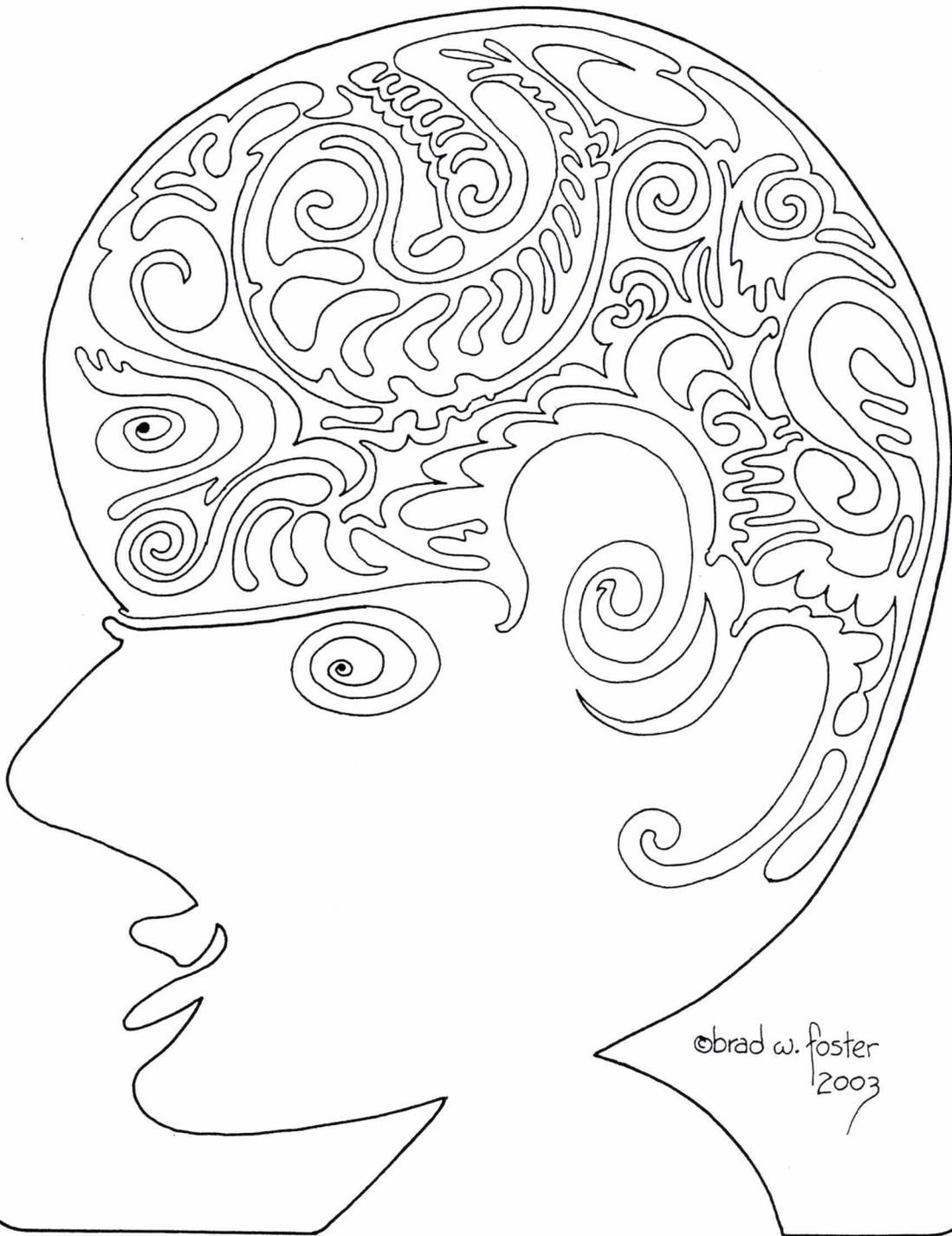


HEAD

IT'S ALL IN YOUR



...JUST EXERCISE TO EXERCISE

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2003

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Art

The cover is from the extraordinarily inventive Brad Foster, who offers the following advice for making the most of this issue's cover: Start with the dot in the eye and you can trace it all on a single line to the "third eye" dot. Sorry you had to wait so long to see this published Brad.

p.11 & 14 © 3-Day Novel Competition (Eve Corbel)

Head! #7 is by **Christina Lake** and **Doug Bell** and is available for fanzines, letters of comment, artwork and good old fashioned grovelling.

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Hello, how are you doing? It's been a while, but at long last we've decided to get our act together and start pubbing our ish again.

A lot has happened in the past three years since we last mailed out a fanzine; **Plokta** has risen to a position of world dominance, **Chunga** has come from nowhere (well Seattle) to become one of the most revered zines around and **Banana Wings** has continued to steamroller all before it. And us? We moved to Cornwall, and went to the beach a lot.

During our first year down here finding work and putting a roof over our head got in the way of fanac. However laziness crept in during our second year - although we did feel that we owed it to ourselves to have a bit of a break after all the upset of the previous year. By this summer we felt the excuses had worn a bit thin and it was now time to get back to work.

We've not been completely idle, one of the good things about having time-out from editing fanzines is we've been doing quite a bit of talking in the pub, beach and coastal path about what direction we'd like to take Head! in. From our many discussions, we've a list of ideas about content, layout and developing an online presence that we want to take further. But the problem with talking is it doesn't get the work done, and with our self-imposed deadline of Novacon breathing down our necks we've shelved our grand plans for the moment in favour of just getting a zine out again.

So we've fired up our old Pagemaker templates (salvaged from our exploded PC), press-ganged some of our oldest and most trusted members of the Head! Collective, set to work ourselves, thrown it all together and here in your hands is the fruits of all our labour.

It's good to be back!

- Doug



Back in July 2003 when the last issue of Head! hit the stands, Doug was standing for GUFF. Although he lost on that occasion, he decided to save up his money and visit Australia himself. Here is a record of his first thoughts on encountering his colonial fannish cousins this Easter, followed by Christina on meeting them again after a long absence...

What new hell is this?

Doug begins:

I'm lost and out of my depth. The cause - I'm at a convention I've never been to before, in a country on the far side of my world. The number of people I know in this hemisphere numbers six right now and none of them are here in this room, which means I'm well out of my comfort zone and my natural shyness is kicking into gear. Christ, what I'd give for a friendly face or even Ian Sorensen to appear at this moment and drag me kicking and screaming to the bar. Nah, that would never happen, Ian has never once dragged me to the bar, the mean bastard, even after I voted for his play thing...or at least, meant to vote for it. Shit now there is absolutely no bloody way Sorensen will ever buy me a drink.

Anyway, even if Ian appeared saviour-like out of nowhere, the bar is shut so that is not an option. To make matters worse it's Good Friday and Australia, which means that everything is shut. If you can't get a drink outside or inside the hotel in which way does this make this particular Friday good I ask? My discomfort coupled with the high humid Queensland atmosphere makes me feel quite unsteady, and catching a glimpse of my sweaty self in one of the numerous corridor mirrors I look as healthy and radiant as a Mayfield junkie. I just hope I can last through to 5 when, you've guessed it, the hotel bar opens...

Only one option remains : the Opening Ceremony. I can't for the life of me think when I last attended the welcoming folderol, probably Intersection when I was gophering. If I was superstitious I'd take it as an ill

omen, but, however, I'm not. Introductions and welcomes fly past quickly, so quickly that I start to wonder if I'm in the right country...after all isn't this Australia, home of the grand Opening Ceremony extravaganza? I was so impressed by the Commonwealth Games one that I personally think Australia should be the default country for any sort of sporting extravaganza including the World Cup, Olympics or Inter-Celtic Watersports Championship¹. Just think of it as the sporting world's default like our dear own Hinkley has become for Eastercons and you've got my idea.

The opening ceremony did provide one useful exercise – meeting up with someone I finally did recognise, the always friendly and cheery Eric Lindsay. And once we'd spotted Eric lots of other folks started coming out of the woodwork – Leigh Edmonds, Valma Brown and Julian Warner, who although I didn't actually know them yet, at least I knew of them and they seemed friendly enough. I soon found myself relaxing and pondering whether I needed that bar to open after all. That notion lasted all of 5 seconds; however I would still have to remain drink-less for another hour at least.

¹ This actually exists – Cornwall, Scotland, Wales, Isle of Man, Brittany and various regions from northern Spain and Portugal take part in a week long competition involving Sailing, Surfing, Swimming, Rowing and that famed sport - Underwater Photography. This year the Basques won the overall competition, but at least the Cornish took some pretty pictures of jellyfish.

Chris and I passed that time partially in another panel but also inside one of the Mercure Hotel's fan traps. Going between floors by lift caused a major bottleneck moving around the hotel, so in the spirit of colonial exploration we decided to use the stairs. But, of course, the stair doors had special locks that let you into the stairwell but not back into the lobby. After a couple of panicky minutes running up and down floors we managed to find a not quite shut door and quickly let ourselves out. This incident, I blame for the fact we were not the first people in the bar. While silver and bronze fell to us, the gold medal went to Queensland native Leanne Frahm, who seemed genuinely upset that a) the bar opened way too late in the day and b) there was only the three of us in it.

The Legends Bar had all the rustic charm of an oil refinery, which may explain why over the next half hour quite a few folk stuck their noses in but nobody seemed to stay, that was not until Visionary Tim arrived. Tim was from the local writers' group Vision and had, quite logically, stuck Visionary in front of his name so people would understand he was a member. We became the first of a long line of folk to ask "So what form do your visions take then?" (Apart from Bruce Sterling who commented that Visionary used to be part of his job title.)

I don't know if Tim's mystical arrival was the catalyst but slowly more fans started drifting in and staying. The bar began to feel like a bar, drinks were being drunk and eventually something like what I know as convention life started happening. Cory Doctorow and then Bruce Sterling arrived at our little table, both asking Tim about his visions, and round about that point I had to make my excuses and run off to be on a panel.

Over the past couple of years I've made it onto on a few programme items, but I've only recently felt I've started getting the hang of them. Down the pub with my friends I can talk bollocks with the best of them, but being in front of an audience I never feel comfortable unless I know quite a bit about the subject. When I saw the preliminary programme for Conjure I volunteered for the panel on comic to film adaptations. It's an area I have some knowledge of and thought it might be a good way to meet people, and if it all went horribly wrong I could just ramble on about the Space Canine Patrol Agency or something equally bizarre in a Silver Age fashion.

I was glad I had a pint in me as the chair didn't turn up. There was me, and two guys I'd never met - Gary Segal and Kris Hembury - up on a very small platform. We decided to launch straight into topic - talking briefly about our love of comics and about some of the recent adaptations. We touched on Alan Moore's attitudes to the film of V for Vendetta, misogyny in Sin City, how X-Men really needed to be an ongoing TV series, the unmasking of Spiderman and movie studios' insistence on including badly developed love interest subplots in every film.

Things were looking good - I wasn't going to need to fall back on my one man dramatisation of the "Super Stalag of Outer Space" after all. In fact things were going too well. Suddenly, the debate was ambushed by an older woman from the audience who initially appeared to be asking a question, but used the opportunity to explain to the room how all this had been pre-ordained in the Dead Sea Scrolls and had been suppressed by the Catholic Church. From the stage I could see the stunned and smirking expressions on the audience's faces during this rambling monologue while all three panellists fought valiantly not only to get things back on track but to get a word in.

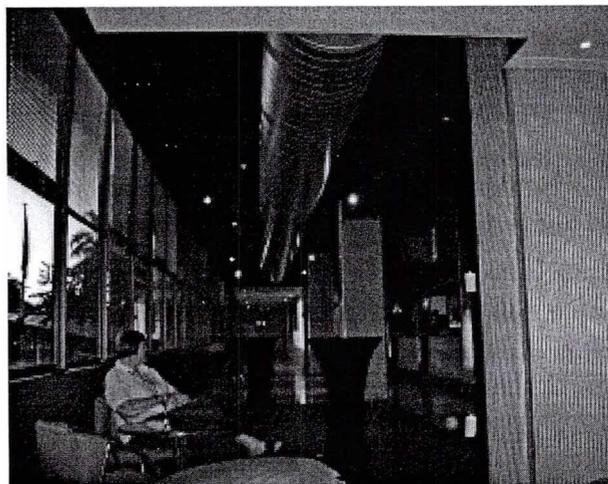


We eventually succeeded and just as we got the discussion flowing again we started running out of time. I wanted to get some ideas from the panel about what comics they'd like to see made into films. After explaining my choice of *The Authority*, and before my companions could get in a reply, she was off again – this time on how Roger Zelazny was right, it's all in *Lord of Light* you know... rather than fight it again we called the panel to a close and quickly left the hall, our work done, but only just.

Back at the bar Eric Lindsay and Cary Lenehan provided ample post panel entertainment by having some sort of weird manly Australian bragging competition. The first round consisted of trying to convince me whose native area was the most shut on Good Friday followed by who lived furthest away from traffic lights and finally they tried to outdo each other in who had been to the remotest part of Australia. At the bar I was introduced to Bristol SF Alumnus and wannabe Australian World Cup Song Writer Paul Voermans. During the long evening boozing fans unknown to me kept coming over to sympathise about the shanghaiing of our comics panel – it turned out that being on a panel was a good way of making friends after all.

The late hours that night were spent at a rather quiet room party. Too quiet – where's Nick Farey, a handy Swede or even a trouser press when you need it? So Christina was dispatched down to the bar, and despite most of the rest of the con having gone to bed she did manage to fetch Eric and Paul to supplement local fans Katarina and Ben, the host Jari and me. And so my first day at an Australian con ended - with a glass of strange strong European liquor in a hot sweaty hotel room ...much like every con I've ever been to – now what was the point of worrying?

The uniform sameness of conventions the world over was revealed to me over the next couple of days with the usual rounds of panels, drinking, meals and chat. This time I managed to supplement the con fun with a spot of sightseeing. A novelty! Well, it is when you consider the recent UK convention locations of Hinckley, Walsall, Glasgow and Blackpool (okay I'm being a bit hard on Glasgow as it does have good shopping and lots of culture, but I've spent a lot of time there through the years and kind of take it for granted).



The bar - 5 minutes after opening time!

Most of our Brisbane sight-seeing, it has to be said, consisted of strolling along the South Bank, eating in the restaurants and bars of the South Bank, gazing at the South Bank from boat trips and taking pictures of it from the mangrove boardwalk on what I presume is called the North Bank. Christina found the artificial beach a great attraction but I preferred the delights of the Ship Inn with its local draught beers (at last, something other than lager) and the even more impressive wrought iron multi-layered tower things in which they served the tangy tapas we had for lunch. I think I'm slowly becoming middle-class.

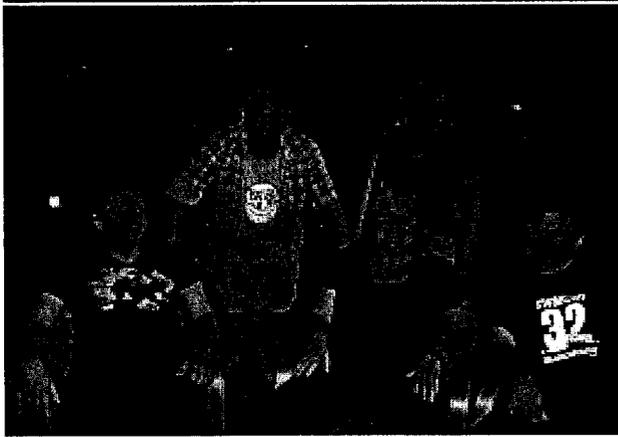
I found myself at the con going to a lot more panels than I would in the UK, probably something to do with the lack of daytime bar. For the love of me I can't remember too much about them but I was shocked to find all the Guest of Honour speeches put on at 10 am. Thankfully attending these meant I missed our hotel's version of breakfast which, if it was anything like the evening food we had on Good Friday, was a major blessing. My stomach felt so queasy that night I'm actively looking forward to eating hotel food at Novacon.

Fortunately I did make it to both Cory Doctorow's and Bruce Sterling's Guest of Honour speeches. Over the weekend, I slowly found myself adopting phrases like "frankenthings", "folksonomic taxonomies", "smartifacts" and "post-interesting objects" – I'm not sure what they all mean but I certainly blame Bruce for those. The programming was on the good side of light, and although I found plenty to do I oddly missed those "fannish" programme items I always seem to find myself attending at UK cons. I did make it to the "Fandom through The Ages" which Christina was on. Valma was disheartened by the lack of young fans interested in the fannish side of life, but I assured her this wasn't just a modern Australian fan phenomenon, a similar panel at a British convention would have drawn the same size and demographic of audience.

An odd slant to the con was the high level of panels about making it in writing. Not just a writing workshop in some side room, but workshops on pitching, editing and publishing. That side of the con alienated me slightly as I have no interest in becoming a writer (although I do have a good idea for re-launching Sgt Rock as an ongoing monthly comic if anyone

is interested). It reminded me of the old Glasgow comic conventions I used to go to where it seemed like everyone was a professional, guest or touting their portfolio around. I shied away from the creative side of Conjure and spent my time hanging out with people like Damien Warman, Lucy Zinkiewicz, Peter Lyons, Shay Telfer and Julia Robinson. I was quickly reassured that this was not standard for Ozzie conventions – it was down to the fact that Fantastic Queensland had a big part to play in the con organisation.

If the truth be told I spent most of the con in the company of Peter, Shay and Julia in some capacity, whether it was at a Conflux event with free hot cross buns or eating bugs in the Thai restaurant which a large group of us descended upon on Saturday night. That meal caused us to miss the Ditmars, but not the post-Ditmar champagne party, obviously. (I'm sure it was there that I spent part of the evening discussing the practical applications of time travel technology in cricket with Leigh Edmonds). The best night though was the Sunday night Masquerade. Now I go out of my way to avoid such things at British cons... I'm just not a costume sort of guy. Something about the endless procession of people showing off costumes for an hour on stage makes me think I'd rather spend the time going out to eat or in the bar, and generally I do. Julia and Peter seemed quite stunned when I mentioned I'd be skipping it to go out for a curry. Returning to the con hotel the function space had been turned into a middle-east bazaar complete with belly dancing. The DJ (I think it may have been Sean Williams) was spinning a good cross-section of music, perhaps a bit too much on the 80s electro-pop side for me, but hey even I danced to a couple of tracks, more than I've managed at any recent discos at UK cons. The whole atmosphere felt really relaxed, quite marvellous, a bit like the Saturday nights at Plokta-con. If this was



Peter, Doug, Julia, Christina and Shay

how they did masquerades in Australia I could get quite into this.

Peter, Shay, Julia, Christina and myself stayed in the bar chatting, long after the party officially ended, after the bar closed and when the hotel staff came around to physically throw us out. We decamped to Peter's room, somewhere up high in the hotel, where he promised us cool chilled wine – his winnings from the quiz. We chatted while the wine chilled in the fridge, marvelled at the city view, the cost of the 24 hour room service and Ian Thorpe's Diet Water adverts, before we realised just how shattered we all were. As we struggled out the door back to our own hotel, Peter pleaded with us "Come back, the wine is nearly chilled now, any minute it'll be ready..." Those words haunt me still – what better reason to brave the risk of deep vein thrombosis, security delays and dodgy in-flight movies than to share a late night drink with some fine friends. I can't wait to return to Australia.

Christina continues:

While Doug was making new friends, I was catching up with old. It was nine years since my last trip to Australia, and I was trying to reconnect. I'd been surprised to see so many names I knew on the convention

website, not least because the convention was in Brisbane, outside of the main centres of fannish activity I'd visited last time. I wasn't worried about the fans that didn't remember me, like Danny Heap, and David Cake, so much as those that did. Had I changed? Had they? Would we have anything to say to each other? How much would it spoil those earlier memories if we simply said our hellos and went our separate ways?

In some respects, Leigh Edmonds and Valma Brown were the easiest. Leigh still looked like a womble, and Valma seemed just as friendly as I remembered. It felt quite easy to pick up where we'd left off in '97. They'd even brought me Tim Tams so I could drink port through them again, just like at the Swancon we'd attended together. Regrettably the moment never arose, but the gesture made me feel remembered!

Then there was writer Paul Voermans who I'd known in Bristol. The first time I went to Australia, I was surprised to find that he lived just round the corner from Damian Broderick (who I was staying with) and that they good friends. This time, I'd only just been enquiring after Paul when this guy who looked vaguely Indonesian started talking to me, and it clicked, this was Paul with his hair grown long. As I'd never considered Paul a convention-going type of guy, this was more surprising than him knowing Damian. In fact Paul seemed made for the convention life. He was a great guy to hang out with in the bar, and was so full of energy and verve that it took me two days to notice that he wasn't actually drinking any alcohol!

Jenny and Russell Blackford were my next encounter. How could I ever forget their champagne Jacuzzi parties? There'd been some changes in their life – Russell was working on a PhD and Jenny had discovered she was gluten intolerant, but

their attitude to life hadn't changed. They still looked like the decadent party-lovers I remembered. The wine in their glass still sparkled, and when it came to the masquerade disco, they appeared stripped down for action, and danced the night away (despite the curry we'd all eaten earlier!)

The only person I didn't feel I caught up with properly was Julian Warner who seemed too firmly ensconced in a parallel convention (okay, a card party) in the dealer's room to be around much.

Being on a panel with Leigh was quite an experience. He opened proceedings by producing a bottle of bourbon and giving us each a shot. We were then invited to give the correct response. This, as any trufan know, is "Smoooooth" (with arm motion) in tribute to Tucker. Maybe I'd left my trufan credentials on another continent as it took me a moment to pick up on the reference and follow Leigh's lead. We were there to discuss the well-worn theme of fandom through the ages. In an attempt to ensure that panels always had content, the convention organizers had asked all panelists to prepare a speech. I wasn't sure I held with this, but had jotted down some ideas about the topic (Fandom through the ages) in the back of my travel diary. Bill Wright, who was the sort of fan who gives you a personalized guided tour of his fanzine before handing it over, read out his speech which mainly related to the early history of Australian fandom. This impelled me to throw away my own "speech" and talk about Pete Weston's first encounter with Australian Science Fiction Review as narrated in *With stars in my eyes* and his shock at discovering it was a fully-fledged literate fanzine full of excellent writers he had never heard of. Leigh had the points for his speech written on file cards which he

referred to only briefly to back up his articulate and skilful handling of the panel. He put on his historian hat to theorise that fanzines in Australia were a product of a certain historical period and technology level. Back then, Australian fans had to make their own fun and build their own mythologies. No-one even considered becoming a professional writer as submitting to the US took months. Instead, they took away from fandom a range of skills. Leigh credited apas for his success as a historian - there's nothing like apahacking to train you to hit deadlines!

Leigh and Valma seemed a little freaked out by the convention's focus on writing and getting published. I told them that at the opening ceremony we had all been exhorted to write about our experiences of being Australian (which could be slightly tricky for the non-Australians amongst us!) Panels on how to write about horses in your fantasy novel or build your own small press from repurposed Ikea furniture seemed to be drawing all the crowds. We hardened fans just scoffed.

What I did attend was a number of the panels and talks by Bruce Sterling and Cory Doctorow. You could always rely on Bruce to liven up a panel – even those he wasn't on! In The Future of Journalism panel, he headed off on an extended metaphor riff in which the myth of Content is King was destroyed in favour of king and prime-minister being aspects of media ownership, and the Pope turning up and showering blessings on to unlikely individuals, like the Yarn Harlot whose blog on knitting was getting huge numbers of readers. Meanwhile Cory was fighting the good fight on the digital rights front and came up with one of my favourite quotes of the convention: "Librarians are the moral equivalent of car thieves." Apparently that came from Margaret Atwood. Cory was clearly on the



side of the librarians. Your big problem in life is to get yourself an audience, not put up technological and legal barriers to restrict them, he insisted. I found a lot of Cory and Bruce's panels interesting to me from a professional point of view. They were full of lively, well informed speculation and covered ground that I didn't see so often at British conventions – the fast-shifting world of media.

Maybe the most interesting person at the convention I failed to talk to was the fan GoH Erica Maria Lacey. Shockingly, the committee knew so little about her, that they gave her the wrong write-up in the programme book. Erika sat up on the podium, looking very young and a bit indignant about being supposed to be someone who wrote songs about Buffy and Xena. She admitted she hadn't prepared anything for her GoH slot, but invited questions from the audience. In this way I was slowly able to piece together that she had been a big name in the Brisbane slash and small press scene, an excellent writer and blogger, who had disappeared into another world of boating. I had thought, romantically, that she lived on a boat in order to have the solitude and time to write. In fact, she was working hard, often on other people's boat, to learn her trade; she had no computer on the boat, and apart from keeping a journal was not working on any writing projects at all. I got the impression that she had already moved on from fandom, and although she might resume writing in future, it wouldn't necessarily be for us. Her ability as a listener with an interest in offbeat people came over very clearly. I hope she does stick around.

On the last night of the convention we went out for a meal with Leigh and Valma, and Justin Ackroyd. Having spent the previous evenings in lively, but chaotic food parties of twelve or more, it was pleasant to relax with



Curry Down Under with Justin, Leigh and Valma

a small group of friends, even if we did end up eating in the same Indian restaurant as the night before. It was the kind of curry house that looks and smells so good from the street that Justin simply stopped outside, looked at us longingly and defied us to insist we couldn't eat there again. We didn't. We were far from home, and a good curry is a good curry wherever you find it. Leigh and Valma entertained us with stories of their wedding, which had been Methodist, and therefore dry! Somehow that seemed unlikely when contemplated over a good bottle or two of Shiraz.

When we returned to the hotel the dead dog party was, well, dying. The bar had just shut, and even a bit of BYO couldn't extend it beyond the natural attrition of departed travelers and the tiredness of a long convention. But we did have one last farewell the following day as we were lunching at the Ship Inn, on the Brisbane south bank, when we spouted Doug's friend Peter and some other convention-goers, and I finally asked Karen Melzack the stupid question I'd been trying not to ask all weekend: are you related to Geneva Melzack? What are the odds? Is fandom hereditary? Yes, it seems it is, since Karen is Geneva's first cousin once removed (or something of that nature!)

I've sometimes considered taking up the challenge of National Novel Writing Month. Wouldn't it be cool to spend the month writing, and come out of it with a novel on your hard drive? I've known people do it, or at least talk about doing it. But when my brother Simon told me that he was planning on writing a novel in three days, I was amazed and appalled. That's just plain madness, isn't it? Simon was non-committal, but I felt that deep-down he agreed with me. Here's his story of what happened:

72 Hour Fiction-Party People by Simon Lake

"Who was the twisted S.O.B. who first came up with this idea?"

– E. Sparling, Toronto, ON

Everyone dreams of writing a novel. Any number of people will sidle up to you at some point and tell you that they have a great idea for a novel. The one thing these people don't understand is that writing a novel is damn hard work. Well I suppose some people do, those that actually take the trouble to sit down and begin to compose their masterpiece. They soon realise that while the concept of writing a book and having it published is a cool one, they'd rather there was a way that didn't actually involve the tiresome chore of having to actually write the damn thing.

I've been writing since as far back as I can remember. I used to fill hundreds of notebooks when I was younger, crammed full of awful SF and fantasy adventures. Then I grew up, flitted through various writers' groups and started to write seriously. I've acquired a healthy catalogue of short stories, the odd one of which has been published. The novel, on the other hand, has by and large eluded me. Mostly, I must confess, through laziness. You see, it's true, writing a novel is hard work.

I did make a start once, but the thing seemed to stretch indefinitely before me.

I started to worry that the plot would unravel before the end or that the characters were dull or the theme of the book, topical at the time I started, would be a non-starter by the time I was finished. I looked at all the months I'd spent and how little I'd achieved. I thought about all the other things I could've been writing. Unsurprisingly, my novel fell by the wayside.

"A bizarrely inspiring and frightening journey"

– R. Millis, Toronto, ON

The international 3 day novel contest began life 27 years ago, back in 1977. It started out as a bet, a dare and a challenge, dreamed up in a bar somewhere in the heartlands of Canada. Apparently no one actually completed their novel that year, but the germ of an idea had been planted and over subsequent years the contest has gained a reputation as the ultimate writing challenge. Up to four hundred people now enter. Each year the winning entry is rewarded with publication.

The contest was not something I was familiar with, but a close writer friend of mine living out in Canada stumbled upon the information. She sent me an excited email saying how this was precisely the kind of cool thing she'd love to do, but with a caveat at the end that read simply: "*... but I guess I never will.*"



I think there was something in that coda that bugged me. Sure, we all have dreams in our life and some we fulfil and some we obviously don't. However much you want to explore remote parts of the planet, you need some sort of finance to do it. You may dream of walking on the moon, but odds are that's going to be beyond you. To step out and open the batting for England against the Australians at Lords you need talent. But what does writing a novel in 3 days take? If you want to win then I guess talent might help, but to compete...? Where's the cost? What are the impracticalities? I was on a roll. I had my passionate reply all written out – here was one person's dream that could be fulfilled. Fine. I won that argument. Point proved.

Only how did it then end up that I was going to take part in this contest too?

"... mind boggling, I had to write you a thank you... most incredible high I've had in years"

– A. Davis, Burbank, CA

The 3 day novel contest takes place over the Labor Day weekend, the annual end of summer holiday in North America. The rules are relatively simple. You can write your novel wherever you like, from 12 midnight local time at the start of the Saturday to 12 midnight at the end of the following Monday. You can write alone or as a collaboration of no more than two people. It's permitted to plan out and plot your novel in advance as much as you want to, but you must **not** write a single word of prose before the contest begins.

The organisers operate an honour system, whereby trust is shown that the entrants will stick to the 3 day deadline. You do need to get two witnesses to sign your entry form and it's safe to say from visiting the contest website and reading through the various

pages that obvious examples of cheating are easily spotted by the judges.

I can attest to the fact that Bob Mayberry wrote his short novel in the 3 days permitted by the contest rules. I know, because he wouldn't talk to me."

– D.R. Stephenson, Sitka, AK

3-day novel contest

Once we'd decided to enter the contest, even I had to admit to a certain sense of excitement. Via exchanged emails and lengthy phone calls, first we brainstormed ideas for possible novels and then drew up the detailed scene plan of our chosen plot. Preparation work could safely be enjoyed under blue skies in parks and on beaches as the summer of 2003 progressed towards its end. Everything seemed fine until the actual event hove into view.

Something I'd singularly failed to do in nearly 18 years of writing was now going to be tackled in 3 days.

"The natural product of three days of caffeine-induced dementia."

– J. Francey

September 5th, 2004: Day One

Due to the five hour time difference between the UK and Canada, I'm up first and face the challenge of a blank screen. I immediately enter panic mode. What if I suddenly find I have writers block? What if I'm simply not capable of doing this? What if

I just try typing some words? Then again, what if it's all complete garbage? I start mentally calculating how many scenes ahead I should be and what message it will send out to my co-author if she logs on and finds I've only written a couple.

The panic lasts about 30 minutes, before I reluctantly decide I'd better do something. We have an outline. We have a bunch of characters drawn up and stuff for them to do. How hard can it be? Thankfully it turns out to be relatively easy. I stop worrying about whether what I've written is complete crap and start thinking how smug and self-righteous I can feel when I have five scenes complete and emailed off before the sun will have even risen in Canada. This feels good.

To aid me in my work I've selected a few tapes to play as background music. I normally tend to work in silence as music (or more particularly, songs, with lyrics) tends to be a distraction. But a couple of picks, mostly downtempo ambient dance stuff, start to assume a fascinating mantra-like quality and as the hours roll on I find myself flipping them over again and again as time starts to take on a strange elastic quality.

I must admit by the evening of the first day I'm starting to feel blasé. I'm one scene short of finishing my portion of the first four chapters, well up to schedule and I'm now printing out the scenes Cath has written and putting together a rough draft of the opening chapter. At which point my creative energy levels suddenly nose dive. By the time I slope off to bed (bed? I bet the hardcore contestants write through the night, specially sourced stimulants keeping them going in a 72 hour amphetamine fuelled orgy. Still, I'm a wuss and I need my sleep), I have two

scene short of my planned schedule.

"I wish I had something witty and urbane to say at this point . . . but I'm past that."

– H. Clitheroe, Calgary AB

September 6th, 2003: Day Two

New day, new panic. My co-author is some way behind me, which in one sense is not so bad as I've been slated to write most of the last 2 chapters, but means I'm constantly guessing at the state of mind of our lead character. It might seem logical to be writing whole chapters separately, but we've gone for covering different strands of the plot within each chapter, trying to write to our respective strengths. I figure all it will require is a little buffing up at the end to make things read smoothly.

I reel off a few new scenes. Ha, this is a piece of cake. Outside it's turning out to be another stunning late summer's day. I decide a bit of fresh air and physical activity might stand me in good stead. I take fifteen minutes to go and buy some fresh bread, enjoy the sun and generally look smugly upon all the other people aimlessly wandering around. *If only you knew what I was doing.*

The smugness doesn't last. I reach a difficult scene. It comes out really well in the end, but it seems to have taken me an age to write. Due to the time difference, I still don't have all the scenes from chapter 3. Sunday is drawing on and there's still half the book to write, two thirds to collate and try and edit. The fact that I've been up ridiculously early the last two mornings is also beginning to kick in.

I call up Cath and we chat on the phone for about half an hour. Will we ever want to write

another word after these three days are up? Why did we ever think we could do this in the first place? Isn't it just hell? Are you enjoying yourself? Yes, we eventually agree, it's amazing.

"... at times, it was fun."

– B. Hoag, Brooklyn, NY

September 7th, 2003: Day Three

Due to lack of sleep, the universe appears to have warped. In America it may be a public holiday, hence the date of the contest, but over here most normal people will be setting off for work. I try to shut the real world out, despite the tempting sunshine being once again present. I ended up day two with a dread feeling that the whole project was beyond us, that next time we should be more diligent and search out a *four* day novel contest.

Then I set to the task. It seems I'm a morning person. I can't believe how productive I'm being. As soon as it reaches daytime over in Canada I start receiving pitiful emails along the lines of "how can you be on to chapter seven already?" Maybe I've entered a higher plane or signed some unknown pact that I'll pay for later. I'm flying. I even take time to have a spot of lunch. Straight back on the treadmill afterwards. Hmm, if I have signed some Faustian pact, it turns out payment is due sooner than I thought. I'm rumbling away at the keys, while my mantra music still loops on behind me. To combat the heat I'm semi-naked, sat in a room that's heaped with a thousand bits of printed paper strewn in random patterns that even I'm struggling to sort through. At this exact point I hear a knock at my door. Or I think I do, but I figure I'll just ignore it. After all, I've already unplugged the phone and left the answer machine to handle any calls.

Ignoring the knock turns out to be a bad idea. Next thing I know, someone's turning a

key in my lock. I could be hallucinating, but I decide not to take the chance and rush downstairs. It turns out to be my landlord. What perfect timing for an unexpected visit. I realise that I'm only half dressed, no doubt bug-eyed from the lack of sleep and staring at a screen for the last three days. I've also not shaved and have my mantra music playing in the background.

Luckily it turns out the landlord was not planning a sudden snap inspection. I also manage to save myself from having to explain the concept and reasons behind my 3 day writing marathon. On the downside I decide I may soon need to find new accommodation. Well I suppose I couldn't expect to go the whole 72 hours without some form of distraction. Back to work. More scenes written. I'm beginning to think we *can* do this. On the other hand, the original plan of a half day at the end to edit and polish the whole thing has long dwindled to the status of a fond memory.

I take a quick break to rest my aching fingers and replenish myself with a banana sandwich. I then make the mistake of checking my answer machine. There's a new message and it takes me 3 or 4 listens to decipher it. It seems some elderly woman has mistakenly dialled my number under the belief that I'm some sort of medical specialist. The message relates in a rather breathless panic how she can't make an important appointment and that she hopes someone will be able to come and visit her instead.

I'm tempted to ignore it – I have a book to write and I don't even know who this woman is or how to get in touch with her. Then I remember that if I plug my phone back in and dial 1471, I should be able to

get her number. Damn. At this point my conscience kicks in and five minutes later I find myself caught in a Kafka-esque conversation with someone who apparently has severe hearing difficulties. Once I finally get through to her the fact that she has dialled a *wrong* number and that if she needs help then she ought to try dialling the *right* number, she suddenly gets very huffy and starts telling me off for wasting her time. Gee, thanks.

Satisfied that I've done my good deed for the year, I unplug the phone again and labour on.

"It has been both wonderful and awful."

– J. Domenichine, San Jose, CA

With the end in sight there's no stopping. I have to write all of the final chapter, but since it's the one I've been most looking forward to, it turns out to be relatively painless. The remaining holes in earlier parts of the book, edit work I still need to do, and the ever ticking clock seem less benign. I'm afraid the mantra music tapes I'm playing will snap or melt down. My body aches and I'm beyond even understanding the concept of sleep. If I type another word it feels like my fingers will explode.

Beyond that everything is wonderful.

I reach midnight, leaving the final corrections and collation in the hands of my co-author. My final thought as I slip into unconsciousness is to wonder if the last chapter – which seemed brilliant, some of my best writing ever – will turn out to be simply overblown and pretentious.

I wake up the next day, still immersed in the same fog. It takes a few more days

for reality and normalcy to seep in. In hindsight I'm amazed at what we've achieved, proud of the standard of what we've produced and still realistic enough to know that there are limits to how good a book produced in 72 hours can turn out. And I still love that last chapter. I have no illusions of winning the contest, but I'm glad to have taken part.

"It was an exhausting and exhilarating, horrible and wonderful, enlightening and baffling experience."

– R. Richards, Minneapolis, MN

Seeds of Doubt by Simon Lake and Catherine Myhal ran to 52,271 words and was completed within the 3 day deadline. The planned edit and re-write has so far taken them slightly longer!

Anyone interested in investigating the phenomenon of the 3 day novel contest further should check out the following website: www.3daynovel.com.

To sample a couple of published short stories by Simon Lake you can check out the online archives of Pulp.Net at www.pulp.net/fiction/archived-stories.html



Maybe I wasn't being totally honest when I tried to pretend that I didn't have much in common with all the writer wannabes who were crowding into the panels and workshops on how to get published at the Australian NatCon in Brisbane. I've been writing fiction longer than I have fanzines. But mostly it stays buried within the confines of the writing world's equivalent of the apa - the ubiquitous writers' group.

Astrology for Writers' Groups by Christina Lake

People do things differently down in Cornwall. So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that having gathered together a random assortment of people with a view to starting a writers' group, we should end up discussing our star signs.

"Isn't it curious that so many of us are Taurus?" asserted Jenny, one of the co-founders of the group.

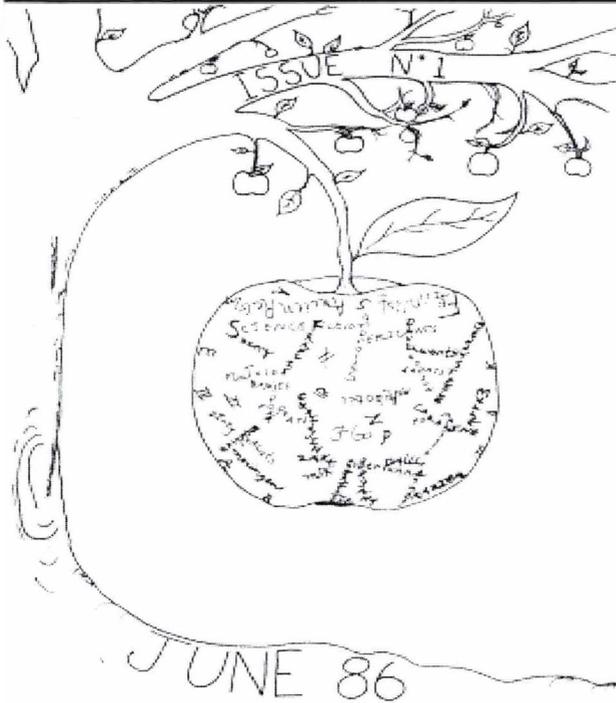
On closer questioning, it turned out there was only one Taurean in the group, but never mind. By then we had found that we were mostly water signs, with a Virgo thrown in to provide that essential element of perfectionism. My mind began to speculate on the potential for finding the ideal astrological mix for a writers' group. Maybe it was only my inattention to sun signs and dominant planets rising that was holding back my progress as a writer? Perhaps if I could find the perfect mix everything else would fall into place?

When I first moved down to Cornwall I had hopes of finding myself hooked up with a community of writers. The college where I work runs a Professional Writing course, and before arriving I had looked at their web site and imagined myself participating and making friends with all these other aspiring writers. But in reality the students are very focused on their course, and my job is to help them use the library, not impress them with the calibre of my writing. I've attended a

couple of the talks they've organized, but that's as far as it goes.

I did try to find out about other writers' groups in the area, but didn't feel very encouraged. They sounded too well established and formal, or else more interested in poetry than fiction. Before I could take the plunge, a colleague put me in touch with a woman called Sue, who was also trying to be a writer. Sue wasn't in a writers' group, though she did manage to get me to join a reading group – but that's a different story. We met in the pub every so often and exchanged chapters from our novels. Or rather I would revise a chapter or two of my novel in the time it took Sue to write a whole new novel! Then Sue signed up for a novel writing course at the college and suddenly her conversation became full of the importance of plot and tension and checklists of what to put in each chapter. I began to wish I'd forked out the money to join the course too, but wasn't sure if it would have been the making of me, or driven me insane. I don't like writing reduced to a formula for selling novels, but it has to be said that the more principled and literary approach of the many writers' groups I've been involved with has not resulted in a huge commercial success rate.

Worse still, not only had I missed out on all those writing hints, but Sue's cohort from the course, then went on to form their own writers' group without me.



The cover of the first Apple.

Never mind, I still had Apple. Apple was a writers' group set up a long time ago by some London based fans. In the interim the membership has completely changed and by the time I moved to Falmouth the remaining members lived in Cambridge, Birmingham, London and Newcastle. Maybe you can spot the flaw in this setup? Surprisingly I couldn't. I was determined to go on being a member, even though getting anywhere from Falmouth takes an inconceivable amount of time, at least by UK standards. But then, it's not so hard to fly from Newquay to Stansted for Cambridge, and I could always visit friends en route to London or Birmingham. (Newcastle, however, was right out. Even I recognized that.)

Somehow Apple always ended up being on the wrong weekend. It took me a while to figure out that it always would be the wrong weekend. Why? Because it would always take me ages to travel and cost me

more than I wanted to spend. Besides Ryanair had cancelled the morning flight to Stansted, petrol prices continued to rise and affordable rail tickets out of Cornwall were becoming vanishingly rare. The scales finally fell from my eyes when after one particularly stressful week at work, I ended up leaping round the room with joy because Apple had been cancelled. What did it matter that David Wake was lying suffering on his sick bed? I wasn't going to have to drive 500 miles over the course of a weekend in order to sit in a circle in someone's living room for five hours, dissecting our attempts at fiction.

This might be a good point in the proceedings to mention the curious love/hate relationship I have with writers' workshops. I used to find them very nerve-racking, less for fear of what people might say about my stories than nervousness about my own comments on theirs. What if I had missed the point of their story entirely (through my own stupidity, of course, rather than their narrative failings)? What if I simply had nothing to say? Over the years, I have become much more blasé about the whole thing. I miss points left, right and centre, insist on foisting my own pet writing likes and dislikes on their texts and, if all else fails, manage to stretch out saying nothing to a respectable length (humour always helps here!). Unfortunately, once the fear goes, so does the adrenalin, and without that, sometimes I simply find the sessions boring. Once everyone's discussed my story, I just want to pack up and go home. Writers' workshops are a contract of altruism. They are for people who care deeply about their craft – who would happily debate the ways of improving a story all day. I have a certain curiosity about other people's writing. Sometimes if I have an affinity for a story I want to take it away and write it myself. But if I don't like the story, or don't have much to say about it, I tune out



long before the writer techies have finished disassembling the stable block and turning it into a garage.

But there's one reason why I keep going back to writers' groups, and that's because I want someone to read my stories. In an ideal world I would send them to publishers instead, or at least to an agent. But that would be a world in which I wrote ten times better (and faster) than I do, thrived on rejection and loved nothing better than running a manuscript circulation business in my spare time.

After I realized I was going to have to leave Apple, I started looking around for alternatives. My brother Simon suggested I joined an online critiquing community for writers, and sent me the web address for the one that he belonged to. It sounded perfect. No tedious travel commitments. No sitting around in living rooms trying to muster enthusiasm for a story that I had little to say about. You can pick and chose what you want to read and when you want to comment on a story. Each story duly critiqued then gives you points towards having your story available online for others to comment on. The only problem was, there was so much dross on the site. Actually that was encouraging in its way. Gosh, if everyone else is that bad, then maybe I'm quite good? It was also interesting to see the genre breakdown: SF and Fantasy were pretty popular, chicklit and young adult seemed to have thriving communities, but mainstream, literature and historical fiction were all lumped together in one single underpopulated ghetto.

My enthusiasm waned rapidly as the novelty value of wading through badly spelled items from teenagers with a uncertain grasp on grammar began to wear off. But what really threw me was the lack of deadlines. With no deadline on my back to scare me into doing

the work, I simply couldn't be bothered to go back for the next story.

My other plan was to recreate the Apple format, but base it in Bristol, drawing membership from the Bristol Fiction Writer's group I used to belong to. BFW was a tight-knit – some might say too tightly knit – community. We met every two weeks for about ten years. Over the course of that time, we came to know each other, and our mutual writing styles far too well. Mark would guilt-trip me about not doing enough writing. Nick and Paul would read from their latest Doctor Who novels (this was in the halcyon days before Russell T. Davies when the franchise was looking for novels from anyone with a hint of a decent idea). I would nit-pick about the behaviour of Mark's female characters. Mark in turn would try to hard to inject non-canonical plausibility into the Dr Who universe. Nick would talk more about The Fall than writing. It was not so much astrology we needed in the end as a spot of counseling, or maybe a divorce. All the same, I missed the group as soon as I moved away. Who else would ever care as much (or at all) about my novels? Who would provide the clear-sighted judgment and creative ideas? Who would give me so many signed copies of Dr Who novels? So last winter at the group's annual Christmas booze-up, I secured Mark's agreement to using his house as a venue for an inaugural meeting of a West Country version of Apple (let's call it Scrumphy.).

At the same time, some strange astrological conjunctions must have been occurring in Falmouth, because Sue's daytime writing group had dwindled down to just two, and so she suggested we form a new writer's group. A couple of days later, I ran into Jenny, a former

student from the Professional Writing course, who asked me if I would be interested in – yes – joining a writers' group she was thinking of setting up. It took a few minutes of conversation and an exchange of phone numbers to agree to pool our resources and in early January we all met round at Sue's house for a promisingly enthusiastic inaugural meeting.

Success looked to be on the cards (or should I say in the stars?) Our first meeting was lively and positive. So what if Jenny was treating the astrological discussion a little too seriously? So what if some of the members seemed more accustomed to doing art and music than writing? This was Falmouth where art and ideas takes many forms. At our second meeting, things began to go wrong. The idea that we might criticize each other's works was greeted with scepticism. How could we know enough to give useful advice? Why should we listen to the opinion of fellow amateurs? I was not surprised when Jenny dropped out, followed rapidly by two of her friends. We picked up a guy from round St Austell way who claimed to be writing SF, but when invited to join on a more permanent basis, none too politely declined. We hadn't even asked his star sign either.

Ultimately I was just left with Sue, and Nancy, her friend from the original writers' group, both of whom are writing full-time. We don't meet very often as Nancy is currently embroiled in co-authoring a psychology text book (can't wait for the signed copies of that!). We recently went to a workshop on writing synopses, run by Mslexia writing magazine, and it looks like we might pick up some more members from that. So far I'm finding the meetings useful, even if I'm approaching them with caution. I've never belonged to

a group that doesn't have at least one foot in the SF world, nor one that's entirely female. Not that I write much SF these days, but I am accustomed to writing for readers who will take a bit of speculative strangeness in their stride. The last thing I want is to become an identikit product of the creative writing boom that seems to have hit UK academia. And if anyone utters that line about "show don't tell" with an air of oracular wisdom once more, I will probably throttle them. Besides having read the works of Dan Brown I now know that everything I was told about writing is wrong. Or at least that you don't have to know how to write well to sell a million.

Meanwhile Bristol Fiction Writers' group has gone on-line, so I've not been forced to go back to the teenage chick lit enthusiasts, and can submit chapters at my own pace (but with a handily solid deadline mid-way through the month to keep me on track with the criticism.) Oddly enough, I find myself missing the cut and thrust of the writing debate after all. Maybe I'd grown to enjoy those afternoons (and evenings) dissecting writing without realizing it? Or at the very least the discussions and bursts of enthusiasm it engendered, not to mention the camaraderie of the post-discussion drink

Actually, I think I've got it all wrong trying to find the ideal astrological mix for a writers' group. I'd be better off turning the concept into a novel, which, with the right mix of wacky, new age beliefs, thwarted geniuses and fake artists, and some lesbian sex, might just become a best-selling Richard and Judy book club choice.

Or I could always use the idea to write a fanzine article.



One of the new things we wanted to incorporate into *Head!* was a general review column to supplement our existing fanzine coverage. Unfortunately, Christina failed to write the fanzine part of it because she was too busy at work, and besides, every time she sat down to write a review of the latest issue of *Vegas Fandom Weekly*, she found they'd gone and published another one. So to kick off the new look review column you're left in **Doug's** hands.

Huer's Cry

Clocks are like People – Clocks are like People

In case you've not had the good fortune to stumble on them, Circulus are the UK's leading progressive-medieval-psychedelic-folk-rock band, and, before you ask, that genre certainly should exist.



Would you buy a used Wicker Man from this group?

"Clocks are like People" is the tricky second album, following an impressive debut with absurdly named "The Lick on The Tip of An Envelope Not Yet Sent". On first listening I was underwhelmed; the musical pyrotechnics of "Envelope" were gone, replaced with much more gentle fare. I was expecting something with a bit more bite, building on the frantic energy of the drums, bongos, guitars, crumhorns and moog combo that made their debut compulsive listening. But "Clocks" grows on you almost invisibly with each listen until you find yourself straining not to play the damn album.

and pixies (it is the sort of thing that prog rock dinosaurs like Rush would have devoted entire 'concept' albums to), but in the hands of Circulus who actively live a communal life, dress in medieval garb and kinda do believe in this sort of thing, the lyrics come across as naïve perhaps, but in a wonderful uplifting way. Circulus make it all work, and make it work well.

Michael Tyack has a fine grasp of writing songs. Every one contains a delightfully sing-able melody. "Song of Despair" sounds like it could have been lifted directly from "Hair" or some other trippy, late 60's hippy musical if it wasn't for the unusual instrumentation. Oliver Parfitt's synth lines fit more readily into the musical mix than on "Envelope", weaving playfully with Will Summers's various medieval woodwind instruments. Stand out tracks? None, they are all good.

The 33rd Trowbridge Village Pump Festival

Trowbridge is an odd festival that frustrates and delights in equal measure. By nature it is considered a folk festival, but having been a regular attendee over the last eight years, I've discovered its definition of folk is fairly wide, encompassing everything from the most traditional finger in the ear, unaccompanied singing to the occasional "celtic" punk band. Compared to most summer festivals "The Pump" is quite small, but what it lacks in size is

There does seem something fundamentally wrong with a band that sings about dragons

made up for in its beautiful setting on the Somerset/Wiltshire border, sandwiched between a lazy river, a rustic olde worlde farmhouse and a nearby ruined castle.

The set-up for Trowbridge is similar each year. A big tent for the main stage, another big-ish marquee for workshops, ceilidhs and afternoon sessions, and a small tent for more rock 'n' blues based bands. There's also plenty of children's entertainment around for those that need it...and more importantly a good selection of local real ales that inevitably run out on Sunday evening.

Friday night was a bit slow with not a lot grabbing my attention other than the headliners **Eliza Carthy and The Ratcatchers** who despite being one of the best bands in the business, somehow have managed to improve each time I've seen them. Tonight was no exception, everyone on stage was having fun, running through what felt like their entire repertoire at breakneck pace. Great stuff, and with one day down **The Ratcatchers** had set a standard high for other bands live up to.

Saturday overall was more consistently interesting. The afternoon saw sessions from country star **Gretchen Peters** and singer songwriter **Keith Christmas** who while pleasant enough for a lazy afternoon sitting in the sun drinking Old Rosie didn't really set the world on fire. **Waterson:Carthy** performed admirably in a mistimed slot, they should have started an evening session - rather than ending a sleepy afternoon one. The evening started well with **Karine Polwart** performing a strong selection of songs, built with the Irish band **Altan** and came to a rousing conclusion with **The Waterboys**. **The Waterboys** were on particularly fine form performing a

"Greatest Hits" set and delivering what may have been the loudest and longest guitar solo heard at Trowbridge. It may not have been Dylan at Newport but there were a few grumbles amongst the older and more conservative audience members.

Having spent years listening to the likes of **Sonic Youth** and **The Fall** this guitar solo was of negligible value really, but in the context of a small folk festival stood out like a sore thumb. It was neither wildly experimental, or in any way challenging, but seemed to highlight in my mind the aspect of Trowbridge that annoys me. Its definition of folk, while being broad is perhaps not broad enough for my liking. Over the past couple of years I've been delving into some of the more neglected areas of the folk and acoustic scene, and while I feel my tastes have been developing it seems Trowbridge remains stuck in a rut. Not all the acts I've been getting into recently are wildly experimental but are definitely just off the mainstream folk circuit radar and as such it is highly unlikely that acts as diverse as **King Creosote** (or indeed any of **The Fence Collective**), **Joanna Newsome**, **Vashti Bunyan**, (**Smog**), **The Incredible String Band** or **Bonnie Prince Billy** will ever get to play Trowbridge despite their music being firmly grounded in the "roots" tradition. I'm not saying that the festival organisers should give over the entire festival to these artists working out on the fringes but when something as simple as an old fashioned five minute electric guitar solo seems challenging, the odd "interesting" act thrown into the mix would help keep this festival fresh.

Sunday morning as always includes the **Annual Folk Quiz**. Some in our group can't understand why myself and Christina's brother Tim are so taken with this event. The jokes, and some of the questions are the same each year, but if we're at Trowbridge



we go to the quiz –it's a ritual and one where you gradually learn the inside history and gossip of the festival and, in an odd, fannish way, that's kinda why I like it. **Wailin' Jennys** (from Canada) and **Rachel Unthank and the Winterset** (from the Northeast) provided the highlights of Sunday afternoon. Both groups combined good looks, youth and accomplished musicianship and the Trowbridge crowd took them to their heart.

If you've been to enough Trowbridge Festivals you could almost write the Sunday evening yourself. The obligatory **Show of Hands** slot provides the early evening feel-good factor, followed by the obligatory female singer/songwriter (**Suzanne Vega** this year) followed by the obligatory well known up-tempo folk rock band to close the festival. However this year the committee had booked **Los De Abajo** who were unknown to all of our gang. This young 10 piece Mexican group combined Mexican folk, punk, mariachi, salsa, dance and reggae influences into an adrenalin pumping concoction that left the audience struggling to keep up. Track after track forged ahead with their brass section blasting out tunes and the band and audience barely getting breathing time in between songs.

The irregular changes of direction launched on the audience meant you didn't know where the music was going, and indeed at one point the entire band abandoned the stage leaving behind the keyboardists to DJ for fifteen minutes, which was tantamount to musical revolution at this point in the festival. I'm sure I could detect a sudden shiver of uncertainty surge through the crowd but thankfully **Los de Abajo** pulled this bold musical statement off – this was just the sort of thing I was hoping to see, something a bit different...indeed I'd have liked to have heard a complete DJ set as the sounds

coming out were just as interesting as the full band line up.

Already running well over their allotted time slot, the band abandoned their electric instruments in favour of traditional Mexican ones and leapt off stage and out into the crowd. With the audience forming a tight circle around them as they played on into the night serenading us with revolutionary music from the streets of Mexico City, it felt magical and from the face of the committee members on the stage something they had never imagined happening. What a great way to end a festival.

All Star Superman #1-5 – Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely
All Star Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder #1-3 – Frank Miller and Jim Lee
Batman 655–658 – Grant Morrison and Andy Kubert

When DC announced their new All Star line, their plan was simple – launch a new title based on a classic superhero with a high quality creative team behind it and not tie the book into the ongoing continuity, so that more casual readers would be tempted to pick up an issue here or there. The first characters selected for the All Star treatment were DC's flagship icons Superman and Batman.

The announcement of Miller and Lee's ridiculously named **All Star Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder** was greeted with awe on the internet. Jim Lee is a superstar artist, who in addition to being editor of Wildstorm Comics has been used in recent years as DC's Mr Fix-It,

usually when high-profile titles go wrong, or their sales flag. Frank Miller whose two seminal works **Batman: Year One** and **The Dark Knight Returns** redefined the character so much that nearly twenty years later writers are still struggling to take Batman off in a different direction. Audience reaction was decidedly mixed when #1 finally shipped. The plot was nothing we hadn't seen before – namely the murder of Dick Grayson's parents, Dick being taken under Batman's wing and emerging as Robin, the Boy Wonder. If the story wasn't new the art was pretty hot, although Lee drew a lot of flack in #1 for showing too much of Vicki Vale wandering about in her apartment in her underwear. When the script was leaked on the internet, it turned out Lee's illustrations were all drawn to Frank Miller's rather flippant and openly misogynistic writing.

And that is only the start of the problems with the script. The pacing is wrong – while the plot has been fairly fast-moving, it is taking an age to get anywhere meaningful. The characterisation of Batman is way off key as Miller pushes his Dark Knight-style “good soldier” dialogue to the extreme. Batman comes across as even more of an unlovable, egotistical jerk than usual. This vision of Batman is something Miller more or less created in the 90s and has continued to the present day. Fans have been complaining about it for years, so much so that this was one of the prime reasons behind the recent **Infinite Crisis** series - to re-position DC's heroes so they are lighter, more heroic and less violent vigilante figures.

The second big problem that drags this book down heavily is that it has been continually late since before #1 launched. The ongoing delays have destroyed all

momentum the plot might have had to such an extent I continually wonder why I still have it on my reading list.

Lateness has also dogged the work of Frank Quitely. However, despite a couple of minor glitches **All Star Superman** has more or less run to its published schedule, so far. Morrison and Quitely are a combination that have worked well previously on titles like **New X-Men** and the cybernetic Incredible Journey story **We3**. They are like a couple of old jazz musicians who don't see each other for a number of years but when they bump into each other on the circuit play together instinctively, like they have never been apart.

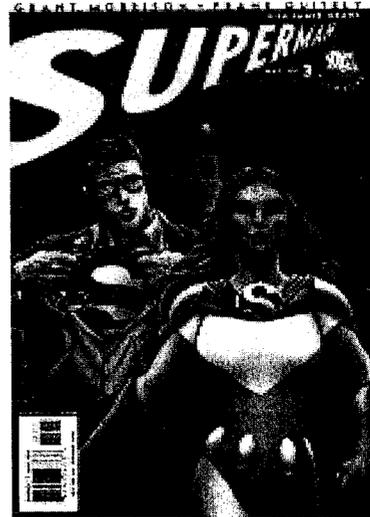
Morrison is the master of pushing concepts as far as they will go and then taking them off at ninety degrees to reality. Fortunately, as he ages and his story-telling ability grows, he knows when this serves the story and when it doesn't. In **All Star Superman** he has chosen to explore and update the outer edges of the Superman mythos, and I do mean update in its truest sense. Each issue has a self contained but connected story, usually based on some aspect of classic Silver Age stories. So far we've had a story based in the Fortress of Solitude, Lois with super-powers, Jimmy Olsen to the rescue and Clark using his powers to save the day surreptitiously while interviewing Lex Luthor in prison. I gather that Krypto the Superdog and Bizzaro Superman are due to appear soon...the Bottled City of Khandor can't be too far behind! Back in the sixties these sorts of stories would be beautifully drawn by Curt Swan, but the writing would often be quite ropey and usually filled with mad concepts, major plot holes and crackpot science. Grant Morrison has taken the stripped down bare bones of these often strange and surreal Silver Age Superman plots, put a modern spin on them, thrown in more up-to-date crackpot-science,



clever but snappy dialogue and produced a very readable and likeable combination. Coupled with Quitely's realistic(-ish) approach to depicting figures, clean sharp artwork and uncluttered but inventive page layouts you have one of the best comics on the market at the moment. This is how All Star comics should be.

In addition to his clever updating of classic Superman, Morrison also points to how Frank Miller should have approached *All Star Batman* in his first story for *Batman*. Here, Bruce Wayne has returned fresh from a year out recovering from the universe shattering events of *Infinite Crisis*. As Batman, he is as clever a detective as ever, but when the mask comes off he is struggling to cope with being Bruce Wayne, having lost his civilian identity over the past twenty years to the cape, cowl and vigilantism. The first issue sees Bruce taking lessons on being a millionaire playboy from his butler Alfred before being unleashed upon society at a charity event at a modern art gallery in London. As usual nothing goes right as the event is gate-crashed by Ninja Man Bats. Batman, of course, comes to the rescue against a backdrop of giant Lichtenstein style pop-art canvases that punctuate the fight scenes with the appropriate sound-effects. Morrison is reminding us via this post-modern story telling device that a more light-hearted Batman is back.

Grant Morrison is also keen to re-incorporate missing parts of the Bat mythos back into mainstream continuity. The plot of this story arc concerns the resurfacing of Batman's son he had with Talia (the daughter of Ra's Al Ghul). The concept of Batman and Talia having a child first appeared in Mike Barr's *Son of the Demon* story, which has long been wished away by subsequent DC editors as "non-



Clark, you knew giving Lois superpowers would end badly, so why did you do it?

continuity". This has always seemed a short-sighted and cowardly decision as characters should be given the chance to develop naturally, and something like Batman having a child by the daughter of one of his deadliest foes is a great springboard for story-telling ideas. Morrison instinctively recognises this and wades in straight-away with the son immediately usurping Tim Drake's position as Robin, upsetting the Wayne household and setting out to impress his father by dispensing his own style of justice involving a very sharp samurai sword. All this is written with similar witty fast-paced flair as seen on *All-Star Superman*.

Batman is more traditionally comic book looking than the ultra-modern high-concept *All Star Superman*, but Andy Kubert's quality pencilling coupled with moody inking by Jesse Delperdang gives the book a feel that echoes Berni Wrightson's work on the early *Swamp Thing* stories. With a strong start the future looks bright for both Batman and Grant Morrison.

Christina tries once more to come to grips with the hand that fate has dealt her. Life could have been so much better if she had been gifted with a passion for ballroom dancing, or even knitting. Science fiction only gets you strange looks and friends who think it's kinder not to mention it. Where did it all go wrong, she asks, and who's to blame?

The Science Fiction Gene?

I sometimes wonder why there are so many readers out there who won't read science fiction. Are they all victims of the negative connotations of SF that Ansible seems increasingly dedicated to exposing? Or are people born that way, with minds that prefer the here and now to the speculation about what lies beyond the apparently solid walls of their home environment?

It seems obvious within my own family that it's an inbuilt predisposition. My mother doesn't like anything that is "strange" or "weird". She's never read any science fiction, and the closest she's come to fantasy are the works of William Shakespeare and Alice in Wonderland. My mother's family are all very literary, and I can't recall any of them reading SF. My mother's sister bought us the Narnia books, but that could just as easily have been for their Christian significance as their imaginative content.

My father's family seem a better candidate for the gene. My Dad will read science fiction or fantasy providing it's reasonably well-written, and certainly likes stranger stuff than my mum. His brother Gerald also read SF and fantasy, though I'm not sure how significant that is since he emigrated to Canada in the early 60s, and had very different cultural influences to the rest of the family. My father grew up reading comics and going to Saturday morning cinema if he could scrounge the money. Perhaps exposure at an early age to a wider range of

influences than my mother accounts for his increased tolerance for strangeness, rather than any heredity trait?

When I look at my childhood and adolescence, I sometimes wonder how I came to be a science fiction reader at all. At the age of 18 when I left the family home in Southend-on-Sea to go to university, my cultural world was pretty narrow. I'd read historical novels, and European literature, but knew virtually nothing about movies or American TV (my new university friends couldn't believe I'd never watched *MASH* or *Happy Days*!) These holes in my knowledge were largely down to my mother who controlled the family viewing every evening once children's TV was over. We'd watch a lot of British drama which I was prepared to believe, along with her, was the best in the world (give or take the odd blip on the radar like *Triangle*), and the mainstream British comedy series (which vaguely bored me). We rarely ventured into the downmarket world of ITV, and we were just as likely to go to the theatre as the cinema.

My only window into a different culture was music. Everyone at school devoured pop; we didn't need i-pods for that, just simple transistor radios. We lived and breathed the hit parade. My brother Tim and I obsessively hunted for bargain singles at the weekend, trying to track down obscure non-hits by Mott the Hoople, Sparks and Wizard. I think the first hint I had that there was more to music than the here and now was listening to the Sunday afternoon show when they



played charts from earlier years. My favourites were from the psychedelic end of the 60s – Flowers in the Rain, Pictures of Matchstick Men, Lazy Sunday Afternoon. Current pop began to seem as dull as the disco tracks that were dominating the charts at that time and my transistor dial led me to Radio Luxembourg, and then Radio Caroline, which by this time was broadcasting progressive album tracks to a dedicated audience from off the coast of Essex. From there it was a short step to Genesis albums, the music press, and its pre-punk pantheons of Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Captain Beefheart. Names like Ballard, Dick and Lovecraft began to enter my consciousness. Science fiction and the counter-culture had made its way in through the Trojan Horse of my transistor, despite my mother's stranglehold on TV consumption.

When I did ultimately get into science fiction in my final year at university, I saw it as a reaction to reading too much French literature for my degree, but it could just as easily have been a culmination of the slow rejection of my white middle-class English family values for what seemed like a wider, stranger world. In any case, French literature, at least as taught in the 1970s was largely a literature of ideas (even though we read none of the cultural theorists like Baudrillard, Barthes and Derrida who were around at the time), and it was the French counter-culture in the form of the magazine *Metal Hurlant* and various *bandes dessinées* that was largely responsible for my transition to science fiction reader. All the same, I was the only person from my French degree course in the science fiction society. (Fran Dowd was briefly doing the same course as me, but had left by then to do more adventurous things with her life.) The rest of the group, as I remember, were mainly studying maths (or dating mathematicians.).

I suppose what appealed to me at that stage was that SF was a non-literature, or an anti-literature. I liked the fact that it wasn't taken seriously by the academic establishment. It felt subversive, a trash culture that had slipped beneath the radar of most of the older people I knew. This was just pre-Star Wars. SF was still cool. It wasn't the mainstream, but it was easy to get hold of. That it came, complete with its own culture was a bonus which made it even more fascinating.

If we return to genetics and the small sample of my siblings, it's interesting to see that out of the three of us that grew up under the same environmental conditions, my brother Tim had a mild interest in science fiction (he read Clarke and Wyndham) and fantasy (the usual Tolkien thing), but never pursued it further. My older sister as far as I know never read any science fiction, and isn't interested in the genre. She was also, in some ways the least influenced by the family culture as imposed by my mother, as she actually had a social life when she was at school, rather than sitting round watching TV, and rebelled more overtly and much earlier than I did. Her trash cultural influences were books like *Love Story* and *Midnight Cowboy* which she lent on to me to read under the covers after lights out. She famously chose *Lady Chatterly's Lover* as a school prize, causing a minor storm at the bookshop. But she doesn't have a taste for the weird, and I would say that the science fiction gene, if such there is, missed her, or more likely skipped a generation as I wouldn't be surprised if it turns up in her son, my nephew James.

My youngest brother Simon is definitely a science fiction reader, but I don't know if that counts, as being at least seven years younger than the rest of us, a lot of his

influences came from me and my brother. Despite the age difference, I remember Simon and I getting into science fiction at about the same time, both starting to write SF novels over one of my summer holidays from university, and competing to see who could get the most amusement out of the E E Doc Smith Lensman series (I suspect I won. Simon was more the right age for them than I was!) So maybe we influenced each other.

None of this cultural exploration of my own family background really helps with the sort of people I've been encountering recently through joining reading groups: keen readers who don't read science fiction. For most of my adult life, the serious readers I've known have been in fandom, so by definition, most of them "do" science fiction. Maybe I should have asked Pam Wells why she doesn't read SF, but somehow it seemed beside the point in the 80s when we were all busy being active fans together. But even though Pam didn't tend to read SF, she did have the fannish mindset in spades, and was as much in to strange, weird shit as the next fan. So I don't think she'd be much help. The women I'm talking about (and they are all women, so there's also a gender issue coming in here, even if it's only the gender issue of reading groups being predominantly a female thing) are intelligent, middle-class, and because it's Falmouth, vaguely "arty". Some might be put off by too much sex or bad language in a book, but those that read more widely just didn't consider there was much to interest them in science fiction. It was interesting to see reactions to *The Time Travellers Wife*, which has become something of a reading group book. Most people really liked it, but there were one or two who complained that they found it difficult to keep track of the different

timelines, or just found it too complicated. But none of them rejected it outright, maybe because it doesn't feel like science fiction. It has a well worked out science fiction plot, but the trappings are modern day America and at its heart is the story of a relationship.

There's not much sign of interest in science fiction within the student community at Falmouth. Art schools are not (or didn't use to be) hot-beds of conformism, and there are a lot of strange people around, but they're strange in a different, less verbal way than science fiction fans. Actually it's interesting that even on the Illustration course where you might expect science fiction and the comics tradition to be a visible influence there is very little of it around. Our lone male reader in the first reading group I joined was an illustration student who was keen on Douglas Copeland, Chuck Palahniuk and Haruki Murakami but had no interest in science fiction. I think he had the strange-stuff gene, but didn't see much to appeal to it within science fiction.

The more I think about it, the more it seems a nonsense to talk about a science fiction gene, or as meaningless as attempting to pinpoint the gay gene. All the same, I do think people have a pre-disposition towards certain types of books (or to reading at all) and an aversion towards others. For example, I'm never going to be a fan of horror, and I don't think any amount of differences in my upbringing would change that, or at least none in the remembered, conscious part of my upbringing – I'm prepared to admit that pre-rational experiences are a likely influence here. But then, you could ask, would men read books about relationships if it was the done "guy" thing? In fact it's already started – in this post-Nick Hornsby era you can get chick lit for boys. I don't think that many men will read it, but some will. Just as some men



love the novels of Jane Austen. If I were in the book marketing business I'm sure I would be confronted on a daily basis by the truth of gender and cultural generalizations. I think there are many people who will never read science fiction, or if they did, wouldn't get what it was for. But I feel there is an equal number of people who would and don't, because of the way it's marketed. I think the cultural prejudices have changed since my parents days. It's not the strangeness that puts them off, but the sameness, the way that science fiction looks like a commodity for the initiated. The bookshop chains stack the shelves high with what they know will sell, often multiple copies of the same series, in a way they don't for any other type of book.

I wonder now whether I would have become a science fiction reader if I had come to the genre at a later stage? Some of the fascination might have been less as it became more mainstream. Over the years I've come to realise that my SF gene is not the same as other fans that I know. I don't want to collect large quantities of books, certainly not if they are huge volumes in the same series (though I'll make an exception for China Mieville and Neal Stephenson). I don't want to read hard SF books about gas giants (unless they're written by Iain M. Banks) and I certainly don't want to read books about talking cats (no, there aren't any exceptions to that one.) (Damn, yes, there is, but it's not a genre book, so I think I can get away with it.)

There's a lot of intelligent and well-worked out SF around these days, but it doesn't have the "out-there" strangeness of Philip K. Dick and my early heroes. SF seems to have created a mainstream of its own that is a bit impenetrable to the non-sf reader, but doesn't have the wild appeal of strange ideas, anti-literature values and cult status that attracted me to the genre in the first

place. Maybe cyberpunk was the last flourish of this strand of SF? Can we even call SF a literature of ideas any more, or should it be renamed a literature of world-building, scientific modelling and cleverly characterized space opera? There are ideas in there, of course there are, but sometimes you have to read through a hell of a lot of lovingly crafted scenery to get at them. And then we complain when someone without the sf background comes in, grabs the ideas, and makes a fortune out of them.

The truth is a lot of non-SF readers love SF ideas, they just don't want the genre trappings. They have the gene, but not the culture. But would we like it if they did? Dr. Who has gone from being that slightly despised artifact of nostalgia to cool family viewing. Dr Who fans are both proud and dismayed. But perhaps the return of Dr Who will ensure another generation of adults responsive to SF?

Last week I stood in the supermarket next to a kid in a complete Dr Who world – having his own adventure with the cybermen while humming the Dr Who theme tune. Perhaps that's where my SF gene came from – not France or my dad or the radio – but from watching Patrick Troughton trying to outwit the Mind Robber? And so maybe what I'm talking about is not genes but memes, the capsule ideas that spread through our culture like germs? Could it be that I caught SF at an early age off the telly, grew up never knowing I was infected until one day someone handed me an Alfred Bester novel? Then – kaboom! – sf mania? It's no stranger than blaming it all on tiny strands of chemicals in my cellular makeup, that's for sure.