

Sglodion 3½

Sglodion 3½ is a further aberration from Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, England, RG1 5AU. Why? In 1989 I was a guest at Orycon 11 and began a long-standing tradition of celebrating such doings with a hasty fanzine cobbled together from recent scribblings which con members had mostly been lucky enough to miss. This long-standing tradition having lain idle ever since then, it is now Boskone 29's turn. Tough luck, Boskone. (February 1992)

I Wish I'd Written That

'I Wish I'd Written That' was the self-explanatory title given to a trio of brief presentations at Mexicon (Harrogate, England, May 1991). In the event, Kenneth Bulmer wished so much that he'd written it, whatever it was, that instead he stayed at home and wrote it. Brian Stableford planned to read out some dreadful plot outlines for hack fantasies based on role-playing game worlds, and to wish aloud that he'd actually been paid to write the junk ... but in the end he was overcome with shame and gave an impromptu talk on homeopathy. (Don't ask.) And I too performed the traditional rite of the cop-out, in my own way:

For a while I thought I would be morally worthy and choose something of classic status, probably G.K.Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*—which has now been continuously in print for 83 years. Of the books I enjoyed as ripping action-adventure in the 1960s, there are very few I can bear to think about, let alone reread with enthusiasm, now that we're in the 1990s and I'm almost as elderly and doddering as Chris Priest. *Thursday* is one of the survivors. You can argue that it's a theological thriller, or the ultimate conspiracy-theory novel, or a prophetic parody of a million then unwritten stories about spies and double-agents, or even a work of surrealism. It's partly a nightmare of social disintegration, partly a *Mystery* in the double sense, and often very funny. Once, by talking fast about Angst and metaphysical dread, I managed to sneak it into a listing of the 100 Best Horror books and was severely handled by purists ('Langford defends the indefensible,' etc).

But.

But wishing to have a grubby finger in something from so long ago is cheating: *The Man Who Was Thursday* couldn't have been written in my lifetime. So next I considered a short story which if you wear the critical high hat is fairly easy to dismiss as a meretricious bag of tricks with pronouns, trashy melodrama, obsessive repetitions and dotty science ... yet somehow it works. It digs its way into your

memory and whole paragraphs stay there dancing all night when you'd prefer some peace and quiet. It hooks me every time, from the first sentence: 'He doesn't know which of us I am these days, but they know one truth.'

Yes, it's Alfred Bester's 'Fondly Fahrenheit' from 1954, when he was on top form and I was learning to talk. Bester was always fascinated by the idea of maddening jingles and rhythms that you couldn't forget. This was the closest he came to writing an entire story to one lunatic tune ... until it seems entirely logical for the narrator or narrators to explain: 'If you live with a crazy man or a crazy machine long enough, I become crazy too.'

But then, in a burst of self-revelation, I thought: this wish is also subtly untrue. In my blackest, innermost heart, what I really want to have written is something that makes an obscene amount of money. Even a mildly indecent amount would do. I therefore boldly went to the Great Review Copy Mountain that dominates our home, and selected the first thing I could find by a truly prolific and famous author in our field. The time had come to expose myself to the secrets of mega-success.

It was an eye-opener. I'd been too long away from the Real Stuff. This wasn't merely the seventh book in a fantasy series but a seminar in advanced post-feminist thought. In Chapter 2 I had my consciousness raised almost beyond the ozone layer by a telling scene in which supernatural powers teach a woman a moral lesson by changing her into a man. Instantly and uncontrollably she (or he) is smitten with rampant lusts of the body and starts to rape the other woman present.

To make the point absolutely clear, a snap of magical fingers reverses the situation. The first woman is back to her normal, beautiful self; the second becomes a hairy chap and (despite retaining both complete free will and the memory of what has just happened) is overcome all of her own accord with 'passion so compelling that it admitted of no interference' ... and it's rape time again.

Why so? 'She had been helpless before her abrupt desire,' explains the author afterwards, and goes on to hammer home his moral. (Had you begun to wonder if the author might be male?) Both women are restored to normal and one of them muses, wide-eyed, on the learning experience: 'It seems that men have passions that women do not.'

The implications of this sensational leap in understanding are worked out in detail. For example, there's a middle-aged fellow in the book who likes to have it off with (consenting) underage

groupies: the women now regard him as almost literally godlike, in part for the amazing male self-control he shows in not raping his way through his entire female acquaintance. Every spotty teenaged lad who reads this fantasy can walk proudly down the street (as indeed I did), knowing how grateful all those passing women would be if they only realized the titanic restraint he's exerting to tame those raging glands and spare them the Joy of Sex.

You can see what superlative reader psychology must lie behind such a ground-breaking contribution to sexual politics. Any guesses as to the author? No, not John Norman. Yes, Piers Anthony, and the hugely selling book is called *And Eternity* (another one to cross off your list).

It's no wonder I remain poverty-stricken. Every once in a while I wish my natural embarrassment didn't stop me writing lucrative stuff like this. Or maybe it's just cowardice, applied to all those books I sometimes wish I could get away with having written.

New York Review of SF 35, 7/91

In Absentia

[Since I couldn't afford Contrivance, the British Eastercon held in Jersey in 1989, I was bemused when they asked for a con report....]

Ah, Contrivance, I well remember that fun-drenched time. Everyone who was anyone was there. The things H.G.Wells got up to amongst costumed female fans cannot be repeated for fear of libel suits, but how we all laughed when good old H.P.Lovecraft ate the Hotel de France out of ice-cream. As Jules Verne quipped to me while furtively spiking Cliff Simak's mint julep with absinthe, 'Merde!'

What else? Cyrano de Bergerac didn't appear much on the programme, having spent his time sightseeing around the locations of the TV detective series they'd named after him. James Blish held everyone fascinated for an hour with his plan to adapt *Finnegans Wake* into a Star Trek movie. 'It must have been brilliant,' Doc Smith said afterwards, 'I couldn't understand a word.' Then the whole Fan Room party went roaring upstairs: Bob Heinlein had gone to bed early and we chorused 'Spung! Spung! Spung!' outside his room until in his crusty but lovable way he started blowing holes through the door with a Lee Enfield rifle—how we all laughed.

It was Phil Dick who late one night passed me a very strange cigarette and said, 'But you're not here.'

'Neither are you,' was my shrewd repartee.

Borrowing John W.Campbell's future-scanner apparatus, we checked on the forthcoming issue of the fanzine *Conrunner* and found a letter bemoaning the absence of many other named authors.

'It hasn't occurred to some of these damned fans,' said John Wyndham, 'that most full-time British SF authors except me and Pratchett are pretty bloody broke and rarely travel far to cons, while the only snag about this totally wonderful and deservedly

praised Jersey venue is that it discourages the cheapskates who usually share a car or pop in for just one night.'

'It'll all be the same in a million years,' slurred Olaf Stapledon, who was pissed.

We went on and had a great if low-budget time, and hope you did too; but if any more crummy little fan politicians mention the word 'boycott' we are going to scream, do you hear me, *scream*.

Meanwhile, I wish I had space to tell you the one about how Mary Shelley tried connecting a nine-volt battery to this very tall and very drunk member of the Technical Ops crew, who lurched appallingly erect and gazed at her with watery, speculative eyes. Or how George Orwell booked into Room 101 and found it did indeed contain the worst thing in the world, being the manager of the Brighton Metropole Hotel....

Next time I hope to arrange matters so that my anecdotes will be more reliable (though not much). See you there.

Contrivance post-PR, 7/89

Graphic Debauchery

17 Oct 91: Gollancz launched their new line of graphic novels with almost lavish drinks at a odd-shaped London gallery. The walls were hung with originals—often in a rather confusing order—from the initial books *A Small Killing* (Alan Moore/Oscar Zarate) and *The Luck in the Head* (M.John Harrison/Ian Miller), plus future glories like the Ian Macdonald-scripted *Kling Klang Klatch ...* which from the specimen on view would appear to be about depraved teddy-bears.

The usual rabble of sf freeloaders was diluted by an influx from the sensitive worlds of art and comix. Alan Moore's major-prophet beard and hairstyle successfully concealed his reactions (if any) from the masses. Most artistic comment was directed at cuddly editor Faith Brooker's simulated leopard-skin shoes, clearly the hit of the evening. A Gollancz publicity master explained the shortage of *Luck in the Head* review copies with the effortless fluency of one whose first infant words were, 'Your cheque's in the post.' David Pringle waved dummies of his new *Realms of Fantasy* (conspicuously lacking the words 'Realms' and 'of') and his old *Million*, issue 6, resubtitled as 'The Magazine About Popular Fiction' in hope of explaining it to the public and stemming a tide of fiction submissions formerly rejected by Mills & Boon. 'Since they've fired you, are GW Books folding?' I asked him tactfully. He said, with caution: 'They say no, but, in effect ... yes. They're claiming to "revive" the line in 6-12 months. Some chance.' GW novels by Garnett, Watson, 'Yeovil' etc. remain in limbo.

Meanwhile ace reviewer John Clute was poring delightedly over his latest task, being *Futurespeak: A Fan's Guide to the Language of SF* by Roberta Rogow (Paragon House \$24.95). This entry has more

mistakes than words,' he marvelled:

SLANS (*literary*): *Superhuman successors to homo sapiens in a series of stories by A.E. van Vogt, beginning in 1925 with Galactic Lensman....*

'She's a Trekkie,' explained Mr Pringle. 'The entries on *Star Trek* are quite good. The entry on "Future History" omits Robert Heinlein. As for the New Wave....' He blenched and sought consolation in the Bulgarian wine, which had run out.

The books? *The Luck in the Head* was and is an effectively unpleasant story, here tizzied up by Miller in his chaotic 'asylum images' style (as opposed to the better-known 'tight pen' art—his phrasing), which conveys the nastiness but is tiring to read ... some of the scattered text was hard going even in those full-sized originals. *A Small Killing*, with trad speech balloons, has the expected word-perfect script from Moore, dissecting the familiar idea that people Get On In Life by doing violence to their old selves, and tracking its yuppie adman hero back through bad turnings to his first 'killing' as a kid. Good hallucinatory climax (with one creaky bit ... an early, implausible flashback which seemingly exists only to be Significantly Echoed in the finale). Zarate's water-colourish art, though swerving occasionally and dangerously towards a 'funny papers' look (cf. his and Alexei Sayle's *Geoffrey the Tube Train and the Fat Comedian*), is just about right for the surreal images here—as slick, schematic realism wouldn't have been.

But where was Mike Harrison? A vast, unattributable voice intoned, 'He might get out more if they hadn't nailed his feet to a pedestal.' By now the lavish victuals had dwindled to fizzy water and detumescent celery: Chris Evans led us off to a pub, which in retrospect was a mistake.... *Ansible* 52, 11/91

A Review

Abduction: the UFO Conspiracy by David Bischoff
(Warner, US paperback, 328pp, \$4.95)

You probably think you know what to expect from a title like that. This, however, is fiction. No, no, bite back your horrible, prejudiced and sceptical remarks: I mean it's actually advertised as such. Not SF but a thriller, with the sort of 'this astonishing story can only be told as fiction' overtones which have failed to carry much conviction since it proved possible to tell the story of Watergate as fact.

David Bischoff has done his research, not very difficult in this over-documented field. Names are dropped furiously, some seeming to have got damaged in the process. Thus the sainted Hynek is always referred to as 'J.Allen Hyenk', possibly for fear that the original—or rather, his estate—would sue over a fictional claim that the 'Project Blue Book' report was faked. But then we have 'Jasque Valle' (spelt thus twice) and mentions of both the *Weekly World News* and *World Weekly News*, and one can suspect mere carelessness. Stanton Friedman and

Whitley Strieber both come through in clear. Mentioning the first is a wise precaution, as otherwise his lawyers might speculate no end about the fictional 'Dr Fenton Leiberman', who by a strange coincidence is 'a UFOlogist with a scientific degree who self-published his work and made a living touring and speaking about UFOs and the government cover-up.' The featured sceptic naturally expresses very, very rude opinions of Leiberman.

Since this is labelled as fiction, there's no point in quibbling about its 'factual' content or even its viewpoint—there's a sort of ghastly fairness in the way that everyone here who takes a stance is an unlovable caricature. We should judge *Abduction* on its merits as a novel, and only *then* throw it violently across the room.

Routine bestseller trappings abound. There is much padding and deployment of brand names—our author even takes time out to tell you about the word processor he uses, and which function key you press to save a document. The characters are all solid, triple-ply cardboard. Thus we encounter a venal, coke-snorting *National Intruder* reporter with a fondness for nymphets, a vaguely Sagan-like sceptic with a drink problem and a mind as flexible as a steel trap, an unwashed UFO nut of extreme dippiness ('The key,' he said, tapping the aluminium foil, 'is the solarnarium. You have to convolute it *just so* to obtain proper magnetic harmonics,' etc.), the sceptic's beautiful daughter who inevitably has a Close Encounter (with the genuine dramatic possibilities of such a father/daughter clash thrown away in soap-operatic shouting)....

In particular I enjoyed the coddled, psychopathic CIA killer, just barely reminiscent of the Executioner in *From Russia with Love*. 'Termination with extreme prejudice,' he croons to himself with 'a delicious shiver'. They have to keep him doped to the nostrils merely to stop him running amok, and he gets in the proper mood for work by dropping a hamster into his kitchen-sink disposal unit, turning the switch, and listening luxuriously to the tiny screams.

Naturally there's plenty of mayhem, all ludicrously overdone. Victims are tortured or knocked off to the accompaniment of corny remarks intended not for them but for readers: as in a grade Z movie, the heavies are playing to the audience. So before being shot, a ham-radio broadcaster who has stumbled on the Secret is gloatingly told: 'It's time for the big sign-off ... Your ratings were just terrible.' Thickets of exclamation marks impede the narrative flow at supposedly exciting moments.

The plot itself concerns another tiresome conspiracy theory. Everything you know is wrong. Stop me if you've heard this one, but it's that desperately villainous organization the US Government which is behind flying saucers—using drugs, painful medical examinations and cute robot aliens to establish the story of UFO abductions which it's simultaneously

denying, refusing to believe, and struggling to cover up. Conspirators, who can figure 'em? Meanwhile, what about these two enigmatic chaps who walk on occasionally and act all enigmatic: could they be *real* aliens, as the author nudgingly hints? In the other corner, who are the sinister 'Publishers' who control everything (including most especially the CIA), and arrange routine murders through their diabolical hitmen, the 'Editors'? Nice terminology, but...

Abduction is so unremittingly awful that I'd have no hesitation in revealing all the answers, but Bischoff neglects to provide them. After a false climax which leaves one villain deceased and one beautiful daughter abducted, the book stops. The hideous revelation is thus that there's more to come; meanwhile, you're cheated of the one slender reason for finishing such dross, the catharsis of learning whodunnit and what it was all about. If volume two shows itself on my doormat, I promise it will follow the hamster into oblivion. *The Wild Places* 3, 7/91

Highballs!

Respectable SF criticism has this habit of focussing on good writers, well-known writers, historically important writers—no two of which categories wholly overlap. Ask Mummy to draw the pretty Venn diagram for you. I sometimes take a perverse interest in what's left in the vast and shoddy obscurity beyond the diagram ... for three reasons.

First: unlimited quantities of rotten SF exist out there in the sludge reservoirs, influencing the image of the genre; and most of us have read all too much of it. What questing spirit raised on hard SF can resist a journey into extraliterary space?

Second: it's horribly true that the compulsiveness of SF can (for most readers when they're young, for too many throughout their whole lives) exist independent of your actual literary virtues.

Third: just as physicists begin by examining 'simple' systems, so perhaps (I rationalized to myself, having decided to write this piece anyway) critics can make useful generalizations from books whose crude fantasies and formulae are nakedly visible.

My choice of obscure writer for an experimental once-over was the erstwhile bus driver Philip E. High. He was British (chauvinism), I had most of his stuff either from my indiscriminate SF-buying days or as review copies (opportunism), one or two fans had made enthusiastic, completist noises and deplored High's lack of fame (optimism), and I vaguely remembered having once been tempted to sweeping generalizations about him (lack of controlled laboratory procedure).

From 1964 to 1979, High's fourteen novels were published in the grottier literary circles: Ace Doubles, Robert Hale, Dobson. This is at once a bit of a handicap for any author. My dim recollection that our man's *Prodigal Sun* (1965) was better than most turned out to be, in part, what scientists call an

artificial datum—i.e. that book, the only one to be published in the almost respectable 'Compact SF' paperback line, was also virtually the only one to be copy-edited.

In the rest, High's preference for commas where colons, semicolons, dashes, new sentences or no punctuation at all, are required, often results in text like this, it is peculiarly irritating to read, the only SF author nearly as bad is Harry Harrison and he at least usually confines it to speech in quotation marks, possibly on the theory that people don't make true sentences in conversation. Also, far too many 'significant' lines are delivered portentously, in ... *italics!*

Let us be scientific. Pausing to refresh my memories of 13 out of High's 14 novels (the omission is *Butterfly Planet*, 1971, which I've never come across), I made a chart to see whether good, strong formulae and instructive trends would emerge. You bet they did. Many of them, I predict, will remind you of other books before and since.

High's peculiar charm lies in his patent spring-loaded plotline, which invariably starts from a position of rock-bottom despair and then *keeps on getting more cheerful*. Thus in 87% of my sample, the opening scenario is shittily dystopian and/or post-holocaust; in 100%, we get a happy ending of global and often galactic proportions. One side effect of the exponential rate of improvement is that flashbacks are always to not-so-good times and are thus invariably downers. Another is that High's plots tend to suffer from premature ejaculation. We've barely taken in the fact that the ravening Vegan mind-hordes are giving the hero a stiff time before, rather too soon, he's gone off and overcome them.

As a result, the shorter novels like *Invader On My Back* (1968, possibly the best of the lot) read better. When carried too far on High's roller-coaster of new technologies and victories multiplying at compound interest, the book tends to peter out in cosmic flatulence, like the dully schematic interstellar-war finale of *The Time Mercenaries* (also, oddly enough, 1968).

Whence the initial unpleasantness? Although humanity contains nasty specimens, chiefly power-mad demagogues, the basic threat of a High book tends to be external: aliens in 54% of our sample, rising to 92% in the light of later revelations about how perceived human baddies are in fact being manipulated by the aforesaid Vegan mind-hordes.

By way of non-rigorous confirmation: three of the novels were indeed reprinted in Arrow's 'Venture SF' space-opera series, which loudly claimed to hark back to those golden days when 'the only good alien was a dead one'. In justice to High and the Vegan embassy I should mention that in 77% of cases (including all the Venture trio) the balance is redressed by wise old alien mentors who Help Out when the happy ending starts looking difficult to

achieve. Some sort of record is set in *Fugitive from Time* (1978), where the extraterrestrial foe is so superior, despicable and innumerable that no fewer than three—or, depending how you count them, five—independent alien mentors are required to push the wheezing plot to its triumphant finale.

Ah, but you'll identify with the human hero (100%) or heroine (0%), who is ever ready with such sophisticated gallantries as, 'I'm sorry, it was reflex. In my culture it is incumbent upon the male to protect the female' (*No Truce with Terra*, 1964). If not an officer of the British Navy (8%) he is invariably some other species of physical or mental superman (92%), though his mindboggling abilities tend to be clouded at first by amnesia or deceptive stupidity (62%). 'Intelligence Quota, conscious mind, 110; Intelligence Quota, potential, 612....' (*Double Illusion* aka *The Mad Metropolis*, 1966).

Frequently he will have self-doubts or weaknesses, and accuse himself of being too easy-going, or overfond of the ladies (46%), a form of randiness whose chief discernible symptoms are holding oneself rigidly in check and taking many cold baths. In only one book, *Twin Planets* (1967), does this uncontrollably guilt-making erethism actually result in pregnancies. This is also the only book where such an astonishing if demurely offstage consequence is actually required by the plot.

However, the High Hero is cultured and will often quote a bit of inappropriate Literature to demonstrate this (62%—the sample is a mite inadequate, but one gleans that the all-time top bard is Swinburne). At the end of his long toil he naturally gets the girl (100%), often under the terms of that social contract which is High's favourite utopian vision: predestined telepathic sex with the One Right Person (69%), a boon frequently extended to all or most of the race (54%).

Speaking of races, ethnic minorities quite often receive a determined mention (38%). As in early Doc Smith before the Rigellians got integrated, equal opportunities consist of a cameo part showing how splendid and staunch your minority is, after which chore the WASP heroes return to the actual business of the plot. There is a sort of ghastly, bumbling well-meaningness about the mould-breaking way in which High's whites demonstrate their total lack of prejudice by 'jokingly' addressing black walk-ons as 'Black Boy' (*Sold—for a Spaceship*, 1973) or 'Old blubber lips' (*Blindfold from the Stars*, 1979). Actual, systematic racism is however practised only against artificial or cyborgized races (23%), who when they've shaken off their insidious Vegan mind control are later allowed to use the same toilets as everyone else.

The High trademark most favoured by his fans is an inventive gift for devising boys' toys in the form of exotic weaponry (100%) ... over a wide range from solar bombs via flesh-rotting handguns, pencil-

sized personalized cruise missiles and automatic repeating crossbows to tiny hunter-killer submarines which cruise the bloodstream, electrocuting bacteria. High-tech small arms will often have deeply silly names, usually made sillier by italics. From a single book's extensive armoury one may at leisure select an italicized Prengos, Vildustuck, Zu, Zine, Narth, Zac, Bute, Spond, or even Garrett (all from *Come, Hunt an Earthman*, 1973). An interesting sub-obsession involves subjective, hypnotic weapons (31%): the psychosomatic whip, the hysteria bomb. This comes to a head in *Reality Forbidden* (1967), whose culminating arms race is entirely in the mind: force screens may be physically impossible, but 'Our illusion of an H-bomb won't penetrate their illusion of a force screen....'

Horrid infections and tumours are also rife (54%), many of them preying exclusively on bad guys who are not in tune with the Force. Oddly enough, the nasties aren't related with particularly gory relish, and the genocide count is remarkably low for such heavily armed SF (only 8%).

Much more familiar is the gung-ho enthusiasm with which the hero and/or human race tends to have whole new technologies developed to production line point within about a week of getting a new idea or taking apart an advanced alien gadget. Pretty remarkable, when phenomena as simple as animal pelts move them to gems of scientific insight like 'This fur, I concluded, had evolved as some sort of protection against the ever-present radiation' (*Fugitive*, and yes, he does mean hard radiation) or, 'There was a wide band of silver fur on the animal's back which absorbed sunlight. This energy was converted into food'—to sustain a doggoid the size of a pony (*Blindfold*).

On the high-tech front I also admired the miniature race which developed miniature nukes: 'In all probability the 'mushrooms' of these devices seldom rose higher than a normal mushroom' (*These Savage Futurians*, 1967). Only the brave should dare High's version of genetics (*Speaking of Dinosaurs*, 1974), involving such concepts as 'blank genes' ripe for recording your favourite TV programmes, and the notion of a genetic racial memory which will one day make us sit up and realize with much smiting of brows that we call ourselves what we do owing to dim recollections of being descended from the Yewmen Race of planet Terth.

Enough of cheap jokes. Despite his obvious enthusiasm and a surprising measure of 'good bad book' readability, High is a dire and unimportant writer, displaying in his works a classic sloppiness and stereotyping which detract from the books' legitimate escapist fun and cheerily nasty invention. In that sense he's a bad example, rotten with fantasies of power and wish-fulfilment. Yet it's rather touching that his heroes are never particularly interested in conquering the universe, merely in

achieving a little peace to sit down and, when the opportunity presents itself (38%), to enter into total symbiosis with the ecosphere. Meanwhile, any remaining baddies are merely chastened/reformed (38%) or rot quietly away on exposure to the light of sweet reason (31%).

Contrasting this with, say, the equally ill-written but wildly successful *Skylark* and *Lensman* books, wherein a series of multiple genocides purges the cosmos of every single member of every non-cuddly race ... and you can't help wondering whether High's obscurity is largely because his weapon-toting, universe-shaking supermen, far from embodying fascist ideals, are merely too Britishly unpretentious, and wishy-washy, and nice.

This intensely litcrit analysis is dedicated to all those other writers like High who thought SF was jolly wonderful, who scraped together an idea or two and tried without any huge talent to make their names immortal—and who (99.8%) didn't succeed even to the extent that he did. Remember them. They perished that our remainder shelves might live.

New York Review of SF, 1989

Under the Lid

[Just a letter to a fanzine, but I rather like it.]

So Simon Ounsley enjoys intriguing encounters with something rustling and transcendent on the edge of consciousness? Reading his description in *Lip 5* took me back more than twenty years....

For me it didn't rustle; it buzzed and sang, in a smoky cloud that clung around my head. It was hot and clammy and hard to breathe. And a sourceless, informative voice would bring the horror to its peak by pronouncing what was in that brief context the most hateful word in the language: 'miasma'.

Then, as you were expecting, I would wake up the rest of the way and wonder what had brought that on. Mild anoxia, no doubt, in a suffocating tangle of bedclothes; that might account for the strong feeling that the buzzing nausea wasn't an ordinary dream but a different and nastier state of consciousness, or unconsciousness.

Much later I tentatively traced one component of this recurring nightmare to a merry incident from when I'd had a go at fishing. You can easily reproduce this trauma for yourself. Have your bait-box filled with lush, plump, tenderly reared maggots, forget about it for a few days too long, and then whip off the lid without previous consideration of what maggots turn into....

But I never worked out what I had against the word 'miasma', which to this day strikes me as inexplicably sinister.

If I'd been religious, perhaps I would have put it all down to a close encounter with seepages from hell. But religion had been the year before. Now I was scientific, and eager to ascribe the hellish experience to a hold-up in oxygen supplies to the

brain. It was time for research.

The encyclopaedia contained little relevant information, but my already copious stacks of crime fiction had several suggestions about the borderlands of consciousness ... such as the interesting results to be obtained from pressing your thumbs rather hard into a friend's carotid arteries. Perhaps fortunately for my friends, I'd recently been impressed by an account of how famous scientist J.B.S. Haldane had conducted all sorts of hazardous experiments on himself.

My teenage contemporaries, I suppose, locked themselves in the bathroom for altogether more seminally pleasurable reasons. I instinctively felt that a hefty clip on the ear would reward any attempt to explain to my mother that I wished privacy to squeeze my carotids. It was difficult enough to find the bloody things.

Eventually, standing in front of the mirror, fingers sunk into my neck, I saw myself fading behind the uncertain shapes of dark continents. It was both like and unlike the nightmare, with a roaring and throbbing instead of that evil remembered buzz, and with a waning feeling of being in control. I fell over a couple of times, and gave myself vile headaches, but never heard that voice utter the much-feared word 'miasma' or had that night-time feeling of

*When the green field comes off like a lid
Revealing what was much better hid—
Unpleasant...**

It was certainly a cheap, albeit bruising and criminally stupid, route to Altered Consciousness. There was a morbid attraction in being able to do sweeping things to one's mental capabilities with the push of two fingertips. After a while and maybe even as a result of the 'controlled experiments', the involuntary nightmare encounters died away, and my interest shifted to safer hobbies like messing with step-up transformers to generate multi-kilovolt electric arcs.

Reading Simon Ounsley on metaphysics pointed up the unfairness of it all. When other people stray over the edge the lucky sods seem to encounter fun things like God and eternity and the quantum field, any of which I would actually be mildly interested in meeting (despite uncertainty as to how one should open the conversation). 'Artificial' attempts aside, all I ever got was a dose of buzzing existential nausea straight out of a bad horror story. I've been suspicious of transcendence ever since. 'There are lids which Man was not meant to open....'

[* Auden. Yes, of course you knew; this note is for the ill-read, OK?]

Lip 6, 9/91

Behind Closed Doors

[Yet another of the regular computer columns which distract me from Real Writing....]

Last issue's feature on the secrets of Locomotive Software prompted our ace reporter to detach

himself momentarily from the bar and investigate the software company which is possibly the most obscure in the world: Ansible Information Ltd.

Ansible began life in 1984, and again in 1985, 1986 and 1988. For a company which has had no effect whatever on the working habits of nearly four billion people, its offices are surprisingly grandiose, consisting of two crumbling Victorian slum houses many miles apart. Asked how they can afford such palatial premises, head programmer David Langford quipped, 'We can't, but we have to sleep somewhere.'

Besides its basic commitment to unpronounceability, Ansible, as originally envisaged by chairman Christopher Priest, was to provide software solutions for unknown, obsolete systems which nobody owns or buys any more. 'While stealing computer time in the Oxford nuclear physics department, I learned to program an IBM 1130 by punching the cards with my teeth,' explained technical director David. 'Unfortunately this skill was slightly less viable than hoped in the home computer market.'

Ansible's first commercial project was a system of pop-up menus which might have been a runaway success if restaurant owners hadn't fussily objected to having slots sawn in their tables for the installation of this simple, spring-loaded device.

What complementary skills did production chief Christopher bring to the company? 'By then I'd written several highly praised though unremunerative SF novels in which shifting realities and hallucinatory narrative established a dreamlike state where no fact or interpretation seemed reliable. This left me ideally qualified to write industry-standard instruction manuals.'

So how did Ansible enter the Amstrad PCW market? Secretarial scapegoat David explained: 'As SF writers, we used to be forced to look at friends' terrible, badly-typed, unpublishable novel drafts. Then we noticed a change: more and more we were seeing terrible, unpublishable novels smartly produced on PCWs! This was an obvious pointer. Also, we had this idealistic notion about making disgusting sums of money.'

An early Ansible product was the TYPO program, which could be run against your computer-produced documents to introduce random spelling errors, misaligned letters, etc., thus catching the eyes of editors who'd grown bored with excessively perfect word-processed scripts. But these were early days for Ansible, and TYPO was withdrawn owing to a slight bug which in its first releases (up to version 4.79) could cause the PCW monitor to explode.

Is the computing world anything like the directors' former haunt of SF writing? 'Oh yes,' replied switch-board operator Christopher. 'The combination of good reviews with low profits and huge tax demands is very nostalgic. We keep sales down to a familiar level partly by writing software for obscure jobs no

one wants done and partly by our policy of not answering the phone.'

Our reporter was shown around Ansible's trophy room, and peered with revulsion into the glass case containing more than 47,000 pin-mounted bugs from early programs. On the wall are framed letters from computing giants Locomotive, WordPerfect Corporation and many more, all telling Ansible to watch it if they don't want to get sued.

Is it possible to explain Ansible Information's fabulous lack of success? 'I put it down to beards,' commented tea-boy David. 'In big-name software houses, male staff have peculiarly irritating beards—look at that horribly hirsute lot at Locomotive Software. Unfortunately my wife won't permit such a drastic revision of our public image.'

We followed the Ansible team through a complete day's work, beginning with intensive hours of oversleeping. Software boss David expertly showed how five or six minutes of making random changes in a program can quite often move the bugs around a bit, while public relations maestro Christopher shouted down the phone at multi-million-pound companies who as usual wanted a £29.95 utility package but claimed total inability to write a cheque for such a huge amount in less than six months.

After a long discussion about the parentage of HM Inspector of Taxes in the company's nearby boardroom, known as The Plasterers' Arms, the mailroom supervisor (Christopher) and philatelic salivation operative (David) gave an exciting demonstration of how on a busy day Ansible often mails out enough software parcels to be counted on the thumbs of both hands.

Of which of its achievements, then, is Ansible most proud? 'Our manuals,' insisted technical authorship co-ordinator Christopher. 'We print fewer split infinitives and maintain a higher level of semicolons than almost any other doomed company of comparable size based in Reading.'

'I'd say our support service,' contradicted customer liaison assistant David. 'Within weeks of receiving a routine letter of complaint or death threat, we rush back a full explanation that the bug in question only appears to be so because they've grossly misread the manual, and in fact doesn't exist, being instead a valuable feature requested by thousands of past users, which in any case results from flaws in the operating system and Amstrad's hardware.'

Why the name Ansible? 'We wanted the software to go ever so fast,' said nomenclature supervisor Christopher, 'so we stole the name of the fastest thing in SF, the instantaneous communicator in the novels of Ursula Le Guin.' Only later did they discover that it's an anagram of 'lesbian', which amuses their customers greatly and frequently.

Asked whether Amstrad PCWs were actually used to prepare the manuals for their PCW software, both members of Ansible's product documentation section

shuddered and said, 'Do you think we're mad? What do you use to produce *your* magazine, eh?' Our reporter made an excuse, collected his mac, and left....
8000 Plus 38, 11/89

Not Wild Cards At All

I've just been helping unveil Penguin's new fantasy and SF imprint, 'Roc'. Unexpectedly in these times of recession, they threw a huge launch party which had SF pundits groaning and taking aspirin for days after....

This happened in one of those subterranean London nightclubs with black decor and an invisible entrance ... my fervent thanks to Kate Stableford, daughter of the more famous Brian, for brilliantly spotting the Roc logo on a bunch of balloons outside. Appalling scenes of scheming, boozing and group photography duly took place, and countless notables were reduced to the level of the beasts as they struggled to eat (without cutlery) chicken legs engulfed in a thick barbecue sauce corresponding closely to H.P.Lovecraft's descriptions of oozing, blasphemous ichor.

The 'Midnight Rose' editorial collective (Neil Gaiman, Mary Gentle, Roz Kaveney and Alex Stewart) gloated without restraint over the appearance of their first SF anthology, *Temps*—or perhaps not its *appearance* exactly, since it looks decidedly odd. 'Precisely why do you want a cover picture of a flying Swiss Army knife?' Roz had reputedly asked the Penguin art department, sarcastically adding, 'I suppose it's the cutting edge of SF....' Penguin liked this phrase so much that they added it to the cover. Anyway, *Temps* seemed popular at the party: vast stacks of display copies were nicked within about an hour, while no one showed much interest in stealing the three fantasies by Americans which formed the rest of the Roc launch.

Outside the club, Mr Gaiman reported a scene of touching, fascinating stupidity. The drink had run

out remarkably soon, thanks in part to the efforts of a couple of crashers (or were they dear young friends of Geoff Ryman?) who attempted to haul off large stocks of booze in a plastic bin-liner. Two huge bouncers disapproved of this, and got remorselessly physical about it. 'They only had to walk away from the bouncers,' Neil said wonderingly. 'They only had to stop reaching for that bag and they wouldn't be beaten up any more.' *Thud. Thump. Thud.* The crystalline logic of his analysis went unheeded.

Next day's event was more typical, an evening session at Waterstone's in Bath where six *Temps* people and the aforementioned three Americans faced an eager audience of (I calculated, subtracting Penguin and bookshop staff) seven actual members of the public. Two of these later proved to be lady companions of the US contingent. It was an uproarious occasion, you bet. Neil and Alex attempted to provoke heated discussion by asserting that the superhero concept of *Temps* (to be precise, the concept of seedy, downmarket, dole-queueing and quintessentially British superheroes) was wholly original, owed nothing whatever to *Wild Cards* and indeed had been thought of long before *Wild Cards* had so much as been imagined, honest. Controversy was stilled by the fact that the audience had never heard of *Wild Cards* either. We signed all the books in the shop and ran for it.
GMI 15, 10/91

Infinitely Improbable

Mrs Langford Regrets: Hazel, alas, isn't coming to Boskone. She plans a week of sybaritic luxury, gorging on food I don't like, soaking in expensive bubble-baths, watching her Robert Powell videos and gloating over not having to fly in a bloody aeroplane.

A Statement from Boskone 29: 'I've passed on your requests for bourbon, groupies, contracts and coffee. The rest of the committee assures me that we can get them all for you, except perhaps for the bourbon, groupies and contracts.'
Ben Yalow, 7/91

"What's Boskone?"
"A simple, distinctive,
pronounceable, coined word...."

(E.E.Smith, *First Lensman*)

So, of course, is:

Sglodlon 3½

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