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The Dillinger Relic 58

DR is written, edited, and published every other month by

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Bernadette Bosky

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The Mental Ward Cast: Bernadette Bosky, lover and spouse. Victoria: Victor VPC II (IBM-compatible) computer. Kadmon: Kaypro 2K computer. Ruby: cat.

Perhaps our story begins six years ago, when I moved to Durham in order to live with Bernadette Bosky and go to graduate school in Computer Science. I wrote zines gushing about both these possibilities. As it happened, while the former turned out even better than I had imagined, the graduate school plan somehow never got off the ground. In my more morbid moments, I would imagine my overenthusiastic words graven on stone somewhere, never to be forgotten.

But I learn from my mistakes, which is why I know so much, and the next time I came up with a possibly grandiose self-improvement plan, I kept my mouth shut about it. A few months ago, with Bernadette's enthusiastic approval and support, I sent in an application to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of North Carolina's Chapel Hill branch.

The catalog had indicated that the undergraduate grades the school required were higher than those I had gotten in college, but I decided that the worst they would do to me for daring to apply as an unqualified candidate would be to reject me, and that outcome would be operationally no different from what would happen if I didn't apply.

And so I sent in the application. I wrote a letter which would sound somewhat familiar to some of my old-time readers, as it talked about a lot of the great things that are going on in computers and information, and how I wish I were a part of all that, as I've said in these pages. I obtained recommendations from D. Gary Grady (computer consultant), John Kessel (Professor of English), and Joe Moudry (University Librarian). I took the Grad Record exams again, and discovered that at least one of my old skills hasn't atrophied. (I got two 800s and a 730, but who's counting?)

I expected the school to take its grade requirements seriously, but a few days after April 1, I received a notice of acceptance. I'm going, of course. I now alternate between overconfidence and the certainty that I've utterly forgotten how to study, but the balance is towards the former.

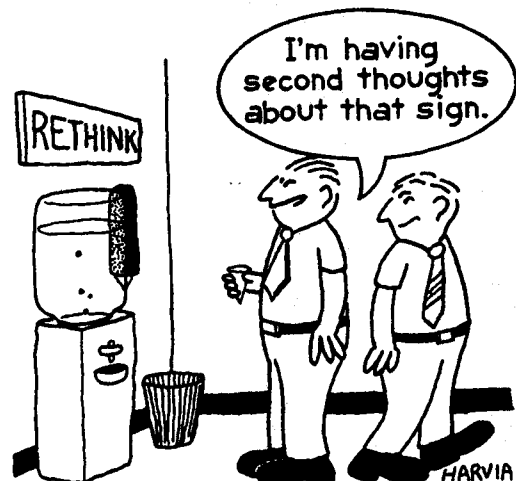
I plan to be there for two years, emerging with a Master of Science degree. As Chapel Hill is right next to Durham, we will not have to move. I am not sure exactly what area of library and information science I will specialize in, but I expect it will be something fairly computerish. Among the courses that sound particularly interesting are Information

Resources, Online Databases, Systems Analysis, Information Retrieval, and Information Structures. As a matter of fact, some of the courses I plan to take are also part of the Computer Science Department, so maybe my original plan hasn't completely died.

If I succeed there, I plan to look for some sort of job in the field of Library and Information Science. I am familiar with Janice Eisen's theory that if you have to call something a science, it isn't one (see Creation Science, Christian Science, Political Science, etc.), but I hope prospective employers won't be. I hope I'll find someone to whom computers are strange and arcane, so that those who have the mystic knowledge to deal with them are to be treated with respect and not bothered with petty annoyances. (Yes, I think that all competent and skilled employees should be treated that way, but that is not the usual rule. For instance, I am quite genuinely impressed by those who can type with all ten fingers and don't even have to watch what they're doing. I'd treat such a person with respect if I were hiring one, but others disagree.)

So what will this do to DR? Well, you may have noticed that this issue is a bit late. I think I will be able to continue with DR at a somewhat reduced pace, namely four times a year.

Meanwhile, I am developing something of a minicareer as a thoroughly minor radio personality. The Writers of the Future people apparently liked my performance on local radio and offered to make the arrangements and pay the expenses for me to be interviewed on radio stations in other parts of the country, as part of Writers of the Future promotions. And so, about half a dozen times, I have called radio stations in places like Wyoming and Oregon (charging the calls to WoF) and discussed "The History of SF" or "Does SF Predict the Future?" I mention WoF if and only if it seems relevant to do so, and I am not expected to give plugs for Scientology or L. Ron Hubbard. Bernadette at first felt she was too busy to do this sort of thing, but now occasionally takes five minutes to half an hour to discuss "Women in SF" or "SF and Literary Values." We both enjoy it.



Your Horoscope

The stars urge you to Just Say No to drugs and tell others to do likewise, as they can lead to irrational and compulsive behavior.

By now, quite a few people have suggested that Robert A. Heinlein may have died with a wicked grin on his face. Heinlein always downplayed the predictive value of science fiction, but in the last week of his life, the whole country found out that one of his scenes had been reenacted in what passes for real life. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, it turns out that the best way to reach the "amiable nullity" who is the leader of the free world is via his wife's astrologer.

In revealing this tidbit, Donald Regan takes the Nastiness Award among the recent suck-and-tell books from the Reagan Administration--a title he may well hold until some other disenchanting staffer describes how he peeped through the Lincoln Bedroom keyhole at the First Couple having or attempting conjugal relations. But I'm not sure the news is all that new.

There was already sufficient evidence that this President so loved by conservative defenders of the male-dominated real American nuclear family was taking his orders from "Mommy"; we just didn't know that she in turn was getting them from the stars. And when we consider the number of self-evident falsehoods that Reagan appears to be quite sincere in believing, from the idea that he was in Germany photographing death camps when he was really in Hollywood making movies, to his faith that the Pentagon will soon give us a defense system as good as Luke Skywalker's, does it matter whether he got them from astrology or from some presumably more reputable source?

Mailing this is going to cost about 50% more per copy than last issue, thanks to the new postal rates. The Post Office looks particularly bad over this latest rate hike because they almost simultaneously reduced service. Actually, the coincidence of raised rates and decreased services isn't entirely their fault. Congress demanded that they reduce their budget; or as a sign in my post office says, they were "impacted" by budget cuts. (Presumably, they had to lay off all their grammarians.)

All of this leads to renewed talk of privatizing the Post Office. I'm ambivalent; some wonder if private enterprise would charge more for delivering to hard-to-reach addresses, and if this is a bad thing. My own guess is that if you did have truly competitive private post offices, it would cost more to send a letter to someone across the country who lived on top of a mountain--maybe as much as fifteen cents.

On the other hand, I fear that the government might "privatize" the mail the way it did the phone company--by creating a number of small, inefficient monopolies which the consumer is forced to use, and explaining that this is really free enterprise.

I favor a free-enterprise post office, but that may be because I use it, but don't

work for it. Competing companies go out of their way to make their products and services cheaper and better, mistreating or underpaying their employees if they can get away with it. Government agencies give their employees a good deal, and if they have to cut back, they take it out of services to their captive customers. Thus the best deal is to work for the government and get everything from private enterprise. Now if everyone were doing this...wait a minute.

I swore that I'd never give my old prep school a cent, and in the 28 years since my escape, I have kept to that vow. (I can get an almost Ellisonian grip on a grudge.) But now the sumbitches have snuck up on me. They've asked for money for the kind of good cause I really approve of: a program that finds bright kids in the ghettos, rescues them from the public school system, and gives them what I've always admitted was an academically good education. I'm sending them a check.

Actually, I find that I don't feel too bad about that. Alma Mutha gave up their most offensive trait years ago when they became coed. I don't know if they've given up the dress rules, but those did have the advantage of giving me something to rebel against.

A county not far from here is actually called Person County. That leads to fewer jokes than you might think, but a recent headline said, SMALL BEAR LASSOED ON FARM IN PERSON.

About 30 years ago, a group of people set out to create an absolutely logical language. I'm not at all sure that a logical language can be created, but at the very least you can learn all sorts of things trying to do so, or watching others try to do so. On the other hand, I trust that no one will be the least surprised to learn that the project has run into all sorts of emotional battles, but that hasn't killed it. One schismatic group, which is now working with a language called Lojban, seems to be making some promising efforts, including computerized applications. They are publishing a newsletter called JU'I LOBYPLI, which is available from Bob Le Chevalier, 2904 Beau Lane, Fairfax, VA 22031. I suggest that you write to him and ask for information.



ICFA Report

Self-referential metanarrative is a controversial issue in contemporary writing. Some maintain that it is the wave of the future, while others insist that it is a last refuge of various scoundrels unable to handle the demands of ordinary narrative, such as for a narrative hook or other interesting way of beginning a text.

The International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts is an interdisciplinary gathering which has been held annually for the past eight years. It began in Boca Raton, Florida, and moved to Texas four years ago. This year it has returned to Florida, but to Fort Lauderdale, and was held from March 18 to March 20.

For the past six years I have been annually attending the Conference. Not coincidentally, that is the same amount of time that I have been living with Bernadette Bosky, as the Conference is one of the many Good Things she has introduced me to and we have shared. But this year there was the possibility that I would be attending alone, as she has been busy working on her doctoral dissertation and didn't know if she could spare the time to go.

This somewhat complicated things, as we were both scheduled to chair paper sessions. We had both suggested specific topics for sessions after last year's Conference, but usually the only way to be sure that a session one suggests will have papers is to go out and find specific people to write the papers. We had not done this, Bernadette because of her dissertation, and me for some good and convincing reason which I will tell you as soon as I have invented it. When we realized that the sessions we had hoped for would not take place, we got in touch with Roger Persell, who is in charge of the section of the IAFA on Interdisciplinary papers, and offered to chair sessions to be made up of papers which did not fit into any regularly assigned sessions.

We were assigned two such sessions. Originally, I was to chair one of the sessions on "Religion and the Fantastic," while Bernadette handled an ingeniously combined pair of papers under the rubric of "Fantasy in the Comics and the Comic in Fantasy." But the Religion section was closer to Bernadette's professional interests, not to mention looking better on her *vita* (I told you not to mention that), and so, with Dr. Persell's permission, we switched, in time for the change to be listed in the Conference Program.

Our tentative plan was for me to go on Wednesday, for the official opening of the Conference, and for Bernadette to change her plane ticket to one on Thursday evening, and arrive then, if she decided she could in fact spare the time, or otherwise cancel. This meant, however, that at the very least we would have to trade back on the sessions we were chairing, since the Religion session was scheduled for Thursday. If she did get to come to the Conference, she would then chair the Comic session on Friday morning. And thus it was that I took a plane to Fort Lauderdale on Wednesday in the hope that she would decide to follow the next evening.

The trip was thoroughly uneventful. Hotel checkin was marred only by the hotel's insistence that I put up a \$50 deposit for the privilege of associating with those superior beings who own credit cards.

At this point, old friends started arriving. Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow, whose papers, on fantastic literature and alternate states of consciousness, are always fascinating, were again in from England. William Mountcastle, who does papers on the religious aspects of sf, was here. Olena Saciuk, who is on the Executive Board of the Organization and may be the only person who comes North to these gatherings (she teaches in Puerto Rico) was there. Fantasy writer Susan Schwartz was present this year as an official guest. And I began contemplating adding to my badge the words, "She'll be here tomorrow--I hope," as all these people asked where Bernadette was. Susan Schwartz, in fact, offered to introduce Bernadette to her colleague Judith Tarr, who has just completed a dissertation (in Medieval Studies), as evidence that writing a dissertation can be done.

I reported this clamor for her presence to Bernadette on the phone, thus encouraging her to decide to come down, and then went to the official conference reception. This gathering suffered from the belief on the part of someone on the hotel or conference staff that this group of highly verbal people would like nothing better than to have to shout at one another over the din of a mediocre rock band in a small, enclosed room. But at least there were interesting people to shout at and be shouted at by.

There was Eric Shaffer, whom some of you may remember from my report of last year's con as the one who appeared as himself and as his friend Patrick Murphy. This year Patrick was present, and I myself would be involved in a similar masquerade, with transsexual aspects, as I would be replacing Bernadette at a session the next day. While Patrick was not masquerading as anyone else, he is currently confusing people by teaching at an institution called Indiana University, though it is the state of Pennsylvania. My first guess was that he was some sort of undercover agent, infiltrating Pennsylvania on behalf of the state of Indiana, but he insists that there is a Pennsylvania town called Indiana. It is, he informs me, near Pittsburgh, and even nearer to the shopping mall where *Dawn of the Dead* was filmed, which shrine, he adds, he has visited on several occasions.



There too was Martha Bartter, who may be the only scholar thus far to put me into a footnote. At last year's conference she did an excellent paper on Samuel R. Delany which suggested that the discontinuities, inconsistencies, and lacunae in his recent novels could be seen as representations of some of the uncertainties contemporary physics tells us are all around us. In reporting the paper in *LINES OF OCCURRENCE* 13, I made the cynical suggestion that at least some of these flaws could be blamed on Delany's deficiencies at plotting, that being the one fictional area in which Delany does not excel (he understated). When Martha presented a revised version of the paper at the Science Fiction Research Association last summer, my theory was mentioned, complete with footnote.

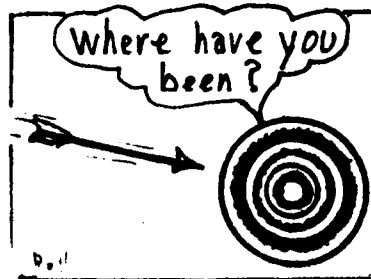
Also present was Marleen Barr, whose latest critical work, *Alien to Femininity* (Greenwood hc), is an imaginative juxtaposition of sf novels with contemporary feminist and post-modernist critical theories, brilliantly indicating the parallels between these texts as alternative approaches for women in contemporary society. I told her so, in perhaps somewhat simpler terms ("Duh, I liked her book"), and she was glad to hear that, especially as mine was the first critical reaction she's gotten to the work in the months since it was published. My reaction also compared favorably to a recent *SF STUDIES* review of another book of hers, which triumphantly pointed out the obvious fact that the book was "feminist polemic," as if that self-evidently indicated that it could not also be good literary criticism.



In previous years, almost all the sessions were devoted to the reading of papers. This year's Conference added about half a dozen more impromptu panel discussions. The first of these started off Thursday, as Susan Shwartz chaired a panel entitled, "Reviews of Fantastic Literature and the People Who Write Them." This title was immediately proven somewhat inaccurate, as Harlan Ellison opened with a discussion of film criticism, which he himself is now doing in the pages of *THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*, and its difficulties, such as discussing a good film without either revealing too much that the audience should find out for itself or simply screaming that everyone should see it at once.

Dave Hartwell then discussed the decline and fall of sf book reviewing from the 50s, when most of the positions were held by the likes of James Blish, Damon Knight, and Anthony Boucher, to today, putting much of the blame for this collapse on the fact that one can no longer come anywhere near reading everything in the field. Permanent ICFA Guest Brian Aldiss suggested that one particular boundary marker for this falling of standards could be found in a *GALAXY* review column of the 70s when Spider Robinson used the phrase "Lemme splain."

This session also offered the academic horror story of the Conference: Jean Lorrh, who teaches at a not overly prestigious university (Murray State, in Kentucky), mentioned that although she has had 12 novels published and has a PhD in Medieval Literature, she is not permitted



to teach Creative Writing because she doesn't have an MFA.

Then there was the discussion of the theory Ellison promulgated in a recent issue of *F & SF* to the effect that "fans" have no sense of humor, having instead a taste for dumb puns. One way Ellison manages to amass evidence for this theory is to define fan as "any sf reader I don't like," but there is something to it. There are those in the sf community who like to take some pointless play on words and treat it as if it were humor. Indeed, the very issue of *F & SF* in which Ellison made the complaint includes a competition (humorous definitions based on authors' names) where most of the winning entries would be just as funny (or not, as the case may be) if one had no idea of anything the authors had written (e.g., CORN BLUTH: to wave an ear of corn in a threatening manner).

For the second session of the day, I went to one with the inviting title of "Science Fiction's Inner and Outer Spaces" and was not disappointed. Len Hatfield read part of his forthcoming *Starmont Reader's Guide to Greg Bear*, pointing out how Bear's characteristic landscape is a paradoxical one in which a finite exterior conceals a larger or even infinite interior, like the "nocytes" growing within Virgil Ulam's body in *Blood Music*, or the asteroid in *Eon*, which contains an infinitely long tunnel. Mike Clifton followed with a Jungian view of the landscapes of Foster's *Sentenced to Prison* and Silverberg's *Tom O'Bedlam*, showing how the crystalline imagery of glass, jewelry, and ice in these books can be seen as mirroring the psychic integration of their protagonists. Gregory Zents concluded with a discussion of the Anthropocentric Cosmological Principle, the idea that the Universe had to be such as to include the possibility of carbon-based life or even human life as we know it.

At lunch, Harlan Ellison addressed us. He had a scapegoat, a local reporter named Chauncey Mabe. The curiously-named scrivener had somewhat brought his own fate upon himself. Ellison, when being interviewed, insists only that he not be described as a science-fiction writer, or as one who denies being a science-fiction writer, despite having won numerous Hugos and such. Mabe apparently consented, then began his story, "Harlan Ellison says he is not a science-fiction writer, but..." So he got to sit there and listen to himself being described as a horrible example of the way the media mistreat those they tar with the brush of "sci-fi."

It was now time for me to impersonate Bernadette and chair the session on "Religion and the Fantastic." This meant that I would have to forego a session on Octavia E. Butler's fiction. I found this particularly disappointing, as Butler herself was attending the conference; I wanted to meet her, as I will be a sort of second banana to her next month at Contraction, where she is Guest of Honor, and I am Fan GoH.

Other than that, however, chairing the session did not present any difficulties. I introduced the three papers, which I'd had the chance to read beforehand. Mark Sirkin, apparently a newcomer to these sessions, talked about the image of Jewish alienation in sf, as seen in Superman, Mr. Spock, and Asimov's robots. Those may not seem immediately obvious examples, but he made much of his thesis sound credible. William Mountcastle presented another in his series of discussions of speculative theology in sf, this one on images of the Ideal Community. Finally Joe Sanders delivered one of his typically insightful papers, this one on religious imagery in Stephen King's *The Stand*. His paper was discussed by the rest of the panel and some of the audience afterwards; the discussion had a certain surrealistic aspect to it, as Joe and his wife Mary were the only participants in it who had actually read *The Stand*. (It was particularly unfortunate that Bernadette missed this part of the program, as *The Stand* is one of her favorite King novels.)

I enjoyed dinner, with Monty and Kaye Mountcastle, and an evening panel at which Brian W. Aldiss, Peter Beagle, Octavia E. Butler, Stephen Donaldson, Harlan Ellison, and Brian Stableford discussed what the marketplace does to writers. Bernadette managed to survive the trip down, including an airport limo driver who passed her by even though he'd been specifically sent to pick her up, and she joined me after the panel.



Friday morning began with the session Bernadette was now actually chairing, on Comics and the Comic. Greer Watson gave us a thorough history of female superheroes in the comics, from the early days, when they were scarce and stereotyped, to the present, where a series is actually allowed to have more female than male characters. Elizabeth Perry Murrell looked at some of the ways Douglas Adams amuses us in the *Hitchhiker* books.

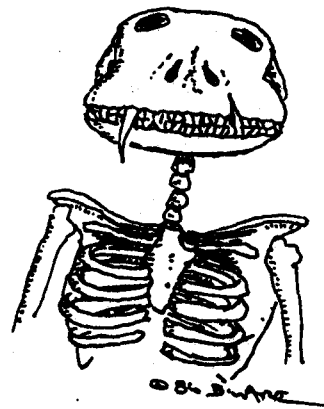
This ICFA had the same sort of scheduling genius as the earlier ones. At the same time as the previous session, there was Olena Saciuk's session on Science Fiction as Satire and a discussion of female heroes which included Susan Schwartz discussing her own fiction and a paper on Silverberg's female characters. I wish I could have attended those two, as well as the one Bernadette chaired. The next hour, however, offered the option of East German literature, 17th-century lit, contemporary painting, French lit (including a paper in French), and going back to sleep. I chose the latter.

One advantage of this choice was that I was a bit more alert for the luncheon speech by

Scholar Guest of Honor Katherine Hume. She is an excellent choice for the honor, having written two brilliant critical books: *Fantasy and Himesis*, about the extent to which fiction "should" be "realistic," and *Fynchon's Mythography*, which makes, and plausibly defends, the counterintuitive theory that *Gravity's Rainbow* includes a mythological component that Fynchon is not trying to mock and deconstruct. Her speech, dealing with the possible relationships between sf and postmodernist literary theories, was predictably good.

There was a particularly good session after lunch, devoted to Harlan Ellison, and particularly to *A Boy and His Dog*, in both text and film versions. Ellison had said earlier in the Conference that one leading reason he had decided that academic criticism could be valuable was hearing a discussion of his work that Peter Malekin had presented at an earlier ICFA. (Bernadette, who was also in the audience for that particular paper, agrees with Ellison's evaluation of it.) In this session Malekin presented a similarly good paper on *A Boy and His Dog*. Several other critics discussed it, and Ellison informed us that the film version was even more sexist before he demanded the removal of parts he found intolerable, and told us that he will soon finish the novel of which what we have read thus far is only the beginning.

After that was a session on "Metafiction and Metaphysics." It began with a typically thought-provoking paper by William Schuyler, once again using fantastic fiction to illuminate philosophical questions. This time he was discussing Patricia McKillip's "Riddle-Master" books, considering the system of encoding knowledge in riddles as a right-brain alternative to more linear left-brain approaches. The next paper was on "The Hegelian 'Bad Infinite' in *A Canticle for Liebowitz*." I will resist the temptation to suggest that the title was self-referential, though the paper did seem to be the longest I heard all Conference. Finally, there was a paper entitled, "Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*: Two Forms of Meta-Fantasy." Beagle himself was present for this, sitting directly behind us, and he seemed a bit bemused by the whole thing, at one point asking his companion, "What the hell is hermeneutics?"



The evening's presentation was one of the highlights of the entire Conference. Last year, a small, attractive, friendly, and energetic woman named Donna Cox came to the Conference for the first time, to tell us about her work with computer graphics. She seemed an extremely interesting person, but Bernadette and I skipped her paper because it was opposite one of the most interesting sessions. (In fact, two of the papers from the session we did attend wound up in the first issue of the IAFA's *Journal*.) We enjoyed the session we attended, but for the rest of the day we kept hearing about what we'd missed. The leaders of the organization wisely decided that this year they'd give her a programming hour all to herself.

What Donna Cox does is to work in what she calls a "Renaissance team" with a scientist and a computer programmer to find the best form of visual representation for the information in the scientist's field. She gave us a presentation starting with a brief history of art from the Venus of Willendorf to the present, and then showing how, in the last 25 years or so, programmers have learned to simulate some of that art on computers. Keeping that in mind, we then learned something about some of the ways data can be presented in more visually attractive ways, and then how the use of color, shape, motion, and two-dimensional representations of multi-dimensional objects can bring out data relationships that are not immediately apparent from the numbers or from simpler graphical representations.

She showed us examples of graphic programs she has worked with, representing everything from rates of corn infestation by healthy corn-borers to a collision between two neutron stars. One of the most striking displays was a simulation of a trip through a black hole. She closed with a visualization of a Klein bottle, a paradoxical shape (like the Mobius strip) which cannot actually exist in fewer than four dimensions. It can, however, be represented somewhat in three dimensions, and we were shown various geometrical transformations of these representations, concluding with one which resembled the Venus of Willendorf.

It's been a long time since I've read anything science-fictional that appealed to my sense of wonder as much as this presentation did. This work is a remarkable combination of art and science, often visually beautiful even if one has no idea of what it represents, but also remarkable in its ability to display data so as to make subtle relationships (which might otherwise be missed) visually obvious. There are obviously all sorts of useful applications.

The bad news is that all this stuff is horrendously expensive. Even with today's leaps in computer technology, this work requires supercomputers, or at least mini-supercomputers. The government's budget for all nonmilitary supercomputer work is \$50,000,000. That may sound like a lot to you and me, but it's pocket change to the government--about what a new bomber costs.

Sex in a hammock



W. R. Rogers

The following day I managed to attend only one session. It seemed as though either I was too busy talking, or they'd once again piled up all the uninteresting stuff in one hour (the better to have conflicts among the good stuff), or something happened. I got to one that sounded interesting, only to hear a paper being read in French. I retreated.

The session I did get to attend was a good one, one of the two sessions organized by Elizabeth Perry Murrell, under the heading of "Mad Scientists." Arthur Morgan gave a paper untangling some of the complexities of *The Book of the New Sun*. The second paper was one I enjoyed more, as it dealt with a book I had read: Vance Bourjaily's *The Hound of Earth*, which is fiction about science without being science fiction. William Francis traced the sufferings of the novel's guilt-ridden atomic scientist protagonist. The third paper was one of the best I heard at the whole conference. In it, Faye Ringel discussed one of the horror archetypes--the always-monstrous offspring of human-animal mating--and how people like Jeremy Rifkin use those archetypes to try to scare us away from genetic research.

But mostly we spent the day talking with the people we come to these conferences for: Eric Shaffer, who is working on a dissertation on a beat poet who disappeared a few years ago, and a novel that promises to be even stranger; Carmen Alatorre, an Air Force captain and single mother whose favorite fictional character is Ripley (in *ALIENS*); Pati Traub, who always does interesting papers on female writers; an extremely fascinating and learned young scholar who takes some of the same sort of interest in Big Name Critics that *NATIONAL ENQUIRER* readers take in their celebrities; and others.

We also met a critic who shows particularly good taste. After an evening session of the Lord Ruthven Society--a new special-interest group devoted to vampires--a man named Tony Magistrale introduced himself to Bernadette and said that his new book on Stephen King uses her essay on King (in *Kingdom of Fear*) as an important source, and he thinks she is one of the critics who understand King best. (His book is *Landscape of Fear*, published in hardcover and trade paperback by Bowling Green University Press. I haven't read it yet, but he's obviously off to a good start.)

We're looking forward to next year's conference: same place, approximately same time.



Reading the Stuff

One of my favorite alternate realities is Randall Garrett's Angevin Empire. This world differs from ours in two major respects: (1) King Richard the Lion-Hearted lived long enough to bring peace between England and France, so that they still have a common government in the twentieth century; (2) magic works, and has been codified in scientific laws.

In this richly imagined world a detective named Lord Darcy—who lacks magical ability, but makes up for it with the sort of skillful reasoning Sherlock Holmes made famous—solves murder mysteries. Garrett almost always set these problems up with great ingenuity. He followed all the rules of classic mystery, as well as the main rule of fantasy/science fiction mysteries: The solution shall not depend on powers and technologies unknown in our world (or at least shall not bring in such solutions at the last minute).

Along with the fascinating background, the charming characters, and the clever plots, Garrett treated us to delightful forms of textual play. There are resemblances to other characters from other works; Lord Darcy's best-known detecting rival, the Marquis of London, is a ~~stout~~ fat, sedentary orchid grower, who has his legwork done by Lord *Bontrionphe* (French for "good win"). There are textual jokes, usually of the sort that enrich the story, rather than substituting for it: In one tale, we learn that a certain Manxman is related to one of the leading suspects; he is, in fact, her uncle from Man.

Garrett produced three books set in the Angevin Empire, the novel *Too Many Magicians* and the collections *Lord Darcy Investigates* and *Murder and Magic*. Then, alas, he suffered a brain infection which ended his writing career. The books went out of print, but some of us remembered them, and were cheered to hear that Ace Books was planning to continue the series, with Michael Kurland doing the writing.

This year, shortly after the death of Garrett's body, Ace published the first of Kurland's Lord Darcy novels, *Ten Little Wizards*. Was it too much to expect that, with a new author, the books would still have some of the brilliance, imagination, wit, and charm of the originals?

Yes.

The news from that particular alternate reality may be disappointing, but there was a pleasant surprise from another antiterra: While I join virtually every other f/sf critic in bewailing the plague of sequels and trilogies (the latter redefined as a series with at least three books), occasionally a new book will present a reality that I would enjoy revisiting, and I am glad when the author gives me the opportunity to do so.

A few years ago, S. P. Somtow published *The Aquiliad*. From the opening sentence—"Once, when I was very young, Father took me in the motorcar to the Via Appia, to see a man being crucified"—it was obvious that we weren't in consensus reality. Somtow's lead characters, a

dense Roman bureaucrat and a wily Native American chief, toured a stranger and stranger New World in which they encountered dinosaurs, a Jewish Bigfoot (the Sasquatches were the Ten Lost Tribes), and finally flying saucers. At the end, it was all more or less plausibly explained, and the book seemed to be a self-contained unit.

But no. Recently, that book was reprinted in a Del Rey paperback as *The Aquiliad, Volume I: Aquila in the New World*. Now the promise, or perhaps threat, implicit in that title has been fulfilled, and we have *The Aquiliad, Volume II: Aquila and the Iron Horse*. In this one, Aquila's son, Equus Insanus (in this world, of course, Indians have Latin names), returns to deal with the forces that created this parallel universe. This book, like its predecessor, is thoroughly enjoyable, though not overly burdened with credibility. At least one more book in the series is promised.

Brad Linaweaver's *Moon of Ice* (Arbor House hc) takes off from a much more recent historical cusp. Given that the book presents a different conclusion to World War II, I suppose that it would be too much to expect the publishers to refrain from blurbing it with comparisons to Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. The books, however, are more different than similar, with the main emphasis of *Moon of Ice* being the political consequences of a different ending to the war.

In Linaweaver's reality, World War II was a draw between the US and Germany, as both developed the atom bomb earlier than they did in our world. Through the eyes of Joseph Goebbels and his rebellious anarchist daughter Hilda, Linaweaver presents what that change might have led to, from the impeachment and conviction of FDR to a calmer post-Hitler Germany with true believers trying to bring back the old revolutionary fervor.

I think this book will bother some people, perhaps more than it should. The Nazis are of course presented as evil, but not as the Utter Mindless Inhuman Evil some like to imagine they were. Worse yet, from some points of view, Linaweaver takes the unfashionable stance that Hitler and Stalin were essentially similar totalitarianists, rather than Right/Left opposites. I, however, find the book's speculations fascinating and plausible, and I recommend it highly.



The posthumous career of Philip K. Dick continues. Yet more of his unpublished mimetic novels are coming out. His old cronies James Blaylock, K. R. Jeter, and Tim Powers, who were at best Laser Books writers during his lifetime, continue to become important figures in the field, not only producing fascinating fiction, but starting their very own movement ("steam punk"), leading to the tasteless speculation that he may be one or more of them in some as-yet unexplained manner. And now, there is a Philip K. Dick novel not written by Philip K. Dick.

Specifically, Michael Bishop's *The Secret Ascension* (Tor hc) is a pastiche of Dick in which Dick himself is a character. The resemblances are there, from general themes (alternative realities, Nixon's evil empire) to details and little touches (the protagonist works in a pet shop, where strange rodents called "Brezhnev Bears" are the most popular item). As in Dick's own work, there are humble characters who wind up making a major difference. (One of these is named "Horsey Stout.") The character of Dick himself is a pivotal one, and he learns that in this universe he has to surrender something particularly dear to him for the general good.

There is much to recommend this book, both as pastiche and as excellent sf in its own right. My only complaint is that Bishop's fidelity to his model extends to the ending, which is a mad rush to an implausible tying up of loose ends, followed by an unsatisfactory and truncated new story, thus giving us a book that seems at once too long and too short, as in all too many of Dick's own novels.

One form of speculative fiction which leads to suspicion of the author's motives is the sort in which a desperate nation, church, or world finally turns over power to someone not unlike the author, and he in turn saves it. The classic of this subgenre is Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian VII*, in which an author surrogate becomes Pope. Drew Pearson (with Gerald Green doing the actual writing) and Fletcher Knebel did similar works about the presidency. Now we have *The General's President*, by John Dalmas (Baen pb), with a typically implausible set of circumstances turning the White House over to a successful businessman, whose suggestions are described so lovingly that one suspects they are Dalmas's own.

I find the political proposals uninspiring. They are all presented with much rhetoric about increasing individual freedom and responsibility, and most of them involve giving still more power to the government. Far more interesting is a subplot of more traditionally science-fictional nature, involving application of the theories of Nikolai Tesla to use weather in the waging of war.

The book offers one bonus. Baen has been using the last few pages of books to offer teasers for other books, and this one includes not just a few pages out of context, but the entirety of David Drake's introduction to his anthology, *Men Hunting Things* (a title which sounds better if you know that it has a sequel entitled *Things Hunting Men*). In three pages of excellent expository prose, Drake gives us an eye-

opening look at the similarities and differences between hunting and war, leading up to a stunning punch line.

I find writers, even some of the ones whose fiction doesn't interest me, to be among the most interesting people around, so when I heard that Samuel R. Delany, whose fiction I always like (except for the Neveryon books), had done an autobiography, I expected to enjoy it. I was not disappointed; *The Motion of Light in Water* (Arbor House hc) is an intriguing and unsparing self-examination by one of the most unusual and creative talents in the sf field. From his early realization of his sexual nature to his efforts to become a mainstream writer to the Dhalgren-like household he briefly set up, this book shows us many facets of a remarkable individual.

A certain critical and polemical term has been appearing in the discussion of sf recently, and reaction to it has polarized opinion to the point where mentioning the word in reviewing a book will convince some people that they MUST read it and others that it is trendy unreadable junk. Therefore, I offer the following two reviews. Choose one:

1) Michael Swanwick's new novel, *Vacuum Flowers* (Ace pb) is one of the best cyberpunk books yet. Its jacked-in heroine lives today in the glittering computerized megacorporated world we'll all be facing tomorrow. Buy it.

2) Michael Swanwick's new novel, *Vacuum Flowers* (Ace pb) is a thought-provoking speculative novel in the tradition of mid-period Delany or early Varley, rich in ideas and images. Some might unthinkingly apply the "C" word to it, but don't let that bother you. Buy it.



Hitherto Unsuspected Literary Resemblances

"There were pinkish streaks among the rock, and it seemed as if some of the chromatic tint from the atmosphere owed its origin to these. There were a number of white veins in the rock, which bore some kind of resemblance to marble, but the majority of it was grey. It gave an over-all impression of greyness streaked with pink and white, rather than an over-all impression of whiteness tinged with grey and pink, or an over-all impression of pink streaked with grey and white.

"Greyness was the dominant background shade; neither black nor white, but something midway between the two. It was a light, rather than a dark grey, yet it could never have been so light that it might be mistaken for an off-white."
--Pel Torro, *Galaxy 556*

"Not that Watt felt calm and free and glad, for he did not, and had never done so. But he thought that perhaps he felt calm and free and glad, or, if not calm and free and glad, at least calm and free, or free and glad, or glad and calm, or if not calm and free, or free and glad, or glad and calm, at least calm, or free, or glad, without knowing it."
--Samuel Beckett, *Watt*

Contraction Report

The last weekend of April, Bernadette and I had the pleasure of attending Contraction, a con in the Detroit area. The conoom had chosen me as their Fan Guest of Honor and, being a class organization, paid Bernadette's expenses as well as mine.

One advantage of this particular area of the country is that Bernadette's sister Anita lives there. We arranged to arrive on the Thursday of con week, thus getting a chance to spend extra time with Anita before the con.

Maia Cowan picked us up at the airport and took us to the con hotel, informing us that S. P. Sontow/Sontow Sucharitkul had surprised the conoom by saying he'd be there. I thought this was a good omen, as I'd read his latest *Aquillad* book on the flight, and had enjoyed it.

We also heard that Contraction would be sharing the hotel with a Mensa gathering. Apparently the two groups had been booked into the same hotel the same weekend by chance last year, and liked it so much they decided to do it on purpose this time around. It turned out to be feasible for each group to allow members of the other to attend any functions that didn't involve food. (I think that was based on economic considerations, rather than a Mensa tendency to get into food fights.)

The con itself began Friday. We went into Ann Arbor to have lunch with Anita, and also shopped for various enjoyably silly things. Bernadette got a purse made out of an armadillo, and I got yet another toy alligator. (I think it's my preppy background.)

In the afternoon we returned to the con and visited the Dealers' Room. This gave me a chance to meet Howard De Vore, whose FAPazines I have been enjoying for years.

The con officially opened in the evening. Once again, Bernadette and I performed "The Island of Dr. Gernsback," our fannish parody of the "Saying of the Law" from Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Once again, we revised it somewhat to ~~parody~~ appeal to other fannish groups, with lines like, "Not to have zippers in your chain mail, that is the Law." (Some day we must publish a Variorum Edition.) It seemed to go over reasonably well. We were joined by the Troupe Ta'amullat, a group of women who skillfully performed Mid-Eastern folk dances.

After the ceremonies, Alan Rosenthal took Bernadette and me to a local Baker's Square, where the pies are major temptations. We returned to the con suite and spent some time talking with some of the conoom members. We'd known many of them from apas'or from pre-con arrangements, so we expected to enjoy meeting them in person, and that's what happened. Don Wenzel, the con chair, obviously knows how to run such a gathering, and fortunately managed to have some time to talk with us, which is not always possible for a con chair. His wife, Kathleen Conat, who handled hotel liaison, also was good company, as were Dr. Halina Harding (she has just been licensed as an osteopath), who ran programming, and her husband, Jamie McQuinn, whom I pumped for information about the librarian bis, as he has been in it for a few years.

In the late evening, Bernadette attended a Mensa session, discussing sex, particularly how one goes about getting some. The general

impression she got gave me no reason to change my original guess that Mensa is the only group I know of whose members would go to an sf con to learn social graces.

We had brought along an alarm clock, but unfortunately, it was the sort one has to wind, and neither of us did so. Thus, as I was wondering whether I should go back to sleep, the phone rang. It was Halina, wondering why I wasn't on the 10 AM panel I was scheduled for. Fortunately, she called at only a few minutes after 10 and I was able to get down there by a quarter past. I joined George "Lan" Laskowski and Mike Glicksohn to discuss fansines. There could have been some differences of opinion, as Lan does the largely science-fictional LAN'S LANTEEN, while Mike is known for work of a more fannish nature, but mostly we all agreed that we wished more people would do fansines of any sort.

The next hour Bernadette, Lan, and a new horror writer named John Stohur (pronounced "sure," in case you're wondering) did a panel on Horror Fiotion. That was most enjoyable, and then we had the pleasure of having lunch with John and his wife.

That in turn was followed by a panel of venerable fans: Howard De Vore, Rusty Hevelin, Lynn Hickman, and Roger Sims. They reminisced and told scandalous tales of the old days, and thoroughly delighted us.

We went out to dinner with the conoom, Sontow, and Pro Guest of Honor Octavia E. Butler. This was fun, but as we were finishing up, we realized that we might be a bit late for the evening's programming. Being responsible people, we decided that Octavia and I, both of whom were scheduled to give Guest of Honor speeches, should return. We did get back at about the time the festivities were scheduled to begin, but of course they didn't begin then. (I said this was an sf con, didn't I?) Besides, we were to be introduced by Lan, who had stayed behind at the restaurant.

The program finally took place as scheduled. Octavia Butler, who speaks as well as she writes (which is saying something), gave a delightful autobiographical talk. I spoke well enough that I did not feel I should beg the conoom's forgiveness, offer to return my expenses, and tell them I'll understand if they strike my name from their records and try to forget they ever invited me. (More often than not, I feel that I have done at least that well.)

All in all, it was a thoroughly pleasurable experience. Bernadette and I will try to make it back there next year, even though we'll have to pay our own way. We weren't the only ones who enjoyed it. Anita came to the con to hear us, even though she said she didn't expect to understand what was going on, but she told us that she wound up enjoying it.





Perhaps the dumbest idea common among the otherwise intelligent people who read fantasy and sf is that our kind of books are the only ones that people actually read for the fun of it. Ardath Mayhar's column in the latest *THRUST* is all too typical. Mayhar mentions *Dhalgren* and *The Book of Skulls* as Horrible Examples of books that are presumably forced upon us by critics and academics, rather than enjoyed by readers. Now those happen to be two books that I enjoyed a whole lot, but everyone knows I'm a bit weird, so we need further evidence.

Dhalgren has sold well and remained in print for 13 years, not because it's assigned in courses--its combination of length, difficulty, and sexual explicitness tend to rule that out--but because its characters, its portrayal of a counterculture, and of course the sexual explicitness, appeal to readers (though not perhaps to strictly sf readers).

Bernadette taught *The Book of Skulls* to a literature class a few years ago. She found it was extremely well received (more so than some more traditionally sf books she assigned) by people who were not primarily English Lit students; they liked and identified with the characters. Indeed, one student said that until reading that book, he hadn't imagined that reading fiction could be fun, but now he was going to look for other books like it.

A recent *NEW YORK REVIEW* contains a fascinating report by Oliver Sacks on recent demonstrations at Gallaudet College, the leading school for the deaf. The school had never had a deaf president, and when yet another hearing one was selected, the students protested, and eventually won. Sacks points out that with many of these students, the politically correct term, *differently able*, is not a euphemism. They apparently develop much more complex mental systems of visual representation to compensate for their lack of hearing. Putting that together with the sort of breakthroughs in computer graphics Donna Cox was talking about at the ICFA, you get some very interesting possibilities.

Mr. X

Conrad Haynes has thus far published two Professor Harry Bishop mysteries: *Bishop's Gambit*, *Declined* and *Perpetual Check* (both Bantam pb). If Amanda Cross took one of her Kate Fansler mysteries, with their brilliantly satirical view of the academic world, and teamed up with someone diabolically clever at plotting, you might get something approaching them.

Harry Bishop is a professor of Political Science who used to work for a government agency, doing something he doesn't like to talk about. Now he deals with teaching, with a College President who seems almost alive at times, with a bean-counting department head who keeps after him to fill out forms, and of course with at least one murder per book.

The dialog is witty, the satire is pointed, the characters include both likable rounded human beings and marvelously drawn grotesques, and the plots are marvels of complexity.

One other thing: I read the books in the wrong order. There is a reference in the second book to Whodunit in the first book. I still didn't guess, and afterwards I looked back at the second book and said, "Oh." I think Haynes gets a few extra points for that.

Some writers, like Haynes, start out good; some take a while. It's taken Paul Engelman three books. The third, *Murder-in-Law* (Mysterious Press hc), follows two books of the sort that one grudgingly calls "clever." This one works, as a mystery, as a source of amusement, and as a story about people.

Sharyn McCrumb hasn't made it yet, but seems to have the potential. *Bimbos of the Death Sun* (Windwalker pb) is almost an excellent mystery. It's set at a science-fiction convention, and she almost gets that right; there are no gross errors, but it doesn't feel like a science-fiction convention. There's a character who may be supposed to be Harlan Ellison (or at least we are told a couple of times that he *isn't* Harlan Ellison, so one gets the suspicion that someone considered the possibility of a lawsuit), but while he is short and occasionally insulting, he is also the author of a series of barbarian books. There's a scheme for revealing Whodunit that would have been quite clever if it had been handled better. Finally, there are a number of portrayals, of the relationship between the protagonists and of a "typical fat femmefan," among others, that seem obviously intended to be bitingly witty, but miss by just enough to be merely unpleasant. One whose satire is no better than that might as well be compassionate.

Hugos

Once again, I have the pleasant duty of thanking those who put me on the Hugo Ballot in the Best Fan Writer category. This time, the news was delivered in somewhat suspenseful fashion. I received a letter from the Hugo committee saying that I was one of those who might wind up on the ballot, and to let them know immediately if I wanted my name withdrawn. A few days later, Rebecca Ore told me that she'd again been nominated for the John W. Campbell award. (She is again my choice for the award.) Then, two weeks later, I was told that I really was nominated.

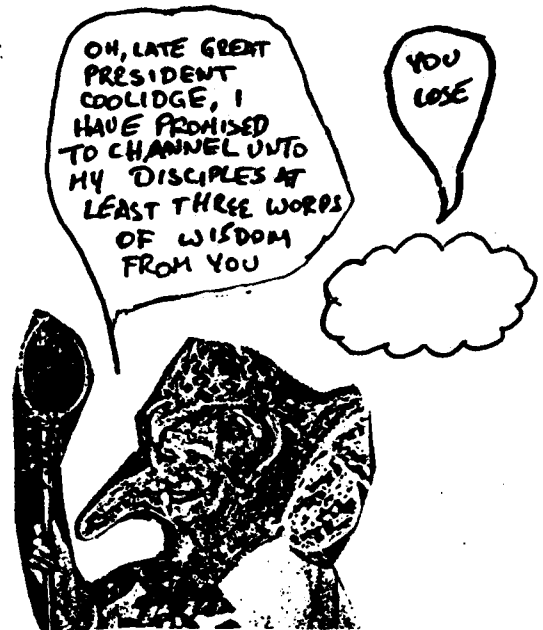
Once again, Mike Glycer and Dave Langford are also on the ballot. This year we are joined by the eloquent Guy H. Lillian III, whose nomination is a victory for those of us who've been saying that some of the best fan writing appears in apas, and by one Leslie Turek, whose work is unknown to me.

I am appalled to see that the Nielsen Haydens' IZZARD, which produced the best single fanzine issue in years, wasn't nominated. There are still some good choices in the Fanzine category, including FOSFAX, which may well be my favorite fanzine these days, and THE TEXAS SF INQUIRER, nominated for a period in which it was still under the brilliant editorship of Pat Mueller. Only my distaste for repeat winners keeps me from recommending LAN'S LANTERN, or, in the fan artist category, Brad Foster. Fan artists Steven Fox, Teddy Harvia, and Taral Wayne, all of whom have not won before and have had excellent work in these pages, are candidates.

Once again, my lamentable ignorance keeps me from having much to say about the pro categories. I am glad to see that the Hugo committee listened to the complaint in these pages and elsewhere and added a free-for-all "Other Forms" category. There will be those who suggest that the category was created for *Watchmen*, the Instant Classic Graphic Novel (which of those is an oxymoron?), but others have seen it differently. Shortly before the winners were announced, I received a mailing from Off-Centaur, the filk-song publishers, saying that they figured this new award would be a good way to recognize the best filk song of the year. It turned out, however, that no filk song pulled in enough nominations to appear on this year's ballot. I imagine that will change next year if the Other Forms category remains. I hope it does; I like the idea of a category for outstanding work in new forms, or in forms which don't consistently produce five or so good candidates a year, even if some year we wind up choosing among a graphic novel, a filk, an anthology or collection, a computer game, a new kind of toy rocket ship, and a particularly ingenious orgy from the previous year's worldcon. Oh, what am I voting for? *Watchmen* is probably this year's best choice, though I really love the *Wild Cards* series.

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Unarius publications offers words of posthumous wisdom channeled not merely from nonentities, but from the spirits of famous philosophers and half a dozen American presidents, including Calvin Coolidge.

Speaking of fannish matters, the one bad thing about being Fan Guest of Honor at Con-contraption was that Bernadette and I did not get to attend Corflu, the fannish fanzine fans' con, which took place on the same weekend. Not too long thereafter, though Bernadette and I received packages from the concom, containing all the goodies we would have received had we been there, from program books and fannish reprints to little plastic snails (the symbol of Seattle, where the con was held). The envelopes also contained checks for the difference between the attending memberships we had paid for and supporting memberships. I think that's just one sign of an admirably-run con. Next year's Corflu should also be good; it's being run by Geri Sullivan in Minneapolis.

Last year's Corflu, as some of you may recall, included a "live fanzine" which was audio and video taped. The tape was produced by Larry Tucker (3358 Chelsea Circle, Ann Arbor, MI 48108), and is available in either VHS or Beta for \$10 in person, \$12.50 by mail. (I believe he'll do it for less if you supply blank tape. Write to him and ask.) Bernadette and I recommend it, not quite disinterestedly, as we appear on it. What we do recommend disinterestedly is another tape available from Larry at the same price--the latest UNCLE ALBERT'S VIDEO FANZINE. That includes Gene Wolfe's thoroughly amusing slide show of last year's worldcon (with invisible slides) and an even more delightful "Men in Science Fiction" Panel, in which Marta Randall, Maia Cowan, Wendy Council, and others reverse and parody all the cliches of "Women in SF" panels.

One other bit of fannish news--the new fanzine con, Corflu, has been forced by hotel treachery to move to the weekend of September 24. Write to Mike Glicksohn, 508 Windermere Ave., Toronto, Ont. M6S 3L8 CANADA.

