their place³¹. However, his actions bring him to the attention of the military³², who want him to translate glyphs found on some strange circular object (which, naturally, has been hidden away from the public's gaze). He twigs that the symbols represent constellations, and so the whole is a gateway to the unknown, a bit like shopping at MFI really. Surprise, surprise, they activate it and then step through it³³. Here of course is where the fun starts, as the society found at the other end are like walking incarnations of ancient Egyptians, except that they are forbidden to read or write. This is because the ruling nasty, who constructed the stargates, having been beaten by an Earth uprising, decides not to give his new subjects the chance of revolting³⁴.

Without giving too much away, the maverick manages to learn to speak³⁵ ³⁶ their language, leads them in rebellion, works out how mummification really should have worked and generally saves the day.

As a film, it isn't quite as good as *Generations*, as it seemed unsure whether to be a speculative fiction, based on existing information, or an action/adventure, à la *Indiana Jones*. This is a pity, as the story as it starts out is as good as any SF that I have read. On the action side, again it is unsure whether to take the Indy or the Rambo line. However, it does sort itself out in time for the ending, which is a bit of a seat gripper; you know what they have to do, but you don't know whether they will make it in time.

After seeing two films in a row, we did what all fen do at times like these, and went for a curry³⁷. After the curry, we remained

³⁰ who knows, maybe *Chariots of the Gods* is right, but none of the experts would admit this. Besides, where would Bob Shaw get information for his talks without his good friend Von Donniken (I wonder where he got that name from...)

³¹ The research for the film was clearly quite thorough, as it mentioned Breasted, who translated a lot of the early texts. As in the film, Bauval (amongst others) feels that Breasted was trying to impose his own monotheistic ideals on the Egyptian system, which predated it by around 3000 years.

³² Ah!, here we go with the cover-up theories!

³³ with special effects that look just a little bit like those of the game *The Journeyman Project*, or maybe just *Bill and Ted*

³⁴ The peasants are revolting! Yes, and so are you.

³⁵ I'm sure this is just a dig at all those who could recite the litany: "Latin's a dead language, as dead as dead can be. It killed off all the Romans, and now it's killing me". Since, if you stepped through a portal, and found that everyone was speaking Latin, you'd probably wish that you'd spent more time studying *Ecce Romani*.

³⁶ *Ecce*. In pictura est puella. Puella est magna. Quis est puella magna? Claudia est puella magna... My interest went downhill rapidly after that...

³⁷ I could tell you its name, but Clydebank is an awfully long way to go for a meal, particularly if you don't live there. On the other hand, anyone who does make their way to the railway station will find the curry house not far from it, just over the road and round the corner a bit.

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media fans and saw *Pulp Fiction*, but then that's not SF at all³⁸

The long shot

It has often been remarked that, in films³⁹ ⁴⁰ ⁴¹ at least, million to one shots occur nine times out of ten. If that is the case, then, as the odds are increased, the absolute certainty of the event should also increase. In that case, Gregory Benford is on to a major winner⁴². Having read of a mission to send an unmanned lander to Titan, the Jovian moon⁴³, the planet⁴⁴ reckoned to be most likely of developing and sustaining a breathable atmosphere, he suggested a little time capsule, like the twee messages and collections of stuff that are buried beneath buildings and the like⁴⁵. In this case, the message would be attached to the lander, in the same way that the Voyager information was. Unlike Voyager, this does not have to last a mere couple of hundred years. Greg has calculated that that might be the wait for the first manned landing. But that is trifling, compared with the *real* long shot. If you wait long enough, an atmosphere will develop, life may evolve to a sufficient extent that archeology can be done as well as spelled and eventually, someone is going to start asking questions about that heap of metal that had bits nicked off it several millennia ago. Or maybe, some settler, (race indeterminate), is going to dig a hole, hoping to unlock the secrets of sedimentary rock, only to discover the remains of the lander, which, like the various archeological anomalies found to date⁴⁶, could seriously

³⁸ On the other hand, it is an absolutely *excellent* film, which involves two of a gangster's heavy mob. John Travolta is amazing as he does the twist while doped out on heroin; his partner is high on cocaine, so it makes for an interesting mix. Bruce Willis, glad that the film isn't another turkey, plays a boxer who decides not to throw a fight when asked by the gang boss. Even Quentin Tarantino himself gets a cameo role. The film follows a few, apparently unrelated, threads which come together in a distinctly weird way. But then, life's like that. Meaningless coincidences happen all the time, really.

³⁹ and in *Discworld*TM novels

⁴⁰ Funny, in *Good Omens*, Pratchett and Neil Gaiman poked fun at all the things that people try to trademark, such as the MealsTM that Famine was flogging. Now, in the frontispieces of the latest books, that flat-earth-on-elephants-and-turtle now has the little mark. Given that the idea comes from India, you would have thought that they should have trade-marked it... if trademarking had been invented back in those days.

⁴¹ Despite what several American firms are attempting to do, you cannot trademark a sentence in this country, so You Deserve a Break Today. Where Do You Want to Go Today? and similar can be said without reproach... but only with a British Accent.

⁴² Which no-one you know will be able to collect on...

⁴³ "By Jove, How Jolly!" was runner-up in the world's worst puns competition in a galaxy somewhere near here. Maybe.

⁴⁴ OK, so it's a satellite. Since you're in that frame of mind, "How many British pedants does it take to screw in a light bulb?" "Actually, we use bayonet fittings, predominantly..."

⁴⁵ In 100 years, or so, most people probably couldn't care less what's under that concrete pillar with the plaque on it, particularly if the plaque got nicked 85 years ago. The prevailing view might be "What ever it is, they sure tried hard to keep it buried..."

⁴⁶ but suppressed. Use another Detect Minor Conspiracy spell.

destabilise society⁴⁷. To write a message that will last the billion years or so that it will take, Benford envisages writing the text of the message in boron, on a piece of diamond, then encasing the whole lot in more diamond. Suggestions are still being sought for the content of the message, but something along the lines of "Kilroy was here" is probably what is wanted⁴⁸.

Another long shot is the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI)⁴⁹. After a few decades of fruitless searching, someone somewhere noticed that there is an amazing telescope that could be adapted to suit. The Hubble Space Telescope, now that its myopia has been fixed^{50 51} is potentially capable of spotting planets orbiting nearby stars, and not just the suggestion of planets, such as gravitational wobble. However, none of the current equipment has been set up to look for planets, as everyone was interested in seeing as far back in time as possible, so, at the next major servicing⁵², a whole new raft of goodies will be added. If it works, then the first message to mankind is likely to be "Kilroy was here first..."

Let's do the time warp...in Stratford

The East End of London has a disproportionately large fannish population for its size. This kind of event is likely to have serious effects on the space-time continuum. Sure enough, for those that know where to look⁵³, the evidence of massive spatial-temporal distortions can be found. British Rail, before being broken up, put a lot of effort into having clocks on every station that all told exactly the same time. This is presumably so

⁴⁷ Personally, I think that hiding evidence to protect society is complete bosh. The only society that would be de-stabilised by revealing such things, like UFOs (or lack of), is the one that thrives on keeping all the really good stuff hidden. This is probably one of Britain's major growth areas. An example was when the Minister for Open Government wanted to cover up some embarrassing information, on largely spurious grounds.

⁴⁸ There is, after all, only so much that can be written using boron ink on a piece of diamond, particularly when it would have to be written at the near atomic level, due to space constraints on the actual lander.

⁴⁹ Cue the old joke: "Is there any intelligent life on Earth" "Yes, but I'm only visiting!"

⁵⁰ Detect minor conspiracy: it was always claimed, in the design stage, that the Hubble would be able to see far enough that it could see back to the Big Bang. Since proof of this would tend to put a bit of a dampener on all those who believed in the Charles Atlas approach (in just 7 days, I can make you a ~~man~~ fully populated world), a quick change with a pencil could turn a plus into a minus. Hence, the telescope wouldn't be able to see too far, and hence their beliefs would go unchallenged...

⁵¹ Of course, if God had been a computer programmer, then he/she would have done nothing for 5 days, then pulled an all-nighter. This is quoted as the real reason why the seventh day was a day of rest.

⁵² makes it sound like a car "Dear Mr , your space telescope is now due for its 3-year / 300 million mile service..."

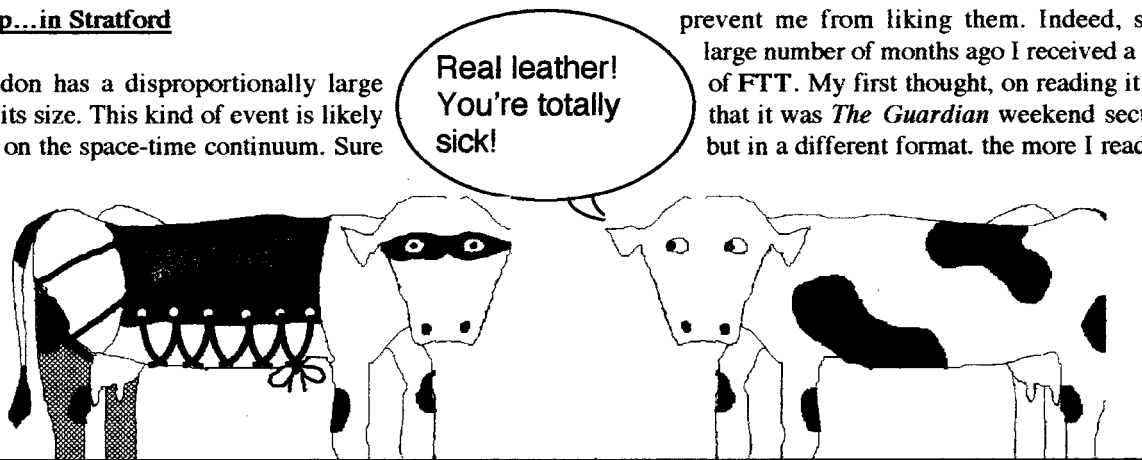
⁵³ mushrooms and other "relaxants" are optional...

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that everyone can agree on how late a train actually is, without having to argue that, by *that* clock, the train was actually on time^{54 55}. Now, either London Underground care less about all this funny 60 minutes stuff, or they have created their own time machines. On the platform at Stratford station, the BR clocks all show the same time. turn around, and the clock under the Underground departure board is 2 minutes earlier. Walk to the other side of the sign, and the clock has gone back *another* 2 minutes! Spooky, or what?⁵⁶ Spatial anomalies can be demonstrated as follows. Where we live, the road is, as far as can be seen, flat. Walk down 100 yards and turn left. This road too appears to be flat. Walk along it for 50 yards, and you come to another road, which runs parallel to the first. Guess what. It's slope is in the virtual arena. So why is it that, when you walk 100 yards up this road, you are now over 10 feet lower than when you started. M C Escher would have approved⁵⁷.

Odds, evens and fanzines

I often think "I am not a fanzine fan"⁵⁸. This doesn't prevent me from liking them. Indeed, some large number of months ago I received a copy of FTT. My first thought, on reading it was that it was *The Guardian* weekend section, but in a different format. the more I read, the



more it fitted. Most of the regular features were there, and all it needed was the Red Cat and it would have been complete. Oh, and the puzzle page. And the Lost Consonants. But apart from that...⁵⁹. After a brief mention in *Attitude*, all I can say is: Watch out for the chocolate covered mushrooms

Coming Soon: Zorro - the musical (actually, it's gone, so it will be only a review of it)



⁵⁴ This process started over 100 years ago, which is where Greenwich Mean Time came from; it was a means of standardising time so that a half hour train journey actually took 30 minutes. this sounds obvious now, but each village used to have its own time zone, so that noon took place over a span of about an hour.

⁵⁵ Yah, let's do lunch and discuss when lunch is...

⁵⁶ what do you mean, there's probably a perfectly rational explanation? I mean, it would be so... mundane.

⁵⁷ although he might have wanted to put möbius fish turning into swans in it, or connected it all up with a series of never-descending staircases.

⁵⁸ in a similar vein, I am not a media fan, a filk fan, a literary fan, a fannish fan, a... well you get the picture. I am a non-categorisable fan, he said, categorising himself.

⁵⁹ "apart from *that*, Mrs Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?"