



Geeks are Different

Geeks are Different is the sixty-sixth SFPA-zine (volume two, number forty-three) from Jeffrey Copeland. It is intended for mailing number 236 of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance and selected others. The text of *Geeks are Different* was composed using the T_EX typesetting system, and is set in 11-point Palatino. It was published by Bywater Press, 3243 165th Ave, SE, Bellevue, Washington 98008, on 28 November 2003.



You're warned: I'm starting this zine with some political analysis. This starts my natter because it's the biggest contiguous chunk. You may wish to skip it. If so, move forward to the next comic strip.

THE TALKING HEADS KEEP REMINDING US that we're less than two months from the Iowa caucuses, and the first event of the Presidential election season. And it makes me want to grab them by their bow-ties and beat the living shit out of them. Every story about legislation or policy will now, even more than usual, be gauged in terms of how it affects the political prospects of one or another contender for some office. That said, and in an somewhat different vein, it is interesting to consider the flock of Democrats running for president, a list only slightly shorter than the ballot in the recent California governor's election.

We'll accept, as a given, that Carol Mosley Braun and Al Sharpton (like that bastard Ralph Nader before them) are running vanity campaigns. Braun took flipping political funds for personal use to a level exceeding even Dick Nixon before the Checkers speech. Sharpton's made his career as a rascist hatemonger, has no notion of practical policy and no idea of how to actually run for office.

Similarly, while Wesley Clark is bright, and has an actual notion of how to run a foreign policy, he also has no experience on the political ground. The right-wing rap is that Clark is running as a stalking-horse for Hillary Clinton. Clark is not shy about defending his positions, and about not letting himself be drawn into sound bites. I watched a tape of Clark ream a Fox "News" commentator a new asshole when the Foxie accused him of not supporting American troops by criticizing the invasion of Iraq as a "sideshow in the war on terrorism." (Cf. Chicks, The Dixie.) He made it very clear that (1) he could no more stop supporting American troops on the ground than he could stop breathing, (2) invading Iraq did precisely nothing for finishing off al Queda and securing Afghanistan. Unfortunately, his electability, because of his lack of political experience, is essentially zero.

I like Joe Liberman, but he's decided that the secret to running for president against an arch-conservative like Bush is by acting like a Republican. Always one of the most conservative Democrats, running for president has pushed him further to the right. If Liberman got the nomination, I'd vote for him as the lesser evil of two Republicans.

I like Dick Gebhardt. He's sensible. He's got good policy ideas. He speaks clearly and passionately about things people in the middle of the country are concerned about — globalization, medicare, inflation, taxes. And yet, he can't seem to make any headway on the coasts.

A year ago, I would have picked John Kerry for the nomination. He's from the pragmatic liberal school. He's married to a woman who's bright, rich in her own right, and won't take shit from political handlers. He's been working toward

this for years, and one doesn't want the Democrats to come back to Kerry twenty years from now, and give the nomination to him because he deserves it, like the Republicans did to Dole in 1996.

However, Howard Dean is my current choice for a number of practical reasons.

I'd said sometime ago that a Dean/Clinton ticket is Bush's dream opponent. I think that's still true. The Republicans have already started running ads accusing anyone who doesn't unquestioningly support Bush's "war on terrorism" (that is, his invasion of Iraq) as being unpatriotic. This is a direct attack on Dean's opposition to the Iraq war, and that's the wedge issue Bush is going to use in this campaign. "Either you're with us or with the terrorists." "You've got the right to protest my speech, but now they do in Baghdad, too." Plus plenty of pictures of him with troops at events contrived for the media — *cf.* flight suit, carrier deck.

Dean is portrayed by the press as being a liberal. However, he's not nearly as liberal as he's being painted. His opposition to Iraq comes out of Yankee practicality. His support of a domestic partnership bill in Vermont — and I can hear the Shiite Baptists cranking up their pulpit speeches over that one — came out of direction from his state's supreme court and a sense of fairness.

On the other hand, Dean has a bunch of passionate, energized volunteers on the ground. And he's raised enough money that he can forego federal matching funds for the primaries. Between them, those two factors can make up a lot of the advantage that Shrub has from a large war chest and well-connected apparatus. Remember how Gene McCarthy could come from nowhere to almost get the nomination because he had a good grass-roots organization.

The places where this is going to be really important is in getting the word out, getting the vote out and getting the vote counted. I have no doubt that we're looking at a re-run of the 2000 election next fall. We're going to, in southern counties, see white suburban poll-watchers attempting to intimidate black voters, like we did in the recent Mississippi governor's election. We're going to see questionable vote totals, like the county in Texas where the three Republican commissioners got the exact same vote totals.* Those are the sort of practical on-the-ground considerations that a large contingent of volunteers can help with.

Elections are about winning, and Dean may, in inventing a plan for getting his campaign going, have also gotten a plan for a successful end-game.

* Voting activist Bev Harris suggests in her new book *Black Box Voting* that Max Cleland was, against all odds and expectations, defeated for re-election to his Georgia senate seat in 2002 not by superior campaigning or fallout from the state's governor's race, but because the totals from touch screen voting machines without an audit trail were rigged. I don't know how much I believe her.



Herewith a set of short takes on everything and anything before we get to the reviews. These didn't fit anywhere else, and I've been saving some of the thoughts up.



Lisa Roberts came to visit us for a long weekend at the beginning of November. I took a couple of days off to hang out with her. While she was here she was watching me working on this zine and commented that I've been engaged in conversations with people in SFPA stretching over fifteen and twenty years.

That's all true, but what I didn't get a chance to tell her is that part of the reason I look forward to visits from her, and from her husband Robin, is that I've had a conversation with *them* stretching back twenty years. There are temporal gaps in that conversation, but when we get on the phone, or the four of us meet at a Las Vegas buffet, or sit across one of our dining room tables, the conversation resumes without pause and without gap and with the same level of familiarity and comfort. I didn't think to tell her it's one of the reasons that I value my friendship with both of them.

And since Robin and Lisa get this zine, if she's read these three paragraphs, now I have.



Harper's reports online that, "A judge in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, was in trouble for dressing up in blackface for Halloween."


I can see it now. The guy's sitting on the bench and singing at a sentencing hearing: "Mammy! How I loath ya, how I loath ya! Liiife in the slammer!"




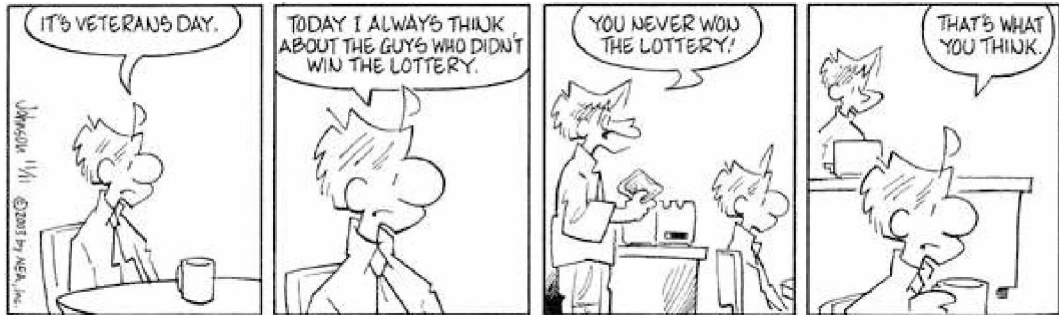
I was filling the printer at the office recently and actually stopped to read the wrapper on the ream of paper. "Boise Paper Solutions: Work. Build. Create."


"Paper Solutions?" What happened to "Paper Mill?"


And "Work. Build. Create.?" Who invents these slogans? Catbert? It's *paper* for Pete's sake!

 Last month, the City of New York reduced the number of dead at the World Trade Center by forty to a mere 2,752. That's still too many, way too many, but it's still thousands less than the *tens* of thousands I was mentally counting on that horrible morning.


 We have long since passed the point where more US troops had died in Iraq II after Shrub declared victory than before. But we've crossed another ugly threshold: More US troops have now died in Son of Gulf War than in the first 3 years of Vietnam. Of course, we've got more guys on the ground, and hence a bigger surface area. And I'd certainly be interested to know what the relative casualty *rates* are.



 Meanwhile, former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch is doing her damndest to be honest about what happened to her in Iraq, and to question her elevation to hero status by the Pentagon's publicity machine. Some of that comes, I'm sure, out of growing up in a small town in West Virginia, but I've got to applaud her strength of character in trying to get her life back on track and ignore the hubbub around her.

 Larry Flynt claims he's in possession of nude photos of Lynch: "I purchased them at first with the intention of publishing them, however, I quickly changed my mind and decided simply to keep them out of circulation."


Wouldn't it have been classier to have bought them and said nothing? But that presumes Flynt had any class.

 I hate what-you-see-is-what-you-get word processing systems. That means that I avoid using my own company's flagship desktop software. I use \TeX for this zine because I can build a flat text file with markup, and format it with some pretty fine-grained control.


Recently, my sometime partner-in-crime Jeff Haemer convinced me to install OpenOffice, the open source program that is compatible with Microsoft Word. Like


Word, it allows for style sheets — the graphical word processor answer to structured markup — but it also appears to allow the kind of control on the back-end that I like from T_EX.

I'm experimenting and we'll see what happens.

 In the week before Thanksgiving, Dell reported that they were going to move support for their corporate customers back from India to the United States. "We felt a little noise and angst from our customers, and we decided to make some changes.... Our corporate customers have come to expect a certain level of expertise." In other words, by the time our big customers worked through the accents of our phone droids, they realized that they weren't getting any real solutions for their problems. (Of course, one-off consumers still get to talk to someone in Bangalore, rather than Idaho.)

It'll be interesting to see if this is the beginning of a trend.

 In the same vein, Wal-Mart got caught hiring illegal immigrants as janitors through contracting firms. At least one Wal-Mart VP is being hung out to dry. It certainly gives one pause: the world's largest retailer got that way by having the goods they sell made in Chinese sweatshops, throwing their weight around with local planning boards, and keeping their costs down by having services at their stores provided through cutouts. I already try to avoid buying things manufactured in China, never shop at Wal-Mart anyway, but now I have other things to watch out for.

 A recent letter from a newspaper in Tennessee, which I found on the web: "The actions taken by the New Hampshire Episcopalians (inducting a gay bishop) are an affront to Christians everywhere. I am just thankful that the church's founder, Henry VIII, and his wife Catherine of Aragon, and his wife Anne Boleyn, and his wife Jane Seymour, and his wife Anne of Cleves, and his wife Katherine Howard, and his wife Catherine Parr are no longer here to suffer through this assault on traditional Christian marriages."



Reviews

¶ *The Hunted* has predictable chase scenes, blood and gore and Tommy Lee Jones. Only one of those reasons makes this movie worthwhile, and he's actually phoning it in.

¶ JJ hadn't seen *Top Gun*, so we watched it one night when it was just the guys. Planes fly around. Dogfights ensue. Things blow up. You've probably seen it. JJ enjoyed it.

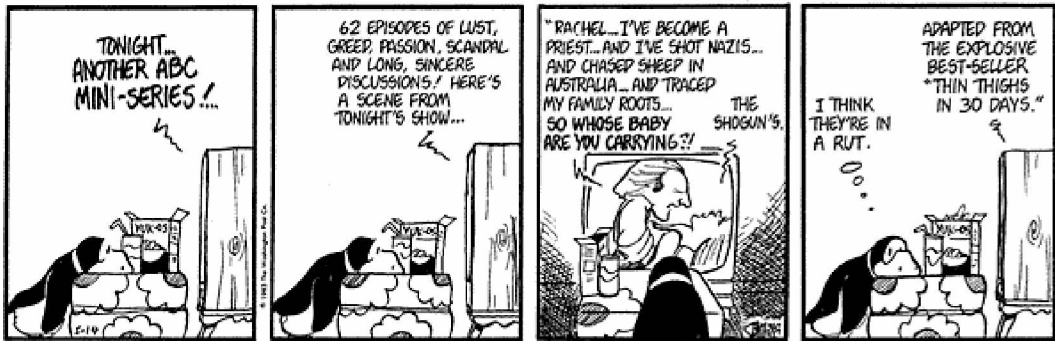
¶ While *School of Rock* is Jack Black's show from beginning to end, it's ultimately disappointing. Failed rock musician Black masquerades as a fifth grade teacher, and turns the class into a band and roadies and groupies, co-opting the class brown-noser as manager. It's from the "hey kids, my mom's got some clothes in the attic, let's put on a show!" bin of movie plots, but too much of the action depends on Black's character being embarrassingly stupid. Too many of the kids are better musicians than they are actors, so they don't actually gel as characters: the guitarist, in particular, is so stiff as to be robotic, about which there is at least one joke. Worth seeing once, but by no means a classic. If you want to see good work by Black, rent *High Fidelity* again. It's got an even better supporting performance by Joan Cusack, who only gets to play a highly-strung elementary school principal in this one.

¶ If you've gotten the DVDs of the first three seasons of *Babylon 5*, it's worth taking the extra time to turn the commentary on for the episodes which have it. Despite incessant whining about how the sets didn't turn out like he expected or the director had no clue what was supposed to happen, Jim Straczynski provides some fascinating insight into what he was trying to get at in his writing. "Oh, yeah: see this guy? Warner Brothers told us we needed a 'Top Gun' type fighter pilot, so, of course, I wrote him in just so I could kill him off." On the other hand, the commentary by the actors (at least in Season 2 — I haven't had a chance to watch the other actor commentary yet) is just silly: Bruce Boxleitner, Claudia Christian, and Jerry Doyle keep telling each other jokes rather than commenting on the action. "There's old Doc Shaft." "Hey, speaking of *Lost in Space*..."

¶ You can't live in a household with a television remote control, two teenagers, and TNT on cable, and not have seen some pieces of *The Shawshank Redemption*. I don't normally like Stephen King, but this is enough outside of his normal balliwick that it seemed worth it to give it a try. Tim Robbins is wonderful as the bank vice president imprisoned for killing his wayward wife. Morgan Freeman is perfect as the laidback, world-weary narrator and observer. James Whitmore gives a stunning supporting performance. There is character development. There

is Robbins plotting for the big payoff without anyone realizing what was going on. Very nice story, very nicely rendered. Now I'm tempted to go find the King novella from which the movie was written.

If you like caper movies — and remember that I'm addicted to them — then it's probably worth your while to see *Confidence*. You've seen the con games before — and the movie ends as it opens, so beware — so there's no new ground covered. However, Ed Burns plays nicely off Rachel Weisz (who seems to be getting a hell of a lot of screen time lately), and Paul Giamatti and Brian Van Holt round out the con men. Dustin Hoffman nicely plays the supporting role of porn magnate. (Catch the deleted scene on the DVD of him auditioning new, er, girls.) Andy Garcia underplays the role of one of the guys chasing after our protagonists.



Angels and Demons is the thriller by Dan Brown which precedes *The DaVinci Code* and which introduces his recurring character Robert Langdon. After seventy pages, though, I realized that life is just too damned short for crappy fiction — particularly since this was shaping up to be *exactly* the same lame plot as *The DaVinci Code*, with Bavarian Illuminati instead of the lunatic fanatical Catholic secret society Angus Dei — and it went into the reject pile.

Recently we had an interesting “compare-and-contrast” double feature over two evenings. We re-watched *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, 1998's two “oh my God! the earth is about to be smashed by a meteor” movies.

First things first: *Deep Impact* is about people; *Armageddon* is about technology. The science in *Deep Impact* is somewhat more accurate. That NASA acquiesced in helping to push *Armageddon* out to an unsuspecting public suggests they're loonier than we've given them credit for.

Téa Leoni gives an absolutely wonderful and nuanced performance as the newswoman in *Deep Impact*. She's ably supported by the likes of Vanessa Redgrave,



Morgan Freeman, and Elijah Wood and Leelee Sobieski† as the teenagers. Geologist Gene Shoemaker — who figured out as a grad student what caused the thing in Arizona we now know as Meteor Crater — acted as advisor on the film. It’s a real story, with a beginning, a middle, an end, with intelligent characters doing the best they can under the circumstances. Best line: Mary McCormack as one of the astronauts, thinking about their choices, says, “Look on the bright side. We’ll all get high schools named after us.”

On the other hand, in terms of emotional manipulation *Armageddon* is much more effective. It didn’t help that there’s

a shot about nine minutes into the movie, at the end of a meteor shower hitting New York, of both towers of the World Trade Center in flames — painfully too close to what we saw in real life only three years later. And, as I’ve observed recently, there’s a shot in this movie at Launch Pad 34A, where the Apollo I fire occurred, that always leaves me in tears — not because of the content of the scene but rather because of the setting and the realization that we haven’t served their memory at all well. It’s got Bruce Willis, running his usual emotional (non-)range, Ben Affleck, Steve Buscemi, and Billy Bob Thornton, giving the best performance of the lot. It’s also got (as the sole respite from testosterone-laden grimace†) Liv Tyler. (Though Tyler appears to exist in the script for two purposes: to look fetching, and to wail “that’s my daddy up there!” at the appropriate moments.) Best line: Buscemi, playing the brilliant, but crazy, geochemist, “Why do I do this? Because the money’s good, the scenery changes, and they let me use explosives.”

They’ve both got their good points, but *Armageddon* is a thrill ride, while *Deep Impact* is a movie.

† On Arthur’s recommendation, I delved into Gerald Nachman’s encyclopedic *Seriously Funny* about comedians of the ’50s and ’60s. There’s some interesting material here. For example, just like it took S J Perlman and George S Kaufman

† The latter of which I note only because it amuses me that IMDB gives her full name as Liliane Rudabet Gloria Elsveta Sobieski.

† Even Jessica Steen as one of the shuttle pilots gets into the testosterone-heavy grimacing act.

to put the words in Julius Marx' mouth and invent Groucho, so it took Mason Williams, Steve Martin, David Steinberg, and Rob Reiner to invent the Smothers Brothers, and even then it took Tom Smothers being an asshole with CBS' management to give them a place in history. Jean Shepard died a pissed-off old man, annoyed that he'd never gotten the public approbation he wanted for his storytelling. Lenny Bruce more-or-less turned a single use of the word "cocksucker" into a career. Mort Sahl destroyed his by deciding that reading the Warren Report was more interesting than commenting on the newspaper. Woody Allen, the neurotic character, is a different animal than Woody Allen, the writer and director, who makes stories by blowing up his own neuroses. Worth reading as history.

Edward Tufte, the statistician and graphics genius at Yale who wrote the excellent *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* has a new short monograph *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*. Among other things, he deconstructs the critical slide in the PowerPoint presentation Boeing engineers gave to NASA during the *Columbia* flight: the slide is titled "Review of Test Data Indicates Conservatism for Tile Penetration" but doesn't even mention that the test data for foam strikes didn't cover a piece as big as the one that hit *Columbia* until the last line, and then is not clear about it. In other words, the folks who had any knowledge about stuff hitting the orbiter were completely unclear in presenting their data. Since the slides were not accompanied by the engineers, nor by a full technical report, the message they were trying to get up the management chain was doomed.

The monograph is classic Tufte: violently opinionated, completely prescriptive. I don't agree with everything he says — I don't, for example, believe that the lack of quality in presentations is completely the fault of the tool — but overall, he makes his usual good points.

Quentin Tarantino gets two million points for style for *Kill Bill, vol 1*. Unfortunately, he loses about one million nine hundred thousand for bringing a new baseline level of gore to movies.

He starts with a basic action movie premise — woman left for dead by assassins takes her revenge — but he films each segment in a different style, or as a put-on of a movie or TV show we've seen before. There's a visually beautiful comic book segment — probably more so because the gore is toned down. There's the *Green Hornet* sequence, the *Seven Samurai* and *Crouching Tiger* send-ups (also visually stunning, by the way). There's a fight scene that's probably a take-off on Tarantino's own *Jackie Brown*. There are bits modelled after samurai movies I've never seen.

Sword fights, knife fights, hospital rape, gangland murder, shootouts, ritual beheadings, dismemberments, spurting amputations, indeed, about every violent

variation you can imagine. Just your basic Saturday afternoon serial. As scripted by Sam Peckinpah on acid after a fight with his wife.

¶ “Everything that has a beginning has an end.” Even if the end is *The Matrix Revolutions*, which contains operatic deaths, a flying kung fu fight in the rain, and has an apocalyptic messianic climax.‡ The Wachowski brothers had a fascinating vision out of cyberpunk which they turned into *The Matrix*. Since nothing succeeds in Hollywood like success, they drove the idea into the ground with their sequels. This last one suffers from over-hype of about 250 milliIshtars, and it sucks at a rate of about 175 milliMagnolias.

You’ve got to dig the people you’re making a movie about.

— Director P T Anderson, perpetrator of crimes against his characters such as *Magnolia*

¶ Take Ewan McGregor playing Rock Hudson, Renée Zellweger playing Doris Day, David Hyde Price playing Tony Randall, Tony Randall playing Joe E Brown, and you get *Down With Love*, a rather funny sendup of ‘60s romantic comedy movies. It starts with a complete anachronism and a geographic disaster in the opening establishing shot,[°] proceeds to confuse time and fashion and color schemes in a melange of chronological confusion. That doesn’t take away from the sly references, the in-jokes, the occasionally hilarious dialogue, and McGregor and Zellweger’s layers-within-layers performances. It’s also got Jeri Ryan wearing eye makeup that weighs more than her breast implants.

¶ We also read *Code Reading* by Diomidis Spinellis, surveyed two of O’Reilly’s “Hacks” series, *Linux Server Hacks* and *Google Hacks*, started *DocBook: The Definitive Guide*, about an particular flavor of document markup, and are still working on *Inside C#*. We started *The New New Thing* (and will review it next time), and delved into *Callahan’s Key* (to dig out a mailing comment reference, and got sucked in). *Naked in Death*, a romance sciencefiction murder mystery that Liz recommended, and *Getting Rid of Bradley*, a Jennifer Crusie romance novel that Eve recommended, are sitting by the bedside feeling unloved.

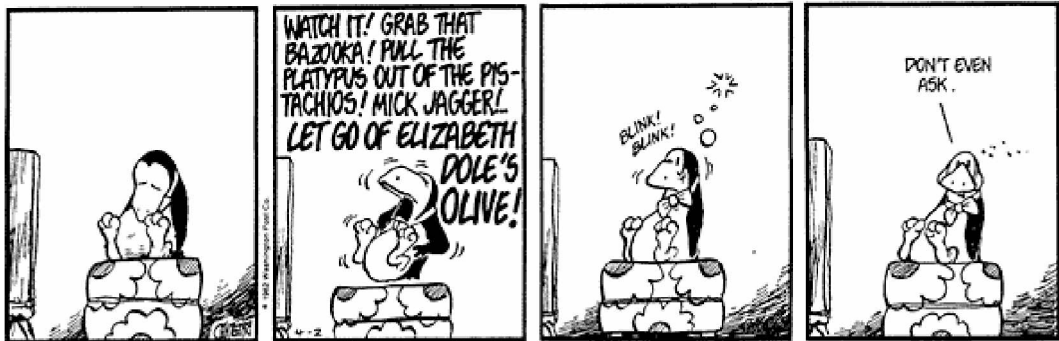
‡ And Lisa Danny Roberts makes the Dave Barry observation and points out that “Apocalyptic Messianic Climax” is just a great name for a rock band.

[°] The establishing shot voice over explains that it’s 1962. Clearly it’s spring or early summer based on weather and clothes. Our heroine arrives at Grand Central station, the camera pulls back and up, and we see the Pan Am building. Which wasn’t completed until a year later. The camera turns so she can catch a cab, showing us the United Nations which is roughly half a mile away.

Mailing Comments on SFPA 234

Steve Hughes ☒ *Travelers Tales* ☒

"Most photography is a flat image of a person, place or thing. A flat image is a great way of remembering an event or place, but it can look very fake. 3d photography adds depth to a picture by fooling the eyes into each seeing their own picture of something." Since these new 3D glasses don't depend on color, they actually work for me. This is very, very cool. Thanks. I've set the glasses in my nightstand, so when I read SFPA in bed, I can look at your pictures.



Rich Lynch ☒ *Variations on a Theme* ☒

"There really is such a thing as a free lunch, no matter what Robert A. Heinlein believed. At the beginning of the year, I made an unofficial resolution that I was going to get out of my office toore this year to take part in seminars and the like that various think tanks around the city often sponsor." This lunch circuit sounds like fun. At Microsoft, we not only have the regular seminar series you'd expect at a research lab — "The syntax-semantics interface in the LinGO grammar matrix", or "Probabilistic generative models for natural language processing and reasoning" — but we're also a stop on some book tours — I've been to talks by Bruce Sterling and Malcolm Gladwell, for example — and some political tours, the last under the auspices of the company's PAC. Unfortunately, since the talks are all broadcast on the internal network, I tend to watch them from my office, rather than trundling across the freeway to the research campus.

"I attended a Cato luncheon forum on 'The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea' (which was pretty interesting - the so-called 'limited liability company' was, and still is, one of the most important tools for creating modern Western society)." The limited liability company is a good idea for doing just that — limiting the liability of the investors — and the original expedition to Jamestown (for example) was launched by one. However, when the company assumed the same status in the eyes of American law as a person, things started to go a little wonky.

*ct Brooks: "On the Columbia disaster: 'And two months later we still haven't heard if anyone knows what happened.' But five months later it's been confirmed what everybody had long presumed what the cause was — foam debris from the external tank damaged the shuttle's wing in a critical area." I will admit that my first thought was "foam? c'mon," but didn't think about it moving at 550 miles per hour, 800 feet per second. There's an excellent article about the investigation by William Langewiesche in the November issue of *The Atlantic* about the accident and its investigation, that includes a description of the test firing of a piece of foam insulation at a mockup of the wing: "The gun fired, and the foam hit the panel at a 25-degree relative angle at about 500 mph. Immediately afterward an audible gasp went through the crowd. The foam had knocked a hole . . . large enough to allow people to put their heads through. Hubbard told me that some of the NASA people were close to tears." ❁ "What was surprising, at least to me, was that this type of incident has happened several times before, and there has been no urgency to fix the problem." This demonstrates how broken NASA's corporate culture is. Since this had happened before and there were no consequences, NASA managers felt the problem could be safely ignored forever. The dangerous PowerPoint slide I mentioned in my review of Tufte's monograph merely gave the management at NASA the excuse to continue to believe there would be no consequences.*

It was particularly chilling to read Langewiesche's article. The engineers couldn't get data about the foam strike confirmed by their management, had talked through the order of failures if there was a hole in the wing, and as sensors on the left side started to wink out, they *knew*.

*ct Schlosser: "On the Tungusta event: 'I'm not sure what could have caused a mid-air burst as opposed to an actual impact.' Larry Niven and David Brin, separately, postulated a mini-black hole. Which doesn't make any sense, either. Maybe it's time to bring the space aliens back into the picture." My marginal note here is what sent me back to Spider Robinson's *Callahan's Key*: the McGuffin in that book is that the invention Nikola Tesla was testing on the day of the Tungusta event on Long Island was what actually caused the destruction . . . on the other side of the world.*

ct me: "What's this I hear about you not wanting another term as SFFA OE? Didn't you see the fine print on the ballots we returned last time? (You were elected for life, buddy! No more of this wimping out, OK?)" The last person that tried to be OE for Life was Seth Goldberg, and look how that ended up for him. "Seriously, you'll be a hard act to follow." And more seriously, thanks. I've had fun doing it.

❁ *"I'm working my way through [Stephenson's] Cryptonomicon now (though 'working' is hardly a fair way to describe it - it's a very good read). . . But how did [it] get nominated for a Hugo Award? Three hundred pages in, and not even a hint of anything sfnal yet." I've come to think of it as alternate history, rather than straight science fiction. Much as *The Cobweb* isn't science fiction, either.*



ct Lillian: "On Australia: Your narrative is good reading, and I'm looking forward to the full DUFF trip report." My parents are in Australia now, for Thanksgiving. They decided to skip the country rather than put up with any celebration of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. (I offered to take them to Las Vegas, where we could have their wedding vows renewed by an Elvis impersonator — causing my father to stroke out — and then go to a topless review — which would give my mother a heart attack.)

ct Robe: "I keep a small roll of duct tape with me when I travel because it's a safety device - it can seal doors from smoke incursion if a fire breaks out in the hotel you're staying in, and can therefore greatly lengthen survival time." It's also useful for other purposes: James kept getting in the face of Allie's boyfriend the last time she was home. I finally told him that if he didn't stop being annoying, I'd restrain him with duct tape. He didn't, and I did. He was so shocked that I was actually duct taping him to a folding chair that he forgot to struggle. But see the comic on this page, too.

☞ "[Gov] Owens [of Colorado, who talked at the Cato Institute against tax on Internet commerce] also believes that if an Internet tax law was enacted, the dot-coms would be subject to a myriad of different tax rates for various states and localities to keep track of, which would be an oppressive burden that would affect dot-com profitability." Interestingly, Amazon claims that it is simply not possible to charge the correct sales tax in every jurisdiction, and yet, they charge the correct tax in every locale where they have offices (like Washington state) and manage to charge the correct tax for the merchants they operate web sites for (like Lands End and Toys R Us).

Norm Metcaif ☒ **Tyndallite** ☞

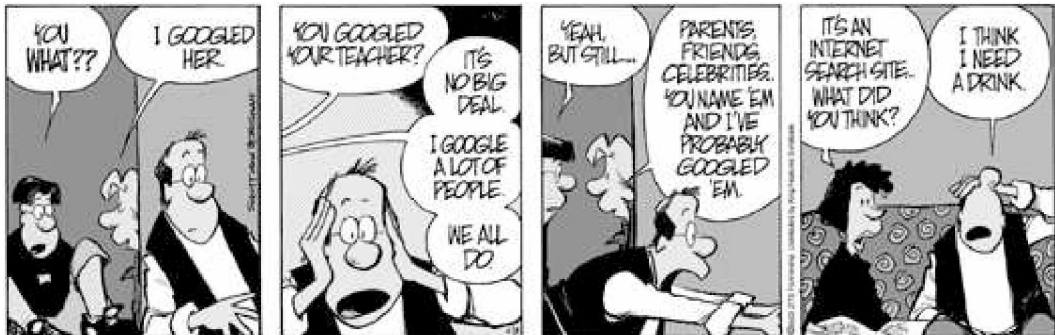
ct Southerner: "Item #9 is listed as: 'StricklaNice Distinctions 18 by Hlavaty'. In its place I have Revenant #18 by Sheila J. Strickland." Yup. That was a failure of the software that formats the OO. I didn't notice it until the mailings were bagged and I was putting the table of contents on the web.

ct me: "Thanks for your glowing review of Neal Stephenson and J. Frederick George's novel The Cobweb (as by 'Stephen Bury')." Their second book, *Interface*, is sitting on Liz's side of the bed waiting for her to read it before I do.

Sheila Strickland ☒ **Revenant** ☞

"Another diverting movie was 'L'Augerge Espagnole' (which they translate as 'Euro Pudding'). A young Frenchman spends a year in Barcelona studying economics so he can get a job back home. He moves into an apartment with five other students who are a real European melange of British, Italian, Spanish, Danish, and Belgium." I saw a good review of this from the Toronto Film Festival. I'd actually like to see it.

ct Brooks: "Ct me on whether the Patriot Act would apply to you: I'm not familiar with all its ramifications, but if you sell books to anyone; I suspect that would put you in the category of 'bookseller' and be subject to seizure of records if the FBI decides you've sold something to someone they want to investigate." The correct Patriot Act workaround for a bookseller appears to be to destroy the records of individual sales once they're closed. However, Ashcroft and his minions keep telling us that they've never used this provision of the law, but they can't possibly let that provision lapse.



Guy Lillian ☒ **Spiritus Mundi** ☞

"While on the subjects of DUFF and Challenger and paying, a note. When Rosy and I won DUFF I was informed that several unnamed fans had expressed worry that I would embezzle from the fund in order to xerox Challenger." You may be a lawyer, and broke, but I can't imagine you using the DUFF funds for other than their intended purposes.

"With luck you'll be one of the SFFAns actually in attendance at this month's DeepSouthCon, so all of this will be old news." Damn! I wish we had been there. I wish this was all old

news. I wish we had stories to share.

ct Brooks: "Seriously, remember the jet whose fuselage tore itself apart over the Hawaiian islands some years ago? The disaster began with a small hole in the hull, which tore itself wider and wider, until the whole roof of the airplane was gone." I seem to remember that it was general stress failure of the skin. That accident made them reconsider the ways for measuring the life expectancy of airplanes. That particular plan had a higher proportion of takeoffs and landings compared to its flying time.

ct Lynch: "DC's turistas behave better than New Orleans'. Nobody shows their tits for the cherry blossoms." Yes, but in Washington, rather than using bookmarks, they just bend over pages. At least Congressmen do.

** "I try to aim high when I engage in 'political mud-slinging' reserving my mud for the professional politicians, let I splatter SFFAs resident wingers, grand people and beloved pals." I'd like to think that we argue about politics rather than people.*

** "...I'd say we haven't seen any Oscar-worthy performances yet in '03." Lisa reports that Meg Ryan's performance in *In The Cut* gets there, but most of what I've seen for movies this year has been not Oscar-worthy.*

** "The real issue is, will Return of the King win the big one?" No, it won't: it's a genre movie.*

ct SFC Bulletin: "Pioneer 10 is 7.6 billion miles away? Come back! Yo forgot something!" The Voyagers are 90AU (about 13 billion kilometers, or 8 billion miles) out. And as they're getting through the edges of the heliosphere, they're getting interesting science done.

ct Markstein: "Your comment that 'Democracy will come to be regarded with the same fear and loathing as Communism' is chilling, because it may possibly come to be." Let's not confuse state socialism from the Soviet Union with communism. Let's not confuse American republican government with democracy.

*ct Feller: "The Years of Rice and Salt strikes me at science fiction's prestige publication of 2002." I need to read it. It strikes me as a really really good alternate history. And I may get around to reading it some time. Hell, I finally got around to getting a copy of *American Gods* two weeks ago.*

*ct Brown: "Ang Lee's ponderous [The Hulk] was overlong and plain dull outside of the action scenes, although I could stare at Jennifer Connelly's face for seven hours without blinking." She can also be seen in *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Rocketeer*.*

ct me: "However nice it was to hear the department head praise Allie as so superior to the other students that they could name only her as outstanding, think of how that made the other kids feel. I imagine the parents who heard this were mightily pissed, and I don't blame them." I understand what you're saying, but I'm a firm believer in meritocracy. If Allie was the second-best kid by that large a margin, I'd like to believe that I would have been just as proud of the first-place (and only) kid. However, since, as we figured out, the

newspaper selects the city-wide winners in advance, based on their high schools, to some extent the fix is in from the get-go.

✿ “Speaking of Patrick Stewart, he played Le Carré’s ‘Karla’ in the superb adaptation of the last George Smiley novel.” Not only was Stewart in *Smiley’s People*, he also played Karla in the TV production of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. But *Smiley’s People* wasn’t the last Smiley novel: *The Secret Pilgrim* is, even though it features the return of the central character from the intervening book *The Russia House*.

✿ “You’ve heard, I think, that Allen Steele plotted ‘The Days Between’ at our banquet table at the second Jekyll Island DSC, bouncing ideas off Ron Walotzky.” No, I didn’t know that. However, taken out of context, and read before “Stealing Alabama”, “The Days Between” is not a very interesting science fiction story. It’s a marginally okay character study of a man in odd circumstances that he simply cannot fix.

✿ “The Bond movies started diverging from the Fleming novels early — Dr No, for instance fries in a nuclear reactor in the film, whereas Bond buried him in bird shit — really — in the book. But that’s a minor point. The basic plot and setting of most of the movies match most of the books ... at least in the early going. ... The Spy Who Loved Me contributed nothing but a title.” Fleming sold the rights to all his books to Cubby Broccoli, except *Casino Royale*, which had already been sold to CBS for television and the actual plot of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, which he thought on reflection was a piece of crap. So Broccoli ended up owning only the title of *Spy*, and had to come up with a new plot.

✿ “The Democratic field has produced only one candidate of personality so far — Vermont’s Howard Dean.” See my opening essay.



ct Gelb: “That silly story about the Democrats in the Texas legislature literally fleeing the state in protest of Republican gerrymandering is a demonstration of how desparately divided, politically, this country remains.” Any belief that this was a simple redistricting was thrown out when it was reported, with a straight face, that the important argument over the district lines, between the president pro tem of the Texas senate, and the speaker of the Texas house, was settled by Tom Delay flying into Austin and running back

and forth down the state house to get them to agree. ❁ *“What would have been different had the election in 2000 ended honestly?”* Read my cynical answer to that question from last time.

❁ *“I could take in a titty bar with my brother – and have. . . — but I don’t think I could have with my father.”* I could probably go to a strip joint with my father, but I suspect he’d be bored to tears, as I always am.

❁ *“What ‘Robbins/Sarandon’ debacle involved the Baseball Hall of Fame? Something to do with Bull Durham, no doubt.”* They were going to have a 15th anniversary showing of the movie at the Hall of Fame, and had invited Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon to speak. Then the saber rattling started, and Robbins and Sarandon were quite public with their opposition. The Hall of Fame cancelled for fear they’d speak out about the war. Robbins gave a speech at the National Press Club shortly thereafter in which he spoke about the danger of a them *vs* us attitude as the war started up, about the dangers to a democratic society of attempting to stop dissent.

ct Schlosser: “You can’t equate Star Trek with 007 flicks. I’ve never heard of a ‘Bondie’.” Sure there are “bondies,” but they’re usually found at leather bars in West Hollywood and Greenwich Village.

ct Reinhardt: “So Judkowitz is now a music therapist as well as a musician. Inspiring vision of one of her sessions: ‘Miss Ruth, I have bad dreams about my mother!’ ‘Well, then, hoist Fifi!’” So Ruth gets a phone call from a patient in the middle of the night, wakes up enough to mutter into the phone “sing Kumbaya three times and call me in the morning.”

ct Metcalf: “How long has it been since I told the anecdote related to me by a Berkeley friend, who well remembered the day a physics grad student came in, sat down at a table in a co-op cafeteria, and remarked, ‘Well ... found the anti-proton today!’ A Nobel prize and six PhDs, he said, came from that project.” On Monday afternoon when I was a freshman, I dropped into Feynman’s informal undergraduate seminar. The previous week’s discussion had been on mesons. Dick came in late with a big smile. He’d just gotten off the phone with Burton Richter at Stanford, who’d discovered a new heavy meson he was calling psi. Since Dick was roughly at the center of the universe, Murray Gell-Mann had told him over lunch about Sam Ting at CERN discovering a heavy meson *he* was calling J. Same particle. Predicted by Gell-Mann’s theories, but heavier than anyone had seen yet. Synthesized on opposite sides of the planet in the same week. Burton and Ting shared the Nobel Prize the following year.

ct Hlavaty: “We’ve discussed refilling our laser cartridge to print Challenger, but have been deterred by the smallish number of copies we could get from each refill — only about 6000, I understand.” What’s the regular number of copies you get from a cartridge? Have you done the price per print calculation? When I last considered buying a laser printer, part of the reason I was looking at a LexMark was that the standard cartridge for it was good for 17,500 pages, which worked out to something like 2.9¢ per print.

(I haven't actually worried about buying laser printer consumables since the HP LaserJet 3 and 5, which got about three thousand impressions per cartridge.)

Randy Cleary ☒ *Avatar Press* 📖

ct Brooks: "Regarding repressed memories: Some events are so traumatic for some people that the mind attempts to deny them immediately and continual denial leads to repression of the event as a self protection mechanism." There was a really interesting article in *The New York Times Magazine* a month or two back about recovered memories. ("A Bad Trip Down Memory Lane" in the July 27th issue.) A Harvard grad student named Susan Clancy found herself caught in a political cross-fire within the psychological community when she did a study in which she found people claiming recovered memories.

Clancy guessed that there was a category of people who are prone to create false memories and who might demonstrate this tendency when given a standard memory test. Her strategy was to present a list of semantically related words, like "candy," "sour" and "sugar," to those who purported to have recovered memories. Then she would test their recall of those words. On the test, she would throw in words that weren't on the list but were like the words on the list — "sweet," for example. Her hypothesis was that these people would be especially inclined to "remember" seeing the word "sweet" — in effect creating a recollection out of a contextual inference, a fact from a feeling. In the end, the data strongly supported her thesis. She published her findings in 2000 in the scientific journal *Psychological Science*.

She got a *lot* of grief for questioning whether *any* recovered memories of child abuse were invented. So she reran the study on people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens. And predictably, *they* fell on her like a ton of bricks.

ct me: "Did you catch the poetry of Rumsfeld book discussion on NPR?" No I didn't, but some of his utterings are completely zen like. I'm not sure if that's intentional or intended to obfuscate. There's an article about his early career in the Nixon administration in the November *Atlantic*. I keep meaning to read it, now that I've read the *Columbia* article in that issue.

☯ *"As for election 2004, I'll go out on a limb and predict that Bush will not win (even if the economy starts cranking up again) unless the Democrats totally blow it (which is about 50/50 in my opinion)."* The Democrats have picked good candidates before who've gone down in history as complete schlupfs because of counter-campaigning. Remember that Dukakis was going to beat Bush until two things happened: Dukakis happened to pick a bad photo op driving a tank at an Army base, and more importantly Roger Ailes (through cutouts) produced the Willie Horton ad. The former photo was used quite effectively by Lee Atwater. The latter ad is credited with giving Bush a 13 point bump in the polls, which he never lost.

Gary Robe ☒ *Tennessee Trash* ↵

Nice zine. Enjoyed the review of the Mexican paint show.

It's at times like this that I envy Mr Protocol. He continues to believe that words on paper are so antique by the time he sees them that they couldn't possibly be of any use. Not only are the classics a closed book to him, books are a closed book to him.

— “Ask Mr Protocol: The Cathedral, the Bazaar and Mr. P.”, by Michael O'Brien, *SunExpert Magazine*, Apr 1998

Tom Feller ☒ *Frequent Flyer* ↵

Thanks for the movie reviews. You got to see an entirely different cross-section of summer movies than we did. “[In *Pirates of the Caribbean*] there is just the right blend of action and comedy relief in the form of two British marines and two pirates.” The comic relief from the two spear carriers who also provide point-of-view goes way back in theater — didn't Shakespeare use the trick? In movies it goes back to at least the characters Tahei and Matakishi in *Kakushi toride no san akunin*, Akira Kurosawa's movie whose title translates as *Hidden Fortress of the Three Bandits*. As I'm sure you know, Kurosawa's two peasants show up in a later movie as R2-D2 and C3PO.

☯ “This year I downloaded the short fiction from a web site called Fictionwise. I don't think I'll make this a common practice, because I had to read the stories on my laptop... If I had a PDA, I might find the process more enjoyable.” I've been a Fictionwise customer for about three years now. Since the compelling handheld application for me is reading, they're just the right thing. In fact, it's one of the reasons I keep considering giving up my Palm and getting a Pocket PC: one of the things Microsoft got right was the reading software. The technology Microsoft has for sub-pixel font rendering (many of which were the inventions of my current manager) make that even better. On the Palm, I use an application called Weasel Reader for reading, which is better than the standard Palm reading app. However, both laptop and handheld still only have about half the resolution of print. (But see O'Brien's observation above.)

☯ “Another drawback to the electronic format is that the one time I really want to have something to read is that period between the time you board an airliner and the time it reaches 10,000 feet, when they allow you to turn on your electronic devices.” Another advantage of a handheld. For reading, you just pull out the little device out rather than wrestling your laptop case out from under the seat in front of you and elbowing the guy in the seat next to you as you extract the machine from your bag. Though I usually have some reading material in dead tree form — almost always SFFA — in my briefcase for the short period when I can't turn on anything.

David Schlosser ☉ *Peter, Pan & Merry* ♁

ct Brooks: "...having had to go in [to Iraq] because there was no time to wait for inspections, we seem curiously casual about securing any WMDs that are actually there." Securing them? Hell, how 'bout finding them? Of course, we've also not been real good about guarding the *conventional* weapons we've found, which has certainly made it easier for the rebels to keep attacking American troops.

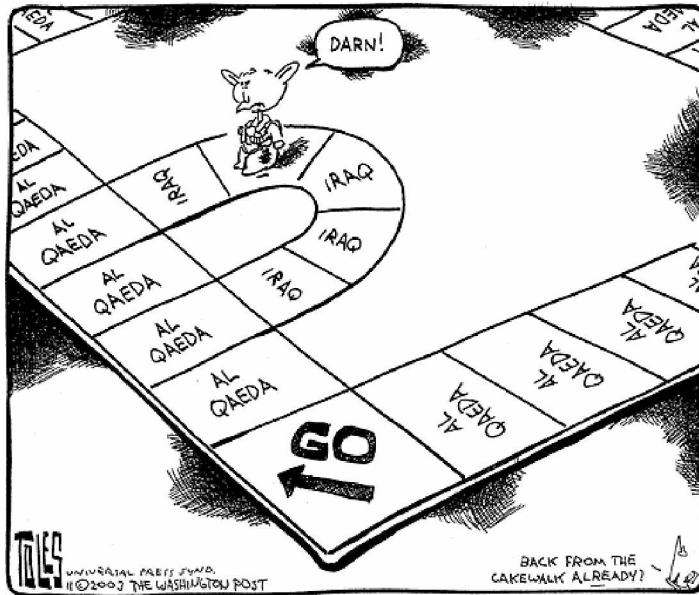
☉ "I'm not sure just how much intimidation there is in monitoring 'non-compliance' with sentencing guidelines since those federal judgeships are for life, right? Those who have aspirations for higher appointments may feel intimidated..." Yeah, the non-compliance seems to have some interesting gaps. Like Charles Pickering, who hasn't gotten any grief from Ashcroft for undersentencing a fellow who burned a cross on the lawn of an interracial couple. Now, to be fair to Pickering, the other two guys involved plead to misdemeanors and got probation. So arguing that he deserved seven-and-a-half years — the federal minimum — for something his co-conspirators had gotten away with gives me pause. However, the third guy insisted on going to trial, and was found guilty.

ct Hlavaty: "Actually, the number of troops we sent was rather more than Rumsfeld actually thought were needed. At least I think that the military convinced him to up the troop count." But, it still wasn't quite enough for the end game. Part of the story of the Iraq war is the story of how Rumsfeld's notions of how the Army should be organized differed from the Army's notions of how the Army should be organized. The Army, historically, wants to be a heavy fighting force. The Marines, of course, got it: light and fast, or as a sailor on leave would think of it, "find 'em, feel 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em."

ct Dengrove: "Ideally, I would wish for even more surgically directed anti-terrorism..." I must say, I agree with you. (Where's Osama bin Laden?) However, it's probably too late to kill al Queda by launching a cruise missile attack against its leadership. The organization is now too decentralized. Unfortunately, the solution seems to be doing things like refusing entry to British Muslim businessmen on business trips from London to Los Angeles, and taking Jordanian-born Canadian citizens off planes passing through New York and deporting them to Jordan where they're tortured. (Both those incidents actually happened, of course.)

☉ "Sorry, no mention of death for masturbation in the Bible." Yeah, but what about death by masturbation? Certainly the warnings about going blind and getting hairy palms came from somewhere.

ct Reinhardt: "One problem I could see with regard to removal of someone like Saddam via assassination is that, with no clear line of succession, you have no idea what sore of leadership would take hold." Well, before the American invasion, the Shiites were in the majority in Iraq, but the Sunnis had all the guns. Now, the Shiites are trying to force in a



theocracy, and the Sunnis with the guns are in hiding. I've got a feeling the outcome will be the same.

ct Brown: "Maybe the plan for the tax cut helping the economy is based on the theory that deficit spending will stimulate a recovery." Deficit spending stimulates an economy if it's poured into something like public works projects. We've proved more than once that trickle down economics doesn't work.

* "An interesting question is what Cuba would have added to 'the social mix' had we not been so paranoid about it for so long." I notice that even some Cuban refugees are now talking about how the embargo has outlived its usefulness. But what about China? Wasn't it Shrub's father who argued forcefully that trade with China would increase the freedom of their society?

ct Lillian: "I agree that they should have, as long as there was a possibility of damage, done what they could determine if it was there or not." Boy, that's a singularly zen-like comment.

* "I need to recheck Superman 2 since I don't recall any teleportation." I seem to remember that there's time travel, but not teleportation. But JJ watched *Apollo 13* last night, and I discovered that my memory of it was flawed.

* "But considering how many years of having that summation titled *Rear-ender* it took to cause your accident, by the time retitling it *Great Blowjob* took effect you probably wouldn't care." Save pathological cases, I've always thought that "great blowjob" was redundant. OK, maybe "good blowjob" is redundant. (What's the difference between a steel belted radial and 365 condoms? One's a Goodyear, and one's a *great* year.) But George

Wells was kind enough to supply me with an utterance of Barbara Bush's: "Clinton lied. A man might forget where he parks or where he lives, but he never forgets oral sex, no matter how bad it is."

ct Robe: "At least for the moment it looks like the question of 'Where in the World are Iraq's WMDs' is starting to get looked at more and more closely and may prove to be the crack that starts the wall tumbling." That question seems to just be get no traction in the press. Neither has the issue of a senior official from the Bush administration revealing the identity of an undercover CIA agent in revenge for her husband questioning Iraq policy. Neither has anyone in the press provided real analysis of the Medicare bill that passed last week.

☼ *"I have no problem with the concept of the mind trying to protect itself...by sealing off a memory. The problem is telling the difference between forgotten, repressed and induced memories."* It turns out there's a way to test for repressed vs induced memories. See my comment to Randy Cleary back a few pages.

Eve Ackerman ☒ *Guilty Pleasures* ☞

"And then, two days later we heard that 22 year old Spc. Jeffrey Wershow was coming home from Iraq to be buried on the family farm." The marginal comment here says, "Five days ago I finished a long comment to you about how we were lied to so Bush could have the war. Now I'm reading about Jeffrey Wershow's funeral and tears are rolling down my face. What a senseless waste." A couple of months later I can reflect on the terrible human face that this puts on the cost of war.

I forget who the editor of *Life* was when they ran a spread of pictures of each of the soldiers killed in Vietnam that week, no commentary, just names and photos. Henry Luce, the publisher, was a vocal proponent of the war, and the editor fully expected that his photo essay was going to be spiked. Luce came down to look over the layouts for the whole magazine for the week, flipped back to the casualty photos, was silent for a while, turned to the editor and said, "thank you,"

☼ *"My brother Mitch sent me a gift for my birthday which Micah said raised my coolness level among the neighborhood moms by geometric amounts. 'Other moms get sweaters. You got a sword.' The sword is a reproduction of a Spanish rapier with a basket hilt. One of these days I'm going to put up some hooks in my office area and hang it, but in the meantime it's leaning up against the wall, looking inspirational."* If you try to hang it in your office, you may get more inspiration than you planned. Remember the scene in *Topsy Turvy* of Gilbert trying to hang the Japanese sword over his door?

☼ *"[As for Raphi at college] I got the official word that he and the mysterious Naomi I never got to meet are no longer keeping company. Maybe next winter there will be someone new I won't get to meet."* There's quite a bit about my daughter's social life that I don't get to find out until much later. My darling wife will casually mention something that Allie told

her. "Oh, she's going out on a date with the guy from down the hall." "What guy down the hall??!?"

✿ "Two hours and one set of x-rays and a CAT scan later, we had the official word. Micah does have a brain. ... And a promise to me that he'll wear his helmet from now on." Back when I was riding regularly, I would occasionally forget, and find myself half a mile from home and bareheaded. I'd turn around and very carefully go back and fetch it. Like Woody Allen says in *Sleeper* my brain is my second favorite organ.

✿ "Right now (July) Micah's in Washington State with Outdoor Adventure, a camping program sponsored by United Synagogue Youth. It's four weeks of hiking and tenting in the Pacific Northwest...." Where all did he go? That must have been a fun expedition. Lots of pretty country up here in this corner of the continent.

ct Reinhardt: "I do have concerns any time a religious document is translated, ... For instance, there isn't a commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.' The Hebrew is very clear in saying 'You shall not murder'..." Similarly, the Catholic church has made a cult out of the mistranslation of "young girl" to "virgin." ✿ "Another mistranslation (and one of my favorite examples) is in the Garden of Eden, where Eve is referred to in English translations as Adam's 'helpmate'. That's not what she's called in the Hebrew. There she's known as his ezer kenegdo, a word that means 'assisting adversary' — the one who cares enough about you to tell you when you're wrong." In general, the English translations of the Bible are bad. The King James may well be the worst example. A chap who worked for me in Austin was studying Aramaic because he wanted to figure out the New Testament said for himself.

ct Gelb: "Thanks for the reminder, I've been meaning to rent Metropolis. Micah's become a big fan of foreign and alternative movies, so I'll likely wait until he returns to get it." On her last visit home, Allie and I were discussing movies. She said she'd just seen *The Seven Samurai* and thought it was way, way cool. I offered to take her to see the third *Matrix* movie, but she'd already seen it, so we went to see *Kill Bill* instead. (Even though I'm grossed out, I really want to know how the story turns out, so I'll skip dinner some night in January when she's home again, and take her to see the second in that series.)





Janice Gelb ▣ *Trivial Pursuits* ♣

“Also, despite our supposed policy against assassination, the recent shooting of Saddam’s sons was greeted with much trumpeting by the US officials. Yet when Israel, for example, shoots a Hamas terrorist leader whom they can prove planned past attacks and is planning further attacks, pious speeches from the US condemn assassination.” I’m not sure that Saddam’s sons holing up in a suburban mansion, and engaging in a shootout with troops coming to arrest them counts as assassination. On the other hand, I’d have advocated taking out Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden back in 1998.

Among your reviews, I’m really intrigued by Jack Hagerly’s *Spaceship Handbook*. I’m also pleased that there’s a new Flynn book from Gregory McDonald — Flynn is also my favorite of his characters. By *Son cf...* he’d driven Fletch into the ground. And I’m amused beyond belief that *Jeeves: A Gentleman’s Personal Gentleman*, the fictional biography, was written by the Raffles Professor of Business Administration at the University of Singapore, who is better known for Parkinson’s Law.

Meanwhile, since you’re talking about movies, too, I’ll take this opportunity to note that MGM are rapacious bastard scum. Two years ago they sold three sets of James Bond movies covering all the released ones, then took them off the market after about six months. This year, they’re selling three sets of James Bond movies, but they’re different sets than the ones they sold two years ago. And they aren’t selling the singletons, apparently. So, if you bought one or two of them two years ago, you can’t fill in your set.

Also, your reprint of the review *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* from *The New Yorker* is just fascinating.

And, even though Westercon was just down the road, Liz's mom was visiting at the time, so that's two conventions we missed this year. Of course, I gather that Westercon was not remarkably successful as a convention, but it was a shame to not see you and the usual suspects from Los Angeles.

ct Brooks: "Actually, rumors right now are that the investigative report on the Columbia disaster is going to show management problems..." See my discussion of both Tufte's monograph on PowerPoint, and Langeweishe's article in *The Atlantic* about the investigation.

☼ "There are still a couple of fans in Hobart..." Speaking of Australian fans, once I started experimenting with OpenOffice, I started looking for narrative help, and the good book I found was written by Jean Weber, and she dedicated it to Eric Lindsay.

☼ "Luckily with the latest flap about the forged Nigerian uranium claim and the continuing bad economy, Dubya's ratings have fallen." None of those have had legs, which just doesn't make sense to me. The claim now is that the economy is getting better because consumer spending went up. Of course, consumer spending went up because people were sent advances on next spring's income tax refunds, and they spent them.

ct Lynch: "I understand that the defense just won a change of venue for the sniper suspects..." It still amazes me that the younger guy's lawyers didn't manage to get the confession thrown out. The one he gave when he didn't have a lawyer.

☼ "I suspect the Academy votes are waiting for the third film to give LoTR some of the major awards." As I said to Guy above, I don't think so, but I'm prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

ct Feller: "Regarding the war: I don't disagree that Saddam Hussein was an evil dictator. I just don't understand why (a) it was our business to get rid of him, and/or (b) why we dedded he was any more evil than the many other evil dictators out there." How long was Hussein "our guy"? As I mention much earlier in this zine, I think Wesley Clark was spot-on when he declared Iraq a sideshow in the war on terrorism. I'm impressed with how he stuck to that message in a hostile interview on Fox "News".

☼ "I've seen the Flint movies and thought they were a bit more subtile than the Powers movies, with less really broad toilet-and-sex humor." The second Powers movie was so full of toilet humor that I have no desire to see the third one. But the Flint ones are just



remarkably low-key in that regard.

ct Schlosser: "You ask here why someone, having downloaded a free song by an artist, would buy an artist's other work..." You give a pretty lucid explanation here. I've always liked Janis Ian's attitude on downloads. The essay on her website about how RIAA is actually hurting her is pretty lucid, too. All I can say is that I keep buying books from Baen because I get to sample their authors' work for free on the web. In the software business, there are guys who give away their main software products and still manage to make a reasonable living. And speaking of Baen books:

ct Reinhardt: "Unfortunately, Rowling isn't likely to get any better as a stylist, or as a writer at all, if they keep not editing her books because they'll sell anyway." I postulated a couple of years ago that there were a bunch of dangerous writers' syndromes. The two most important are Heinlein's Syndrome (you've got enough sales that nobody bothers editing your work because the books are going to sell anyway — Tom Clancy is a victim) and Pournelle's Syndrome (you realize that a word processor will make re-writing so much easier that you don't bother doing it).

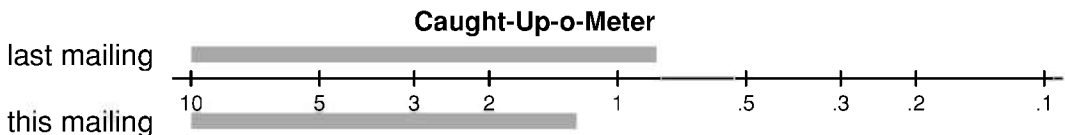
ct me: "Very impressive story about the list sent to the local paper. (I got cheated out of this honor in English from my high school because, I found out later, another student had better 'extracurricular activities' even though that was not supposed to be a criterion. But I'm not bitter, no...)" As I said to Guy, as nearly as we can figure they pre-pick the kids in each category based on the school they attend. But the letters that the teachers at Allie's school wrote were really bad, and *didn't* mention anything but the subject at hand.

✿ *"Are there any difficulties about her going to a school out of the country?"* The only things that are anywhere near issues were the visa, and cross-border banking. Getting mail across the border is sometimes a pain: a regular first class letter dropped at the Bellevue post office at 8am on a Friday — I drop a note to Allie in the box on the way to the work every week — doesn't get to her until the following Thursday.

✿ *"As always, thanks for the thorough reviews. I've tried the 'four words' trick in this mailing for mine. It's harder than it looks!"* Which is why I stopped doing it.



Consulting with the Caught-Up-o-MeterTM shows that I didn't make any forward progress this time. Projects at work, interviewing for a new job, and a new thing I'm noodling around on with old colleagues have sucked up an awful bloody lot of time in the past two months; I didn't even get Janice's zine done.



A couple of issues ago, I ran an essay by Les Earnest about how, in the air of collective national paranoia after the Pearl Harbor attack, he was investigated by the FBI on suspicion of being a Japanese spy. In that essay, he noted that “On another occasion much later, I learned by chance that putting certain provocative information on a security clearance form can greatly speed up the clearance process. But that is another story.” This is that other story, which, like the first, ran in the RISKS digest.

Date: 28 Mar 88 1641 PST

From: Les Earnest <LES@SAIL.Stanford.EDU>

Subject: Short stories of old computer risks

Tired of viruses? I was just purging some old files and ran across a trilogy of true short stories that I posted on the Stanford bboards two years ago. The incidents described span a period of twenty years ending 25 years ago, but I think they are still amusingly relevant.

Kick the Mongrel

In a previous account I told how reading a book on cryptography led to my getting an F.B.I. record at the age of 12 and about subsequent awkwardness in obtaining a security clearance. I will now describe how I learned that putting provocative information on a security clearance form can accelerate the clearance process. First let me describe the environment that gave rise to this occurrence.

White Faces in New Places

In 1963, after living in Lexington, Massachusetts for 7 years, my wife and I moved to the Washington D.C. area to help set up a new office for Mitre Corporation. After three days of searching, we bought a house then under construction in a pleasant new suburb called Mantua Hills, near Fairfax, Virginia. I hadn’t noticed it during our search, but it soon became evident that there were nothing but white faces in this area. In fact, there were nothing but white faces for miles around.

We expected to find some cultural differences and did. For example, people drove much less aggressively than in Boston. The first time that I did a Boston-style bluff at a traffic circle, the other cars yielded! This took all the fun out of it and I was embarrassed into driving more conservatively.

When I applied for a Virginia driver’s license, I noticed that the second question on the application, just after “Name,” was “Race.” When filling out forms, I have always made it a practice to omit information that I think is irrelevant. It seemed to me that my race had nothing to do with driving a car, so I left it blank.

When I handed the application to the clerk along with the fee, he just looked at me, marked “W” in the blank field and threw it on a stack. I guess that he had learned that this was the easiest way to deal with outlanders.

Our contractor was a bit slow in finishing the house. We knew that there was mail headed our way that was probably accumulating in the post office, so we put up the mailbox even before the house was finished. The first day we got just two letters – from the American Civil Liberties

Union and Martin Luther King's organization. We figured that this was the Post Office staff's way of letting us know that they were on to us. Sure enough, the next day we got the rest of our accumulated mail, a large stack.

It shortly became apparent that on all forms in Virginia, the second question was "Race." Someone informed me that as far as the Commonwealth of Virginia was concerned, there were just two races: "white" and "colored." When our kids brought forms home from school, I started putting a "C" after the second question, leaving it to the authorities to figure out whether that meant "Colored" or "Caucasian."

Racing Clearance

About this time, my boss and I and another colleague applied for a special security clearance that we needed. There are certain clearances that can't be named in public – it was one of those. I had held an ordinary Top Secret clearance for a number of years and had held the un-namable clearance a short time before, so I did not anticipate any problems.

When I filled out the security form, I noticed that question #5 was "Race." In the past I had not paid attention to this question; I had always thoughtlessly written "Caucasian." Having been sensitized by my new environment, I re-examined the question.

All of my known forebears came from Europe, mostly from Southern Germany with a few from England, Ireland, and Scotland. A glance in the mirror, however, indicated that there was Middle Eastern blood in my veins. I have a semitic nose and skin that tans so easily that I am often darker than many people who pass for black. Did I inherit this from a Hebrew, an Arab, a Gypsy or perhaps one of the Turks who periodically pillaged Central Europe? Maybe it was from a Blackfoot Indian that an imaginative aunt thinks was in our family tree. I will probably never know.

As an arrogant young computer scientist, I believed that if there is any decision that you can't figure out how to program, the question is wrong. I couldn't figure out how to program racial classification, so I concluded that there isn't such a thing. I subsequently reviewed some scientific literature that confirmed this belief. "Race" is, at best, a fuzzy concept about typical physical properties of certain populations. At worst, of course, it is used to justify more contemptible behavior than any concept other than religion.

In answer to the race question on the security form, I decided to put "mongrel." This seemed like an appropriate answer to a meaningless question.

Shortly after I handed in the form, I received a call from a secretary in the security office of the Defense Communications Agency. She said that she had noticed a typographical error in the fifth question where it said "mongrel." She asked if I didn't mean "Mongol." "No thanks," I said, "I really meant 'mongrel.'" She ended the conversation rather quickly.

A few hours later I received a call from the chief security officer of D.C.A., who I happened to know. "Hey, Les," he said in a friendly way, "I'd like to talk to you the next time you're over here." I agreed to meet him the following week.

When I got there, he tried to talk me out of answering the race question "incorrectly." I asked him what he thought was the right answer. "You know, Caucasian," he replied. "Oh, you mean someone from the Caucasus Mountains of the U.S.S.R.?" I asked pointedly. "No, you

know, 'white.'" "Actually, I don't know," I said.

We got into a lengthy discussion in which he informed me that as far as the Defense Department was concerned there were five races: Caucasian, Negro, Oriental, American Indian, and something else that I don't remember. I asked him how he would classify someone who was, by his definition, 7/8 Caucasian and 1/8 Negro. He said he wasn't sure. I asked how he classified Egyptians and Ethiopians. He wasn't sure.

I said that I wasn't sure either and that "mongrel" seemed like the best answer for me. He finally agreed to forward my form to the security authorities but warned that I was asking for trouble.

A Question of Stability

I knew what to expect from a security background investigation: neighbors and former acquaintances let you know it is going on by asking "What are they trying to get you for?" and kidding you about what they told the investigators. Within a week after my application for the new clearance was submitted, it became apparent that the investigation was already underway and that the agents were hammering everyone they talked to about my "mental stability."

The personnel manager where I worked was interviewed quite early and came to me saying "My God! They think you're crazy! What did you do, rape a polo pony?" He also remarked that they had asked him if he knew me socially and that he had answered "Yes, we just celebrated Guy Fawkes Day together." When the investigator wanted to know "What is Guy Fawkes Day?" he started to explain the gunpowder plot but thought better of it. He settled for the explanation that "It's a British holiday."

An artist friend named Linda, who lived two houses away from us, said that she had no trouble answering the investigator's questions about my stability. She said that she recalled our party the week before when we had formed two teams to "Walk the plank." In this game, participants take turns walking the length of a 2 x 4 set on edge and drinking a small amount of beer. Anyone who steps off is eliminated and the team with the most total crossings after some number of rounds wins. Linda said that she remembered I was one of the most stable participants.

I was glad that she had not remembered my instability at an earlier party of hers when I had fallen off a skateboard, broken my watch and bruised my ribs. The embarrassing cause of the accident was that I had run over the bottom of my own toga!

The investigation continued full tilt everywhere I had lived. After about three months it stopped and a month later I was suddenly informed that the clearance had been granted. The other two people whose investigations were begun at the same time did not receive their clearances until several months later.

In comparing notes, it appeared that the investigators did the background checks on my colleagues in a much more leisurely manner. We concluded that my application had received priority treatment. The investigators had done their best to pin something on me and, having failed, gave me the clearance.

The lesson was clear: if you want a clearance in a hurry, put something on your history form that will make the investigators suspicious but that is not damning. They get so many dull

backgrounds to check that they relish the possibility of actually nailing someone. By being a bit provocative, you draw priority attention and quicker service.

After I received the clearance, I expected no further effects from my provocative answer. As it turned out, there was an unexpected repercussion a year later and an unexpected victory the year after that. But that is another story.

The Missed Punch

An earlier account described how I came to list my race as “mongrel” on a security clearance application and how the clearance was granted in an unusually short time. I will now describe a subsequent repercussion that was a byproduct of a new computer application.

Mongrel in a Star-chamber

In early 1965, about a year after I had been granted a supplementary security clearance, I received a certified letter directing me to report to the Air Force Office of Special Investigations at Suitland, Maryland very early in the morning on a certain day four weeks later. To one whose brain seldom functions before 10am, this was a singularly unappealing trip request.

My wife somehow got me up early on the appointed day and I drove off in my TR-3 with the top down, as usual, even though it was a cold winter morning. I hoped that the air would stimulate my transition to an awakened state.

When I arrived and identified myself, I was immediately ushered into a long narrow room with venetian blinds on one side turned to block the meager morning light. I was seated on one side of a table on which there were two goose-neck lamps directed into my eyes. There was no other light in the room, so I could barely see the three inquisitors who took positions on the opposite side of the table.

Someone punched on a tape recorder and the trio began taking turns at poking into my past. They appeared to be trying to convince me that I was in deep trouble. While the pace and tone of their questions were clearly aimed at intimidation, they showed surprisingly little interest in my answers. I managed to stay relaxed, partly because I was not yet fully awake.

They asked whether I had any association with a certain professor at San Diego State College, which I had attended for one year. I recognized his name as being one who was harassed as an alleged Communist sympathizer by the House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy Era.

Responding to the interrogator’s question, I answered that I did not know him but that I might have met him socially since he and my mother were on the faculty concurrently. They wanted to know with certainty whether I had taken any classes from him. I said that I had not.

They next wanted to know how well I knew Linus Pauling, who they knew was a professor at Caltech when I was a student there. I acknowledged that he was my freshman chemistry professor and that I had visited his home once. (I did not mention that Pauling’s lectures had so inspired me that I decided to become a chemist. It was not until I took a sophomore course in physical chemistry that I realized that chemistry wasn’t as much fun as I had thought. After that, I switched majors in rapid succession to Geology, Civil Engineering, then Electrical Engineering. I ended up working in a still different field.)

I recalled that Pauling had been regularly harassed by certain government agencies during the McCarthy Era because of his leftist “peacenik” views. He was barred from overseas travel on occasion and the harassment continued even after he won his first Nobel Prize but seemed to diminish after the second one, the peace prize.

The inquisitors next wanted to know how often I got together with one of my uncles. I acknowledged that we met occasionally, the last time being a few months earlier when our families dined together. It sounded as though they thought they had something on him. I knew him to be a very able person with a distinguished career in public service. He had been City Manager of Ft. Lauderdale and several other cities and had held a number of diplomatic posts with the State Department. It occurred to me that they might be planning to nail him for associating with a known mongrel.

The questions continued in this vein for hours without a break. I kept waiting for them to bring up a Caltech acquaintance named Bernon Mitchell, who had lived in the same student house as me. Mitchell had later taken a position at the National Security Agency, working in cryptography, then defected to the Soviet Union with a fellow employee. They were apparently closet gays.

In fact, the inquisitors never mentioned Mitchell. This suggested that they may not have done a very thorough investigation. A more likely explanation was that Mitchell and his boyfriend represented a serious failure of the security clearance establishment – one that they would rather not talk about.

After about three and a half hours of nonstop questioning I was beginning to wake up. I was also beginning to get pissed off over their seemingly endless fishing expedition. At this point there was a short pause and a rustling of papers. I sensed that they were finally getting around to the main course.

“We note that on your history form you claim to be a mongrel,” said the man in the middle. “What makes you think you are a mongrel?” “That seems to be the best available answer to an ill-defined question,” I responded. We began an exchange that was very much like my earlier discussion with the security officer in the Defense Communications Agency. As before, I asked how they identified various racial groups and how they classified people who were mixtures of these “races.”

The interrogators seemed to be taken aback at my asking them questions. They asked why I was trying to make trouble. I asked them why they would not answer my questions. When no answers were forthcoming, I finally pointed out that “It is clear that you do not know how to determine the race of any given person, so it is unreasonable for you to expect me to. I would now like to know what you want from me.”

The interrogators began whispering among themselves. They had apparently planned to force me to admit my true race and were not prepared for an alternative outcome. Finally, the man in the center spoke up saying, “Are you willing to sign a sworn statement about your race?” “Certainly,” I said. They then turned up the lights and called for a secretary.

She appeared with notebook in hand and I dictated a statement: “I declare that to the best of my knowledge I am a mongrel.” “Don’t you think you should say more than that,” said the

chief interrogator. “I think that covers it,” I replied. The secretary shrugged and went off to type the statement.

Punch Line

With the main business out of the way, things lightened up – literally. They opened the venetian blinds to let in some sunlight and offered me a cup of coffee, which I accepted. We had some friendly conversation, then I signed the typed statement, which was duly notarized.

My former tormentors now seemed slightly apologetic about the whole affair. I asked them what had prompted this investigation. After some glances back and forth, one of them admitted that “We were putting our clearance data base on punched cards and found that there was no punch for ‘mongrel’.”

I thought about this for a moment, then asked “Why didn’t you add a new punch?” “We don’t have any programmers here” was the answer. “We got the program from another agency.”

I said, “Surely I am not the only person to give a non-standard answer. With all the civil rights activists now in government service, some of them must have at least refused to answer the race question.” The atmosphere became noticeably chillier as one of them answered, with clinched teeth, “You’re the only one. The rest of those people seem to know their race.”

It was clear that they believed I had caused this problem, but it appeared to me that the entire thrash was triggered by the combination of a stupid question and the common programmer’s blunder of creating a categorization that does not include “Other” as an option.

The security people apparently found it impractical to obtain the hour or two of a programmer’s time that would have been needed to fix the code to deal with my case, so they chose instead to work with their standard tools. This led to an expenditure of hundreds of man-hours of effort in gathering information to try to intimidate me into changing my answer.

I was surprised to learn that nearly everyone believed in the mythical concept of racial classification. It appeared that even people who were victims of discrimination acknowledged their classification as part of their identity.

I never did find out how the security investigators coped with the fact that I remained a mongrel, but in 1966 I discovered that something very good had happened: the “race” question had disappeared from the security clearance form. I liked to think that I helped that change along.

Unfortunately, almost the same question reappeared on that form and most other personnel forms a few years later, under the guise of “ethnic” classification. I believe that that question is just as meaningless as the race question and I have consistently answered it the same way during the intervening 20 years.

I now invite others to join me in this self-declassification, with the hope and expectation that one day the bureaucrats and politicians will be forced to quit playing with this issue and will come to realize that the United States of America is a nation of egalitarian mongrels. I believe that we will all be better off.

In any case, whenever you design a database, please don’t forget the “other” category.

Art Credits

Front cover: 9 *Chickweed Lane* from 28 Feb, as a truism. Page 3: *Bloom County* from 21 Apr 1983 — After a political essay, you *need* a dandelion break. Page 4: *Arlo & Janis* from Veteran's Day, 2003. Page 5: *Blondie* from 30 Jun — I've gotten "have a nice day" kisses like that. Page 7: *Bloom County* from 14 May 1983. Page 8: *Strange Brew* from 13 Nov. Page 11: *Bloom County* from 2 Apr 1983 — Opus has a nightmare: probably from watching some of the movies I've reviewed. Page 13: *Get Fuzzy* from 23 Nov — duct tape is a tool of multiple uses. Page 14: *Zits* from 3 Nov — I'm sure we've all had teachers we wanted to "google." Page 16: 9 *Chickweed Lane* from 21 Jan — different strokes, even for geeks. Page 21: Tom Toles from 23 Nov. Page 24: *Zits* from 7 Nov — not that Eve would have any experience with smart aleck teenagers. Page 24: Pat Oliphant from 13 Nov — apropos the recent lawsuit in England, which no British newspaper could tell you about. Page 25: a photo from *The New York Times* of 18 Nov, apropos the cartoon to the left. Why is the man on the left smiling, and where is his other hand? The back cover features a sign from a Canadian park. I believe either my daughter, the seasonal Canadian, or my colleague Sean, the temporary American, sent me a pointer to it.

Index

<i>Angels and Demons</i> , 7	<i>Down With Love</i> , 10	<i>The New New Thing</i> , 10
<i>Armageddon</i> , 7	Eve Ackerman, 22	Norm Metcalf, 14
<i>Babylon 5</i> , 6	Gary Robe, 19	Randy Cleary, 18
<i>Callahan's Key</i> , 10	<i>Google Hacks</i> , 10	Rich Lynch, 11
<i>Code Reading</i> , 10	Guy Lillian, 14	<i>School cf Rock</i> , 6
<i>The Cognitive Style cf</i>	<i>The Hunted</i> , 6	<i>Seriously Funny</i> , 8
<i>PowerPoint</i> , 9	<i>Inside C#</i> , 10	<i>The Shawshank</i>
<i>Confidence</i> , 7	Janice Gelb, 24	<i>Redemption</i> , 6
David Schlosser, 20	<i>Kill Bill, vol 1</i> , 9	Sheila Strickland, 14
<i>Deep Impact</i> , 7	<i>Linux Server Hacks</i> , 10	Steve Hughes, 11
<i>DocBook: The Definitive</i>	<i>The Matrix</i>	Tom Feller, 19
<i>Guide</i> , 10	<i>Revolutions</i> , 10	<i>Top Gun</i> , 6

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Grrrrr, bark, woof.
Good dog.

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