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# Megatheriums for Breakfast 7

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A fanzine published for ANZAPA and others by none other than...

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## The Beauty and Burden of Books

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There's no doubt about it. I have too many books.

*Too many* is defined as: more books than I have shelf space. Sue and I have instituted a very sensible rule which says that I'm not allowed to put up any more bookshelves and I'm not allowed to buy any more books unless there is shelf space for them.

What this means is that I have to constantly cull my existing collection to get rid of the books I don't consider essential, to make room for any new ones.

And when I do this every few months, I keep coming back to the basic philosophy of why I like to own books. Sue asks from time to time about a new purchase: "Couldn't you get it from the library?". Well, in some cases I could, but dammit, I want to *own* the book. But why? What are the reasons we want to possess books and keep them near us?

To read, yes. I don't ever buy a book I don't think I'm going to read. I'm not a collector of first editions or art books. If I buy a book, it is because I'd like to read it. Nevertheless, I calculate that I've only read about 60% of my collection. Out of a total of some 2,500 books, that means that I own some 1,000 books I *haven't* read. Good grief! Will I ever read all of those books? Highly unlikely. And yet I still buy new books.

But why keep a book once I have read it? I'd *re-read* of course. I love re-reading favourite books. I especially re-read a lot when my mind is at a low ebb. Re-reading is enjoyable because you know there aren't going to be any unpleasant surprises!

And I do like to have reference books. I love to be able to look something up, either from casual interest, or because of a crossword or a competition in a newspaper, or to help Katie with her homework. It peevs me no end if I can't find the answer to some question in my own library.

Why else do I like to own books? I think a large part of it is just the sheer aesthetic pleasure of books. A well-made book is a beautiful thing to look at and to handle. And rows of books generally look wonderful on the shelves, full of variety and interest. Despite my passion for computers, I can't imagine electronic versions ever totally replacing the traditional book. There's too much of a sensual pleasure in holding a book, feeling its weight and the texture of the cover under one's fingers, turning the pages and being able to see at a glance how far you are from the end. In a very real sense, the technology of the printed book, the brilliantly appropriate techniques crafted and honed over nearly two thousand years, will take a lot of beating. Only when a computer version looks, feels and works like a book will there be substantial replacement of works printed in the traditional way.

But there is one dreaded aspect of books, and that is moving them. The volume and weight of numbers of books, once you take them down from the shelves, is simply astonishing. You can look up at a row of books on the shelf and think that you'll easily fit them in a few cardboard boxes; but then when you try to do it, you find that you have filled all your boxes to the point where they are too heavy to lift, and you've only cleared half a shelf.

It's also true that books have very little resale value. It makes me almost ill to see school fetes or markets selling hardback books for as little as 10 or 20 cents. To me, this devalues the worth and dignity of books.

Despite all that, I still love to own books, and I'll certainly keep on buying them. I think perhaps half the pleasure is browsing in a bookstore and finding a new treasure: a book long sought-for, or a new volume dealing with a subject I'm really interested in. Melbourne is reasonably well served with bookstores; but the best bookstores I've been into have been in Sydney, where they seem able to support quite specialist and academic bookstores like Abbeys. Their bookstores seem also to be much bigger: there's nowhere in Melbourne as big as the Sydney Angus & Robertsons or their Dymock's.

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But when, clutching my new treasure, I get home and look up at the shelves, there's that dreaded sinking feeling as I think: "Now where is *this* going to fit..."

## Recent Reading

When I first started writing this contribution, I began this section: "Once again, I've been reading very little...". I'd been in one of my periodical slumps where I didn't seem to have the time, energy or enthusiasm to pick up a book in the evenings. However, I suddenly got back into reading about two weeks ago, and I've read quite a lot since then.

<i>Heart and Science</i>	Wilkie Collins
<i>Stephen Hawking -</i>	Michael White &
<i>A Life in Science</i>	John Gribbin
<i>The Lives of</i>	Dianna Wynne
<i>Christopher Chant</i>	Jones
<i>The Magicians of</i>	Dianna Wynne
<i>Caprona</i>	Jones
<i>The Stolen Lake</i>	Joan Aiken
<i>Charmed Life</i>	Dianna Wynne
	Jones

The Wilkie Collins novel was well up to my expectations: Victorian melodrama enriched by a serious tone, and some excellent characterisation. Collins' characters are a good deal more real than those of Dickens, who so often falls into mere caricatures, and whose villains are utterly black and whose heroes and heroines absolutely white, often almost to the point of being nauseating (Esther Summerson from *Bleak House* springs to mind). It makes one wonder why Dickens' works live on as classics while those of Collins, apart from a couple of works, are largely forgotten. Despite the above, I do enjoy Dickens; but I think he is generally over-rated.

That said, *Heart and Science* could not be considered Collins' best work: it's too much of a polemic against Uncaring Science and Vivisection for that. It tells the story of a young girl, Carmina, who is orphaned in Italy and left in the guardianship of her English aunt Mrs Gallilee, who is a Patroness of Science and living well beyond her means. Carmina, of course (otherwise this wouldn't be melodrama) is the heiress to a modest fortune, which will come to her aunt if Carmina dies childless. Her aunt thus has every motive to see that Carmina does not marry - but to her dismay, her own son Ovid (a doctor suffering from overwork) falls immediately in love with her. Plot complications then begin to abound: Ovid must leave for a long over-

seas trip to restore his health; the governess of the household is hopelessly in love with Ovid and begins as a bitter enemy of Carmina; Carmina's faithful Italian servant is forced to leave; we have a Vivisectionist doctor with no human feelings with an interest in brain disease; and on it goes.

As I've said, this is melodrama. But in Collins' hands it makes for fascinating reading, and there is some good character development of the governess, struggling between bitter envy and compassion for the helpless Carmina. Even the Vivisectionist doctor is at last seen to have some human failings.

They don't write them like that any more.

The biography of Hawking was absolutely fascinating. I would say it was a "warts and all" biography, with no attempt to make Hawking out to be some sort of saint. The circumstances of his recent separation from his wife are covered in some detail, though without a trace of sensationalism. John Gribbin has contributed very well written explanations of Hawking's contributions to science, which are neatly meshed with the chronology of Hawking's private life.

What I found most enlightening was the assessment of Hawking's contribution to theoretical physics. I still think it's true that the importance of his work has been magnified greatly in the public mind by his physical disability - "the greatest genius since Einstein" is probably rather overstating it. But, like Einstein, Hawking has been seized upon and made a cult figure by millions of people who have very little understanding of what his work is about. The continuing best-seller status of his book "A Brief History of Time" is very hard to credit, given its subject matter, and one imagines that very many people who have bought the book have never read it. (I have to say that it was not a book I enjoyed very much myself, perhaps because it omitted a lot of interesting detail, and took a very long time to get beyond the basic explanations of cosmology).

I would certainly recommend this work to anyone who has read *A Brief History of Time*, or anyone interested in the human side of science.

I've been reading quite a lot of children's (or I suppose "juvenile") fiction recently, and enjoying it a great deal. First it was discovering Joan Aiken, and now Dianna Wynne Jones. Both of these authors write extremely entertaining fiction, both have a sly and subtle sense of humour.

All of the Dianna Wynne Jones books listed above are set in the same alternate universe, or parallel world. Indeed, the idea of parallel worlds is at the core of the fantasy: the more knowledgeable characters in the books are aware that there are a whole swag of alternate worlds, and there is some traffic between them. Our own world (or alternate time stream) is a near neighbour to that of the main action. Ours is the only one of all those known where magic hasn't been discovered, and is thus considered thoroughly dull and uninteresting.

All three of the books I read concern a character called Chrestomanci, who is an upper echelon public servant in a world where technology and much of the culture is still at the 19th Century level. But he heads a department whose job is to keep magic under proper bureaucratic control, and is in his own right a powerful enchanter.

*The Lives of Christopher Chant* is about the childhood of Chrestomanci, in which he discovers a whole raft of alternate worlds by simply walking into them during his dreams. But he is very young, and naive, and is exploited badly by his unscrupulous relatives. There are some quite harrowing scenes, especially when the young boy realises just *what* he has been inadvertently helping to smuggle between the worlds...

*Charmed Life* is memorable for its female lead, a thoroughly nasty child called Gwendolen, who almost all through the book seems likely to come to a bad end, but doesn't quite. But she's so awful you keep reading, just hoping she'll get her just desserts.

*The Magicians of Caprona* is a sort of alternate *Romeo and Juliet*, but where the feuding families are two great houses of spell-makers.

Back to Joan Aiken, *The Stolen Lake* is another Dido Twite book which I hadn't read in sequence - it comes between *Nightbirds over Nantucket* and *The Cuckoo Tree*. This one involves the pertinacious and ever-resolute Dido visiting Roman America, which was of course colonised by the ancient Celts when they were driven out of Britain by the invasion of the Saxons. They have intermingled with the neighbouring populations somewhat, so they have names like Daffyd Gonzalez. Oh, and we have the return of King Arthur, to a Guinevere who has been waiting for him in South America for some 1300 years and who has put on a little weight in the meantime. It's all non-

sense, of course, but beautifully crafted nonsense, and very amusing.

## The New Look

For those who are interested in such things, this issue of *Megatheriums* has been printed out on my new Hewlett Packard DeskJet 500 printer, using True Type fonts under Windows 3.1.

What this means (apart from not having to sneak stuff onto the laser printer at work) is that I can experiment with a wide range of typefaces. I've always been passionate about typography, and now I can play to my heart's content.

All of this section of the fanzine is set in Monotype Baskerville, a typeface I have long admired. (Well, it may not be *exactly* Baskerville - the font package I bought calls it "Basset" for copyright reasons - but it's so close that no human could easily tell the difference). The connoisseur of typefaces will quickly identify Baskerville by its rounded look, much less compressed than Times, and by the unconnected descender of the letter 'g'.

When I was in my youth, I used to pride myself on being able to identify typefaces at a glance, the way that others could identify cars or trains. I don't have the facility that I used to have, but I can still pick the more common faces with only momentary hesitation. But it's not as easy as it used to be. There have been an awful lot of (and a lot of awful) typefaces designed in recent years with the advent of computer typesetting. These newer faces have in many cases driven out older faces that don't deserve to vanish.

There are a lot of typefaces you don't see any more, not even in packages of "The 100 Fonts Microsoft Left Out of Windows". You never see Plantin used these days; a very black face and very distinctive. Or Perpetua, a typeface designed by Eric Gill and modelled on Roman monumental inscriptions. Let alone rarities like Lutetia, Joanna, Dante or Centaur. I have a treasured photocopy of an old type-book with examples of these faces and others.

But despite the plethora of faces available, the widespread availability of desktop publishing generally means that most people just use the fonts which are in-built into their laser printers: Times, Helvetica, Palatino and maybe Garamond. And so everything looks the same.

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By the way, the DeskJet printer is a marvel. Not quite up to laser quality, but fairly close, and at \$795 a good deal cheaper than a laser printer. I've never been happy with dot matrix printers: they are noisy and slow, and the worst of them (Epson springs to mind) can't be trusted to print any more than a page or two without supervision, as the tractor feed generally screws up as soon as your back is turned.

## Recent Listening

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Bruce Gillespie commented some mailings ago that he did not share my taste for Purcell and Handel, regarding them as "too early" for his interest. Well, rather than developing my taste towards more modern composers, I seem to be heading in the opposite direction.

My latest two CDs were a compilation by the Tallis Scholars, who specialise in early (1400 and 1500's) English and Latin sacred music, and an album of church music by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who was an amazingly talented woman composing in the mid 1100's. Someone must surely have written a book about Abbess Hildegard, but I haven't seen any references to such a biography. She was an incredibly talented individual, who not only wrote music, but painted and wrote plays and poetry, studied nature and was deeply involved in European politics.

To me, this choral music (mostly unaccompanied) is just astonishingly beautiful to listen to, even if I haven't a clue what the words mean most of the time, and is a splendid exposition of what a wonderfully versatile and marvellous instrument the human voice is.

It's actually rather surprising to me that so much of the music I enjoy is sacred music, considering that I am about as irreligious as it is possible to get without being burnt at the stake.

## Recent Computing

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Well, not a lot, really, apart from wasting appalling amounts of time with a game called *Civilisation*.

However, I've been spending a lot of time at work recently learning to use a program called *MapInfo*, which is a "Geographical Information System". All that means is that you use it to draw, colour and manipulate

maps to extract or display information, rather than using a standard spreadsheet or database program. But for its modest cost (modest for a business, that is) of \$2,000, it is extremely powerful.

We have the complete Melbourne metropolitan street and road network and postcode boundaries, plus our own custom information which relates to newsagent boundaries (I work for a division of David Syme & Co Ltd, who publish "The Age", remember?). You can type in an address and very quickly have the system pinpoint the location and draw up the street network with that address at its centre.

## Events

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I don't have room or time to talk about this yet, but the big news is that Grigg family may be moving to a new house sometime in the first half of next year. Sue is up to her elbows in floor plans and kitchen designs, and working out where we are going to find 70 lineal metres of bookshelf space on the walls.

I'll keep you posted. Don't worry, we're not moving very far away.

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This was *Megatheriums for Breakfast 7*

I've spent 426 minutes working on this issue, it comprises 25790 characters and 4520 words, I started work on it on September 1, 1992 and printed it out on September 28, 1992. You don't think I'd miss the chance to fill up a few more centimetres of space, do you?

From David R Grigg, 1556 Main Road, Research, Victoria 3095, Australia.

# At Last, the Mailing Comments Show...!

**You really know you're home when you find a wombat under your bed #22**

Cath Ortlieb

I was amused to read that you missed seeing Michael's birth because Marc forgot to bring your glasses! Because Katie was born by Caesarian section, Sue was under a spinal anaesthetic which, though it left her awake, left her somewhat dopey; and of course she wasn't able to sit up and watch what was happening. I was lucky enough to get the first real view of Katie being held up, covered in fine white fuzz, and umbilical cord spiralling down. It was quite an experience.

**Jan Kicked and Clawed Her Way to the Top**

Jan MacNally

Thanks for your information about MLC. As I think I mentioned last time, we have definitely decided to send Katie there. Actually, she is extremely keen on the school herself, so its not so much a matter of "send" as of "allow" her to go there. All we have to do now it work out how the heck we are going to be able to afford it!

Congratulations and good luck on beginning your Master's degree.

I'm starting to get back in the studying mood again, after a couple of years of absolute academic laziness after I completed my Graduate Diploma. I'm not quite sure what I would take up, though, or if I would have the energy to see it through. I certainly wouldn't do night school again, though, that was absolutely exhausting.

If I do anything, it would probably be by correspondence (I gained my Arts Degree by correspondence through Deakin). I'm keeping an interested eye on the ABC's Open Learning program, but haven't really been tempted by any of the offerings this year.

**Ytterbium 21**

Alan Stewart

Well, I don't know about Synchronicity. Into a well-ordered universe some coincidences must fall... There's a marvellous book called *Innumeracy* by John Allen Paulos, which I strongly recommend. He starts to put some quantitative analysis on how often we should expect coincidences to occur, and generally they occur just about as often as statistics would suggest they should.

For example, he shows that the odds are better than 99 in 100 that any pair of strangers in the United States are linked by a chain of no more than two intermediary acquaintances. That is, the first stranger is extremely likely to know someone who knows someone who knows the second stranger. And the chances are better than 1 in 100 that the two strangers are linked by only one individual, that is, that they both know the same acquaintance.

Making cakes in the microwave, bleagh! This is precisely the kind of thing that microwaves are *not* good at, that and roasting chickens and frying eggs. Try jam, or custard, or pudding, or almost any vegetable. We always do potatoes in the microwave now, forget about boiling them, which wastes a lot of the flavour.

**Energy**

Marc Ortlieb

I'm not quite sure how I feel about you and Cath discussing

your domestic affairs by means of Anzapa mailing comments. It seems slightly indecent of us to be reading them, like listening in at your kitchen window! Besides, it seems an awfully *slow* way to debate matters domestic. "Honey, where's the salt?" "Hmph! You can't have read my last Anzapa contribution, obviously."

About cooking and energy; well, a dishwasher does give me a little more time than you seem to have. But I find making bread and baking cakes really very relaxing, as I've said. Dinner parties (of which we have had exceedingly few) are another matter. Then, I can get really tense, trying to get everything to arrive just at the right moment and for everything to be just the right temperature. Needless to say, I don't often succeed totally. But then triumphantly putting a perfectly risen soufflé in front of a guest makes up for a lot of sins in the earlier part of the dinner.

**Gobbets**

Kim Huett

I thought *my* contribution used small print...! What is this, 6 point?

I'm sure being an "unattached officer" must be very unpleasant for you. That happened to me for a while when I was in the public service about (gasp!) twenty years ago. I was in the Department of Aviation when they re-classified the job I was doing. The powers that be made a valiant effort to push me off into the Department of Social Services, but I wasn't having any of it. I was interested in planes, not pensions, dammit!

Anyway, good luck. You don't really say whether you are hoping for a permanent position or whether you would prefer to be offered a redundancy package - Roger Weddall seems to have landed on his feet with his redundancy.

And speak of the devil...

### Exhystentialism

Roger Weddall

If I haven't done so already, please accept my congratulations on your DUFF win. I'm sure you'll do a great job.

Well, without appearing immodest, I *did* make an interdepartmental memo look interesting reading - I wrote an inspired little piece about such a memo in *Touchstone 5/2*, which was included in the first Anzapacon mailing. But I'd have to re-type it to include it here, which I'm too lazy to do, so you'll have to take my word for it.

I suppose the problem with re-creating live dinosaurs and letting them loose is that you would create an ecological disaster worse than the introduction of foxes and rabbits into Australia. I mean, imagine stegosauruses and brontosauruses thundering around the Australian bush (too dry, except for the far north, I would have thought), squashing all the little possums and bashing down the gum trees. Water buffalo would have nothing on them for destructiveness.

When I talked about people wanting to believe in increased violence, I guess I was thinking of older people, such as my father, who insists that things nowadays are going to the dogs; there's a sort of protectiveness about the past - things must have been better then because it was *my* time, that sort of thing.

### Tisellation

Jane Tisell

Well, again, chocolate cake is not the kind of thing to make in the microwave! You wouldn't try to bake a cake in a steamer, would you? Or fry an egg under the grill? Horses for courses. Use the

microwave for what it's good for, forget about trying to cook entire meals in it. As Slattery says, it's an extra pair of hands in the kitchen.

I am definitely intending to write the software I mentioned. It's just a matter of finding the time. The software won't attempt to do everything, but it should make it easier to keep track and not get into a mess when making changes. I plan to call the program *Event!* But apart from the title, and a few prototype dialog boxes, it's still just an idea at present.

Sorry not to comment further, I'm desperately short of time to finish this contribution right now.

### Anzapa Constitution

Hordes of well-meaning constitutional freaks

Isn't it about time we changed this around a bit? For a start, it seems pretty silly to have a nominated annual fee of \$7 embedded into the document. Why not change this bit to read: "An annual fee is to be paid on or before the first of August. The amount of the fee will be determined by the OBE at a rate sufficient to cover operating costs" ? Any seconders?

### Slaydomania II

Leanne Frahm

I didn't understand a word about the North/South rivalry business in fandom, I'm pleased to say. After spending six years in deep gaffiation, I have about as much interest in fan feuds as I do in the Aussie Rules football competition, that is to say, none at all. There have to be some benefits to becoming middle aged, fat, balding and greying, and staying aloof from such things (as of course I see you are doing) must be one of them. There don't seem to be an awful lot of others, though...

Your judging of your local literary competition sounds as though there would be a great deal of boredom for one or two gems of prose. But the examples you quote sound very familiar; there were similar ghastly examples at the couple of writer's workshops I attended (and probably some of them were mine, for all I remember!). There's a kind of uniformity to bad amateur writing. It's only good writing that is individual.

Your cooking sounds great. When can I come to dinner?

Well, perhaps we didn't clash swords, but I seem to remember times you lost patience with me, and I sulked unconscionably. Aussiecon II is best forgotten. I've been trying hard to forget it for the last seven years... I'm rather appalled that it appears that ill-fated occasion (or leastwise, our management of it) put you out of fandom as well as me, for a similar length of time. *Never again* is branded very deeply on my forehead.

It does make you wonder why people volunteer (or at least, only protest weakly when dragooned) to run such things as Worldcons. At best, it is a thankless, exhausting task; at worst, it loses you friends.

### Fanatic 29

Lyn McConchie

Gosh, everyone in Anzapa seems to have parents having bypass surgery just at present. Hope your Mum is fine. My father appears to be as good as new, and twice as dogmatic. All he needs now is a hearing aid. "Who me, I'm not deaf!"

(Typeface freaks: these mailing comments are set in 10pt Garamond.)