

S G L O D I O N

SGLODION 1 from Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, England, RG1 5AU.

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Obituary (1979-1987)

Ansible passed away peacefully somewhere in the war-torn aftermath of the 1987 Worldcon. In its best years, whenever they were, it was generally agreed that this fanzine had done great things for semicolons. Indeed, the entire cyberpunk movement is clearly influenced by the seminal production values of issue 2/3 (a testament to the artistic effect of runny duplicator ink on shiny paper). Later, though, there came a decline. After major bypass surgery to the colophon, the sadly self-indulgent Ansible 666 concerned itself entirely with flatulent discussions about the protocol of stapling fanzines ("My teeth gritted, and the stapler went spung"). The final, posthumous issues were so rambling, ill-written and ineptly edited that they earned the scorn of all true SF aficionados by becoming best-sellers, and there were angry scenes when one of these insults to science fiction was block-voted on to the Hugo shortlist by the sinister and hateful cult of "Britfanologists", already proven by Los Angeles researchers to have been collectively responsible for the Holocaust and the postal system. Although the special Conspiracy '87 Ansible was a large and imposing edifice, well suited to a Worldcon despite the poor state of repair, it cannot be denied that its manager was drunk and behaved appallingly. Let us pass over the later controversy and the sadness of Ansible's lonely, alcoholic end...and look back on the period of its greatness, believed to have appeared at the end of a sentence in issue 28.

Fables

The scene is the Tower of London before the invention of tourists. Sir Walter Raleigh is picking his nose and trying to think of good bits to put into his draft History of England. Suddenly, through the window, he sees a fight between some workmen doing repairs! One rude mechanical actually gets killed. Enter, shortly after, two kindly friends:

FRIEND 1: Oi, mush! How's the incarceration?

RALEIGH: Hey, see that punch-up? Great stuff. Makes a bleeding change, I can tell you.

FRIEND 2: Oh yeah. This big brickie had it in for his mate 'cos of, wosname--

RALEIGH: No, it was the other guy started it, pissing round with a culverin.

FRIEND 1: Come off it, sunshine! It was all an

argument about the theme of the misuse of power in Measure for Measure, and....

RALEIGH: Bleeding heck! A bit of sodding history happens right outside my window and I still can't get it straight! (Hurls manuscript History into the fire, but allows FRIENDS to retrieve most of it, not without exchanging glances and significantly tapping their temples.)

I still feel like that about Conspiracy '87, and my remaining friends were significantly slow to retrieve the special Conspiracy-report Ansible 51 from its richly deserved flames. If you think you have vast Ansible subscription credit (i.e. money sent to me--not contributors' goodwill credits, which butter few parsnips) and not unreasonably don't trust me to do more fanzines, ask for a refund, or a subscription transfer to Critical Wave, or beg me to fritter it all away on beer.

Another fable is the true but deeply allegorical story of the man who went Beep. He came to us from a firm of restoration experts--that is, builders, but with an aura of smart suits, cellphones and Gucci filofaxes which clearly indicated that you wouldn't get 20% off by paying in greasy fivers.

Beep!

Our natural politesse prevented us from making any comment. Perhaps he merely had the loudest digital watch in the world, and liked to stand out from the other wallies who in cinemas and public places emit a chirping chorus every hour on the hour. He went on talking about the soggy ceiling, the fearful fungus and the bit of roof which needed restoration, and quoted prices more appropriate to complete urban renewal.

Beep!

Obviously he was being radiopaged but didn't wish to interrupt his sales talk. We dutifully kept staring out at the Brain, a convoluted mass of expanding foam with which I'd tried to patch the little flat roof over the bay window downstairs. The Brain, our expert conveyed, had been a bad idea. (But not as bad as that of the previous builders, whose gooey sealant had stayed gooey over two years, as the new workers were to find when they removed the ceiling and it oozed all over them like a Shaun Hutson novel.)

Beep!

It seemed to be growing ever more penetrating, not to say embarrassing. I hinted delicately that we wouldn't mind if he answered his beeper. He smiled politely and arranged a date on which

skilled artisans would fail to turn up and demolish portions of our home. What urbanity, what cool.

Beep!

We ushered him out, grateful to have this source of piercing noise removed before my hearing aid fell apart with the shock. Neither Hazel nor I could resist giggling at this chap who smooth-talked imperturbably while regularly going...

Beep!

"But he's gone," Hazel said after a bit.

Beep!

I can only add that it was most inconsiderate of our totally forgotten smoke alarm to choose that morning to start rending the air with its "battery getting low" warning.

And now, my children, whenever I'm tempted to write an article about the deplorable state of apathy in British SF or fanzines, I deter myself by recollecting the man who went Beep.

Beyond the Fields We Know

People keep saying doomy things about how that noble institution the fanzine has become a pale reflection of that evil cancerous growth the convention, and as an example of a particularly evil cancerous growth they point to me. My sin has been to let conventions push me (by offers of free meals and huge drinks) into writing speeches which afterwards I traitorously publish as fanzine articles, thus subordinating that noble institution etc etc. Since what I write for audiences is deeply similar to my other stuff--with perhaps fewer semicolons, parentheses within parentheses, and words I'm not too sure I can pronounce--one might just as well heap praise on the convention for acting as midwife to a fanzine article....

(Speaking of which, I'm still having a severe attack of Gosh Wow at being invited as a guest to Orycon 11 in Portland, Oregon [Nov 10-12 1989]. No American con has previously displayed such supreme taste. Oh damn, I'll have to write a speech.)

More obloquy should go to the magazines which pay me for what often looks very like fanwriting, albeit with computers occasionally replacing SF as the subject from which I'm digressing. Here's a bit from one of many pieces in Apricot File:

It was a near thing. Our street credibility could have been shattered. Computer hacks would have nudged one another in the pub, tittering and jeering at how Langford had sold out to the big publicity interests, and grovelled for a British Microtype Award--As Sponsored By The Sunday Times.

The crackly voice over the phone said, "We're the British Microcomputing Awards." (I managed to bite back the instinctive response of, "No thanks, we've already got one.") "We understand you, er, do a disk."

"Yes indeed! Our disk gives its buyers unlimited super powers, boundless sexual potency, and an uncanny ability to understand several sentences in

M5-D05 manuals. Make the cheque out to--"

"No, it's the awards, you're in line for best utility software. Can we have all your literature?"

Blimey, I thought. "It's already in the post," I said. "What's the address?"

The second call came to my esteemed colleague Chris Priest. "We want free copies of all your stuff, pronto," they said ingratiatingly. "Will it run on a Apricot Xen computer?"

"Er, we're fairly positively certain it will but haven't been able to try."

"Oh! Why don't you ask Apricot to give you a free Xen? That's what we did."

It is nice to know that innocence still survives in this cruel world.

"Where do we send the software?" Chris asked with commendable restraint.

Not feeling like walking all the way downstairs to check the street number, the awards lady said: "I don't know yet, we'll ring tomorrow...."

The final phone call came many days later.

"Why haven't you sent us your software?"

"We stayed in all day for you to ring with the address, but you didn't."

"Oh, well, it's too late now."

And that, readers, is at least one of the reasons why our cheapo utilities failed to be up there with the international best-selling finalists, GEM, Sidekick and Windows.

...That particular magazine sank beneath me, like Ad Astra and Extro in the past. I stopped reviewing for White Dwarf in 1988 owing to inflation (the fantasy bloody trilogies kept getting fatter while my cheques stayed unchanged), and abandoned Knave when I found that the new editorial policy required a prose brilliance which I couldn't sustain: "Gosh, I've Never Seen One As Big As That," She Whispered Huskily, etc. In 1989 I was actually thrown out of a magazine column spot for the first time--mingy accountants at New Computer Express ordained that all future funny bits be staff-written to save money. I totter on with book reviews in the newish games mag GM and word processing homilies in 8000 Plus. My thanks for the unfailing support of fans who write, "I always skim through your column before putting the magazine back on the rack...."

Unfinished Business

Efforts to assemble a mosaic view of Conspiracy '87 have long since collapsed in contradictions and whingeing. Only fragments remain. Lucky you.

MIKE ABBOTT reports strange doings at a convention desk: "MIKE SCOTT: Would you like to join Follycon? SWEDE (looking supremely unexcited): No. MYSELF: How about a supporting membership? SWEDE (beating his own record for supreme unexcitement): No. MYSELF (in sheer desperation): How about some Follycon tap dancing? SWEDE (turning back, and looking interested): Tap dancing? MYSELF: Yeah, tap

dancing. No other con will offer you that for sale. SWEDE: How much? MYSELF (licking lips): A fiver. SWEDE (getting out wallet and, so help me God, grasping a blue banknote-like object with intent to remove it): Can you tap dance? MYSELF (boggle eyed, but managing to make suitable circular arm motions): Oh yeah, not great but.... SWEDE (to Mike S, with air of getting surveyor's report on slightly desirable residence): Can he tap dance? MIKE S (stricken by demon of honesty): Not really, no. MYSELF (fist in mouth): Squeak! SWEDE (turning away sadly): Oh dear. Pity. MYSELF (desperately, at his retreating back and fiver): Wait! I'll Cossack dance. I really can do that! Only £3! SWEDE (dist-antly): No, thank you." [1-2-88]

PAUL BARNETT confides that "So far as Grafton's sales department is concerned, it is definitely not Grafton's fault that trained members of the SAS have to be employed to get copies of Earthdoom out of the Grafton warehouse," and eventually manages to connect this with Conspiracy:

"(a) My Worldcon was characterized by bumping into Milfordites of the class of '86 who all said (as did I), 'Bloody hell, but I wish we were at Milford instead.' This crystallized at the launch party for Lisa Tuttle's new book, where for an hour one had the pleasure of talking with other people who were writing, reviewing or whatever--i.e., actually doing something. I thought: 'For the same money I could have had a whole week of this.'

"(b) My Worldcon was characterized by the lack of copies of Earthdoom on sale. This was particularly embarrassing since my brother--not a usual fan--had come along for the first day primarily to be bought a copy which both of us could sign. Rog Peyton said he'd ordered copies but they'd failed to turn up. At Lisa's party (see above) Chris Morgan told me that he'd had to 'phone up Grafton and actually beg for a copy of the book. Lisa herself told me that the book had been omitted from her pre-con round-up of likely books in The Bookseller [such as those by guests of honour--DRL] because, when she 'phoned Grafton to ask what they had, they strangely failed to mention Earthdoom. I sent a vicious letter to Grafton after the con, and have had varying responses...the Sales Director told me that Andromeda hadn't ordered copies (hmmm) and that anyway it was all my fault because the book wasn't in the SF section of the Grafton catalogue (my query as to who hadn't listed it there went unanswered); the Editorial Director, Nick Austin, looking at Earthdoom's two-figure sales, suggested that we withdraw Guts because 'perhaps we might not feel that Grafton were the right publishers for it.' All in all, a real thrusting response from a go-ahead publisher." [20-10-87]

Seems to have been one of those alarmingly frequent cases where your editor likes a book but the marketing people don't. Apart from the satisfaction of a good old whinge, this is included as a hint that I don't think

everything about "normal" book publicity is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. Meet me again under the Ian Watson letter for more. I'll be the one with the scowl and the SOD L.RON HUBBARD badge.

Later: Gastron Books, as we came to call them, went into breach of contract for not publishing Guts! within the specified period (that is, by January 1989). We got the MS back but are keeping the advance. Even now, other publishers are learning the meaning of true gastric torment....

HARRY BOND offers Worldcon highlights: "The most vivid all include Greg Pickersgill as protagonist--best, perhaps, in conflict with two American femmes*. Both were brash; both had complaints to make; both took their lives in their hands.

"Number One approaches GP outside the Repro Room. She has, it seems, a gripe. The newsletter Plot (on which, over which, and for which Maureen Porter spent superhuman effort) is not up to scratch in this woman's eyes. GP replies politely. Entitled to own opinion. Suggestion box in Fan Room. Woman will not be brushed off. Runs an APA in the US and would never tolerate carryings on like this in it. Pickersgill replies curtly.... Woman, it seems, would do much better than dolt now in charge; suggests sacking her. Pickersgill silent. What (enquires other) is Pickersgill going to do about it? Pickersgill is going to respond with a torrent of quite extraordinary rudeness, including many expressions I'd never heard, and more which no fanzine would dare print. Shocked silence. 'Well! I am certainly not used to being talked to like that.' Exit Pickersgill, with noise compounded of snarl, disgusted snort and the word 'fuck'....

"Number Two appears berating the defenceless Vince Clarke on the deficiencies of the poor old news-sheet (mistakenly: he had nothing to do with it); he is stumped for a way to reply without breaching Olde Fan Etiquette. Help is soon at hand, a man bound by no such restrictions, Captain Pickersgill.... He lumbers up. Vince looks at him like a drowning man at a plank with fitted kitchen and gold faucets. The Captain speaks: 'Would you care to come through here?', casually indicating the Repro Room. 'Certainly,' quoth the woman militantly. Pickersgill courteously lifts the gap in the counter, and both pass in, one scowling, one half-grinning in anticipation. Five minutes later Pickersgill leaves alone.

"The woman's fate is a subject of guesswork. Was she tucked into a cupboard? Fed through the duplicator? Turned into a curry for Paul Kincaid and Maureen Porter? I've never dared ask, due to psychiatric qualms, or engrams as I believe some call them, over my First Con Party Experience, when I came across Pickersgill standing in a corridor over the prostrate figure of a woman. 'God,' I thought, 'he's finally killed someone.' Only after I'd implicated myself by hurriedly leaving the scene of

the crime did I realize it had been Teresa Nielsen Hayden." [10-10-87]

*That asterisked "femme": I forced myself to type this dreadful fanspeak once, and then substituted something English for Harry's innumerable repetitions of it. Mild-mannered Langford actually felt quite murderous after half an hour of the chap who kept repeating that a major clause of the unwritten Worldcon constitution guaranteed him full facilities to run off a vast APA mailing--so what, as a convention guest, did I propose to do about the fan room's obviously spurious claim of no spare paper or free equipment? (Answer: a diplomatic cry of "Oh God My Bowels!" and a supremely tactful dash for the toilet.)

JOHN BROSNAN: "I was one of the few to have a clear view of what transpired between you and Fred Harris at that OMNI-SFWA party on that fateful night. In fact it was I who picked up the pieces of the glass that you threw at Mr Harris but which hit the table I was standing behind. Yes, every moment of that historic confrontation is etched on my memory drive and ready for instant retrieval at the push of a mental button. For me it constituted that Special Moment that I inevitably carry away from a convention (the Special Moment of Yorcon '78, for example, was when a woman threw up on my head in her bed). So if you need any help in piecing together the event for posterity or a court trial...."

I don't think I can face much more about the Harris contretemps. Bill Gibson profoundly commented, "That Langford...fucking ace, man," and Ian Watson was soothing: "Everyone at the con seemed pissed out of their minds by then. I guess Harry Harrison misses out there. One day I must collaborate with him. I could think out the ideas and plot, and he could number the pages." And Alexis Gilliland regretfully noted that I had shown no class, going on to advance the argument that once "British fandom" (i.e. a few Conspiracy committee members) had accepted Hubbardite sponsorship, it was unreasonable for annoyance to be expressed by British fandom (i.e. the rest of us, who weren't consulted). Roy Hill's perspective was, er, different: "We heard that you had only managed to escape certain death by cutting your way out of a room full of lunatics with a broken bottle. You must take care, even we neophytes know and revere the name Langford and it was truly irresponsible for you to worry your sister Bonny like that. By the way, can you tell her how good she is in Doctor Who and get her autograph for me?"

ABIGAIL FROST claims that the June BSFA meeting turned into one of her most interesting evenings in years: "What happened was that I was kidnapped by ~~John~~ Mary Gentle, who had spent most of the time

since Mexican sitting down outside the site of the Rose Theatre (site of first performance of much Marlowe and some Shakespeare, first Elizabethan theatre to have been excavated, threatened by beastly capitalist property developers and Thatcher mind-slaves English Heritage, triffically Ideologically Sound place), and wanted bodies to spend the night there before stopping Lorries Full Of Sand coming to fill the place in next morning. I was the only volunteer, though G.Ryman and D.Barrett came along after closing time and also turned up next day. Various skiffy persons not at the meeting were rung up; some (we do not name Roz Kaveney, one-time winner of the Charles Oldham Prize for Shakespeare Studies) preferred to sit at home and drink fizzy wine with loved ones; others (we do not name Big Shakespeare Fan J.Jarrold, or 17th-century freak K.Solomon) promised support but found sleeping in on the excuse of a Tube strike more attractive than getting up at dawn to keep the faith....

"The Committee held a Meeting and announced to the masses that Throwing Selves In Path Of Lorries was Ideologically Unsound. (Something to do with an attempt to get court injunction against developers.) This pissed off the masses (most of whom had spent several days there, and had got rather emotional about the place) something chronic....

"While we were all having breakfast, along came The Lorry. Mary and other rebels grabbed me and we all joined hands for a token protest at the site gate, then let it through. Committee v. cross with us. The lorry drove to the back of the site, where it was approached by a JCB; thought this seemed a rather inefficient method of strewing sand on the ruins, so looked again. Turned out it had been an empty lorry, now collecting sludge from the non-theatre part of the site.... And so it was that Roz, in addition to bringing disgrace rather than further lustre on to the name of the Oldham, earning lifelong contempt of M.Gentle etc, missed out on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to cap her 1969 cry of 'But Comrades, you're seizing the wrong building!' with 'But Comrades, you're hurling yourselves in the path of the wrong lorry!'" [20-6-89]

MIKE MOORCOCK actually read Ansible 50: "Either you're turning into Charles Platt or the Scientists have got hold of you...or Charles Platt is turning into you. Copy that is. I haven't turned in 100 Best Fantasies to Carroll & Graf. I haven't turned it in to the UK publisher, Xanadu. Neither has Jim Cawthorn, who is now the author of the book. Neither has David Pringle. The Story of 0's not my idea of a good time, but I can see how it might be for some of them. Tra la la." [17-9-87]

Later: "I suspect M.Morse Wooster lives not a million miles from Patchin Place. Charles P's obsession with me and my life is so weird I'd thought of sending him a blow-up Mikey Moorcock doll to do with as he pleased. Might help ground his hang-ups, at least." [9-1-88]

This concerns another of Martin M.Wooster's

thrillingly creative bits of fact-finding. Mr Wooster, confronted with the above, said: "I am not now, nor have I ever been, Charles Platt." All of the above facts might have changed by now. (Come to think of it, didn't Grafton do the Pringle hundred-best-fantasy volume at some long-removed date?)

CHARLES PLATT: "Forrest J. Ackerman grudgingly allowed a firm of auctioneers to sell off 1000 items from Forry's garage (the remaining 290,000 items are stored in his 18-room home) at an event billed as 'the auction of the century' in advertisements in Omni and The New York Times. Paintings by Frazetta, Lundgren, Rowena, Hildebrandt and Boris Vallejo were thrown in. Frazetta's famous Conan painting drew a high bid of \$24,500, but Frazetta turned this down. A reliable source, who had peeked at the list of reserve prices, told me Frazetta wanted \$2 million for this item. The audience booed. Ackerman's ratty old posters and magazines sold in the \$10 to \$50 range, with the exception of a few genuine rarities. Non-literature did best of all: a couple of genuine Spock ears, worn by Leonard Nimoy and preserved in a sandwich bag, went for \$425, and an articulated metal arm, which used to have fur on it and appeared in King Kong, fetched \$1400. Moral: it's better business to raid garbage cans outside movie studios than to collect first editions." [17-12-87]

IAN WATSON had thoughts on best-sellers: "Your phrasing as to the Hubbard people buying slots on best-seller lists simply by investing ludicrous sums in publicity begs a few questions. This seems to imply that the bamboozled public are duly buying hordes of the books in question. However, the best-seller lists are not based on the number of copies sold. There just isn't rapid enough feedback from the totality of retail outlets. Indeed, in the case of the "best-selling" Hubbard books, I was phoned about 6 months ago by a woman involved in the process of compiling such lists who told me she had been hired by the Hubbard people to find out why their books were not selling. This, simultaneously with the same books being listed as best-sellers.

"Best-seller lists are guesstimates of the number of books that ought to be selling in a given time-slot. I assume that selected bookstores are indeed polled, but more weighting is given to other factors which have nothing to do with sales. For example: the publishers' catalogues, and what they say as to their plans and expectations for a given title; the amount of budget which the publishers say they are contributing to publicity; the intended print-run for a book; and the number of copies which have been subscribed in advance. (In the latter case, I'm told that Hubbard titles are offered with huge discount, something like 70%, and on a sale-or-return basis.) None of these factors means that a single copy is ever bought by the public; yet the book can still be ranked as a best-

seller. Some of these factors mean that a book need not even be on sale in the shops, to be so listed. It is even possible (and has happened) that a book is listed as a best-seller when the book has not been published. Or printed. Or even written. Phoney best-sellers can be, and are, listed not because the publishers are con-men but because of the workings of the best-seller list system. Roughly speaking, the lists are a pack of lies in themselves, by their very nature. This would only change with computerized point-of-sale direct debit operating everywhere, coupled with a system of on-line bar code readers, referencing back to the compilers of best-seller lists." [25-11-87]

That certainly spreads the complications a bit. I agree one can't get into a moral tizzy about the purely commercial hype: the system is dubious and there are no rules. What's odd is the vanity-publishing aspect of spending, as far I can see, far more on pushing the books than could ever be recouped. Has anyone actually tried a rough costing of campaign expenses vs. likely sales? There's nothing immoral in throwing the late L. Ron's \$44 million publicity funding around like this; but some fans, noted authors and Orson Scott Card have publicly gone on to state that this shows us how it ought to be, and that any publisher could and should push anyone's SF just as forcefully. "Come on Malcolm, spend your \$44 million Gollancz slush fund on my novel!"

Footnotes came from Rob Ainsley ("A mate of mine has named his house 'Freeport' and swears he knows a Swedish secretary called Per Pro."), John D. Berry ("Have they stopped buying you free beers yet?"), David Garnett ("Author of last year's 4th best short story in the world" [1988]), D.M. Sherwood ("Me, I identify with Alan Moore's Swamp Thing."), and such a stupefying number of others that I can't think of many candidates for the We Did Not Hear From listing. WDNHF: Harry Warner, Jr.

Special grovels to Abi Frost (whose blistering review of the early Critical Wave had lots of great headlines--IS YOUR NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOUR A HOLISTIC FAN?--but is too dated to use now) and Dave Wood (whose erudite Conspiracy non-report was a trifle hermetic even when still topical).

Phew. Just as my fictional output was sort of bunged up during the 18-month Guts! hassle, so the thought of doing a fanzine has long been blocked by vast mounds of Ansible material (including a COA column not as big as a telephone directory). With luck, clearing out this backlog with the whirling Dyno-Rod of Sglodion 1 will usher in a future of more regular (if not frequent) fannish motions.

Several Days In May

20 May 1989: Hazel and I are brooding on Mexican. Nottingham is terra incognita ("I bet," I said,

"there'll be a Maid Marian Industrial Estate."). Shall we madly hire a car which will lie around being expensively unused for the actual con, or try the rail route already deplored to me by impartial committee man Greg Pickersgill? At once the phone rings and Hazel's father asks if we would care to accept a scrofulous, cast-off family vehicle to save the "waste" of having it scrapped. Plot turns like this would cause complaints in fiction.

With the remorselessness of Greek tragedy, Hazel's brother delivers the car and plunges us straight into horror with the information that someone has nicked the tax disc. Vast penalties loom. Spurred by fear, I suggest a ludicrous implausibility: could it have fallen off the windscreen and into the air vent? To universal scoffing we do things with probes and forceps. The magic piece of paper is in the air vent...but if this happens within seconds of acquiring the thing, what ghastly sequence of Langford Vehicular Horror Stories is to follow? I may have to do a fanzine.

Meanwhile, why does everyone fall around laughing when told about this car?

21 May: Tell Chris Priest about car. He falls around laughing. Tell Martin Hoare. He cheerily predicts that "my style of driving" will turn it over the moment I venture beyond 40mph. Tell my father, who asks, "The usual rusting death-trap, I suppose?" No, I say proudly, I am told it has a rustproof fibreglass body. He falls around laughing and asks if I've counted the wheels. Apparently there is a widespread theory that all 1976 Reliant Kittens have only three. I admit it's a naff name, but after double-checking I definitely make the wheel count four.

22 May: Paul "John Grant" Barnett is visiting for varied reasons, and after Sunday night is luckily too hungover to fall around laughing. The car lies idle while we revise our Guts! for its lucky new publisher (straws will be drawn at Mexico). This is tricky work, since all Paul's chapters are on this sort of disk and all mine are on that sort. Luckily I've written this wonderful transfer program which very nearly works, apart from throwing in an extra space at every pagebreak. This is easily solved by converting all pairs of spaces in the text. I fail to notice that thanks to a peculiarity of the WordPerfect word processor, the process also converts all dashes to single spaces. After a long day's revisionism the MS is left printing out: of course the ribbon fades to pale grey before we reach the pub, the paper jams at about our third round, and we reel home to find the last 60 pages mockingly printed on a single line. And, oops, I've run out of ribbons....

23 May: "The bearer of this scroll, namely, David Langford, is summoned to attend the quest of a lifetime. Your adventure begins at 11am prompt, outside Chislehurst (Kent) Railway Station!" Oh dear. Today is Paul's launch party for his other co-written efforts, "Joe Dever's Legends Of Lone Wolf", being spinoffs from nothing less than

Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks. The promoters wish to celebrate this in cavernous gloom, amid the savage clash and parry of rubber swords...and I, yes, unimportant Langford, have been chosen to accompany Paul on his quest for publicity.

Our adventure begins much earlier than 11am. All the best epics involve gruelling journeys through pitiless conditions; the London Transport strike forces us into major street credibility via a long stagger from Paddington to Charing Cross during the heatwave. "They wouldn't believe it, us two crossing London on soft drinks," I muse. Paul waves a bottle and cries, "Perrier louts." Shrivelled and sweat-drenched, we finally attain the Chislehurst Caves, and it all goes ape.

"You," I am told, "are Sir Conrad, a knight who prefers the banqueting hall to the battlefield." This sounds like journalistic typecasting. I beg to be something more suited to my critical image, like Langford Hackrender, barbarian scourge of the pulpsmiths, but this is not permitted. Shepherded by persons in arcane robes or knitted chainmail, a band of literati and media hacks bears hurricane lamps nervously into the tunnels.

The subterranean journey is of course punctuated by loud encounters which are doubtless thrillingly choreographed were it possible to see anything. Magical types fire off mystic cap-pistols, and there is a disquieting move towards audience participation. I enjoy the sadistic spectacle of a Radio Midlands chap being stripped of his symbiotic tape recorder and thrust whimpering into the darkness to hit things with a padded stick.

Our quest's goal is a dank, lamplit cavern where the party is plied with such delights as "swamp viper" (which I discover too late is cold smoked eel...backbone, skin and all). More welcome but no less dangerous is the "Laumspur cocktail" promised in the invitation: after finding this to consist of legendary tequila and alchemic vodka with just a smidgeon of herbal cranberry juice, I nervously switch to plonk. As the booze flows copiously, several guests grow very thoughtful about warnings that (a) no one should stray out of sight for fear of being lost in 22 chilly miles of caves, while (b) there are no toilets down here. Let us cast a diplomatic veil over the ensuing scenes.

"God, this is so naff," says a Real Journalist who does not appear to be taking any notes.

More role-playing fun lies in store! The now sodden visitors are invited to win a grand prize by solving riddles which costumed characters will pose on request. ("Who is the General with a fondness for crushed velvet?" Er, Haig?) Though boozily acquiescent, I fail to get the hang of this: approaching a hideously made-up dwarf wielding an inflatable axe, I try a tentative "Excuse me, good sir," and at once she takes huge offence.

Egged on by evil Paul, I have another go, this time selecting a fellow in a plethora of straps and studs capped by a nova-burst of bleached hair. "Hello, costumed person, tell me your riddle."

"I'm not in costume, you bastard," says Wayne, famous editor of GM magazine.

Paul and Joe Dever are dragged piteously off to sign 1000 copies of these Beaver-published "Lone Wolf" novels ("Look," says the inevitable someone, "an open Beaver." Kindly hands prevent his escalation to a split Beaver). I locate a native guide and head back towards the sun, falling over from time to time....

Pick up printer ribbons in Tottenham Court Road, as I discover to my surprise next morning.

24 May: What? Who? How? Where? When? After a groan-laden day of the software business ("I've just seen your car," says Chris Priest, and falls around laughing) I reprint Guts!, all of it, and subsequently notice those missing dashes. Far overhead, Concorde passengers nervously complain about the screams.

25 May: Re-edit and re-reprint Guts! Rebellious thought that all this toil and pain wouldn't be so bad if it were actually a good novel.

26 May: Pleasant drive to Mexicon; that is, until the tyre explodes. With herculean efforts we bang and ricochet into a lay-by. "Fear not," I tell Hazel, "there is a spare, we are well provided, your father left the car all stocked with jacks and things." Having jacked up the Kitten with strange ease (aren't estate cars supposed to weigh more than this?), I find Hazel's father sets great store by his spanner, and has kept it. A trek to a nearby tea-van and the purchase of many cups results in the grudging loan of a genuine wheel-nut spanner. It is the wrong size. Keith and Wendy Freeman sail past and, seeing the sybaritic mugs of tea, do not rush to our aid. At risk of tannin poisoning, I set about further ingratiating with a view to the tea-man's adjustable wrench....

This sort of thing never happens with hired cars. I wonder why.

Mexicon: As Jorge Luis Borges inexplicably failed to write: "One of the churches of Tlön maintains Platonically that such and such a fizzy beer, such and such a greenish-yellow colour at breakfast time, such and such a programme stream, make up the only reality there is. All men, in the climactic instant of the real beer running out, are the same man. All conventions are the same convention." Mexicon is, as expected, fun, and as expected it soon blurs...aided by the surreal directions for reaching the main hall from the bar (which is on the same floor) by going up these stairs and through this labyrinth and along echoing corridors and round a bit and down another staircase except when the restaurant is closed in which case it's open as a short cut but wrong use of this route will incur instant terminal reprimand....

Bits I remember: Greg Pickersgill telling the opening-ceremony audience why I'm not on any panels. ("Because you're a deaf cretin, Langford.") Avedon Carol shouting for 48 minutes at a weeping Harry Bond just now convicted of Wrong Thoughts. ("This is a learning experience for him," mumbles

D.West. "It would be wrong to intervene.") Algis Budrys writhing under the lash of Judith Hanna's opinions on Scientology (all her facts carefully credited to me). Three superlatively enlightened editors expressing cautious interest in Guts! before even being bought many drinks. Sneaking away for a quiet tandoori with Terry & Lyn Pratchett only to find three-quarters of Mexicon derisively crammed into our chosen restaurant. Alex Stewart showing off the cover of his fabled "sex in space" anthology, something other than the car at which fans can fall around laughing. And the discovery, almost exactly as predicted, of roads repellently named for Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, etc.

Bits I missed: Greg Pickersgill telling Rob Hansen the alleged error of his ways. ("I don't want to see you at any more conventions!") Katie McAulay--no more Hoare, please--scorning Paul McAuley as one of those pathetic Irish persons who can't even spell their own names. (Paul is considered by Chris Atkinson and Abi Frost as a potential toy-boy, but on closer examination gets rejected.) Hazel's explorations of Nottingham and forming of the conclusion that this is the best ever convention city for people who don't like conventions. ("But you haven't been to New Orleans," interposes T.Pratchett.)

Bad moments: Harry Bond saying, "I've just been looking on the fanzine pile and found a copy of your Cloud Chamber 1 dated 1976!" (Avedon's point of view instantly seems more reasonable.) Total inability to wedge answers to the Sunday-paper detective quiz into the femtosecond between Roz Kaveney reading out and answering each question. Virtuous attempt to survive Monday morning on foul low-alcohol drinks. Under the withering gaze of the rudest car park attendant known to exobiology, the Kitten loudly refuses to start.

Much later: "This is the smallest car I've ever been in!" says effusive Moshe Feder, but there is no room in the back seat for him to fall around laughing.

Infinitely Improbable

BEST LINE OF CONSPIRACY? Brian Aldiss writes: "I insist on relaying this Convention gem. Question from audience: Did William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, et al, get translated into Russian yet? Answer from Strugatskis (via Wiktor Bukato): 'Cyberpunk has not yet reached our backsides.'"

OVERHEARD AT A PANEL: "I'm developing AI systems for the Police National Computer...we have to, because the Mafia are too." (via Marcus Rowland)

SECRETS OF OLD NORSTRILIA: After Conspiracy we entertained Irwin and Wendy Hirsh amid the Welsh mountains, and were greatly taken by Wendy's remark "What's that?" "But," Hazel gasped, "you're an Australian, you can't not recognize them!" "Never seen anything quite like it," said Wendy: "it's sort of peculiar and rabbit-like looking with funny ears...."

It was a sheep.

EMIGRANT NOTES: "As far as I can make out Sydney fandom is Terry Frost, Jack Herman and Jean Weber. That's it. And they all hate each other. Conviction, the annual Aussie knees-up, came and went and if someone hadn't woken me up in the middle of it I might not have noticed. Imagine a Becon without the personalities--difficult, eh?" (Chris Hughes)

SUE THOMASON reports: "I've been reviewing a book whose blurb plot-summary states, 'Somewhere in a far galaxy a being inconceivably alien is surging tumultuously from an unimaginable womb.' So somebody's got round to writing the Authorized Thatcher Biography at last." [1988]

HAZEL'S LANGUAGE LESSONS (Chinese): David R. Smith sends a set of ideograms with tastefully additive meanings. Woman + Hand Of A Master = Slave; Take Hold Of A Person By The Ear + Woman = Marry A Woman; Woman + Pursue A Career = Cunning; One Woman + Two Women = Adultery....

EGOBOO: I was much relieved when Patrick Nielsen Hayden slogged through 50 Dwarf columns and made cheering noises. "They're absolute models of what buyer's guide reviews should be: I particularly admire the economy with which you manage to make useful distinctions between different grades of escapist trifle. Couldn't get away with this in Locus, where Charlie unashamedly prohibits all-out negative reviews: if his reviewer absolutely hates a book, Charlie will either give it to another reviewer or skip covering it altogether. Which, aside from its obvious general wimpiness as a policy, also (I think) makes it more difficult to triangulate on the attitudes of Locus's reviewers, thus making it harder to get any use out of them."

"THE MIKE MOORCOCK THERE I TOLD YOU SO ITEM: seems the National Front is touting Frodo and all the happy proto-feudalities of LOTR as an essential antidote to materialistic capitalism." (R.I.Barycz)

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE: This year, Reading's post office has showered me with around a hundred envelopes addressed not only to 74, 79, 92, 92a, 96 and 98 London Road as usual (the last housing the

British Dyslexia Association), but also 94 London Street, 94 Linden Road and 94 De Beauvoir Road. Haven't heard from me? One of these addresses is probably where your fanzine ended up.

HAZEL'S LANGUAGE LESSONS (Anglo-Saxon): "ealuscweren, dire distress; horror; misery; despair. The literal meaning of this compound is much disputed. Possible translations include: 1. Serving ale. 2. Serving bitter or evil ale. 3. Running out of ale. 4. Having a beer." (Teresa Nielsen Hayden)

COURT CIRCULAR. I giggled a lot on hearing that Chris Priest was getting measured for a top hat to attend the Queen's garden party last year. Alas, this was merely a Society of Authors committee perk, and fails to tell us whether royalty thought The Glamour was rilly triffic. "I'll have to get my hair cut too," said an ashen-faced Chris. "There'd better be a fanzine article in this...."

HAZEL'S LANGUAGE LESSONS: "My Spanish dictionary has yielded some useful words: solfear to solfa, solmizate, (coll.) to cudgel; ochavar to form an octagon; lombarda Lombardy gun, (bot.) red cabbage; cocedero easily boiled; alcaldada abusive action of an alcalde. I can just see the alcalde cudgelling someone with an easily boiled red cabbage because he hasn't got eight sides...." (John Brunner)

Later: "I want to add the following from Thai. Krapaow rot-mai bus conductor; krapaow thasanachorn travelling bags; krapaow James Bond attaché cases."

TOKEN NEWS: the Reading Beer And Not Much SF Group now meets on Mondays (8:30/9pm on) at the ICL (Reading) Club opposite the station. Here Martin Hoare, master of fan theology, recently stunned rotten elitists (me) with the information that nice fans never stay in a con bar when they can go to room parties. Fans talking in Room 770 are true and approachable fans. The same ones talking in the bar would be (we shudder to reveal) a clique.

READING 665804...is no longer my phone number.

YOU RECEIVED THIS BECAUSE (a) you'd have preferred Ansible; (b) you're sick of unfunny "Why You Got This" lists; (c) there is an X in the box. [X]

S G L O D I O N 1

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