

Sglodion 3

Sglodion 3 comes to you from Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, England, RG1 5AU, and makes no claim of redeeming social value. It is available.
(29 April 1991)

The Charity Con

On Sunday 1 July 1990, I committed a shameful act. Though I was encouraged and abetted by Brian Stableford, the guilt lies heavy on me still ... well, no, it doesn't really.

Did you hear of what was to be the most gigantic computer show/charity event/SF convention ever held in Europe? "Compute for Charity" was the name. I learned about this blockbuster from a very tatty sheet of paper explaining that all manner of international SF megastars were attending: that is, Terry Pratchett. Unconfirmed wonders too stupefying for the human mind to comprehend were offered in smaller print, among them—as I was interested to discover—Dave Langford.

One thing led to another. Lured by promises of free train tickets, luxury accommodation, unlimited booze and egoboo, etc, I presently found myself sitting with Brian Stableford, en route to the fun city of Hull. "The only bright side I can see," he said after a few hours, "is quite a good bookshop I haven't visited for years." This, for Brian, was unusually cheerful and merry.

Thirty thousand people were to attend over the awesome weekend. Thirty thousand a *day*. No, forty thousand, said the final flyers. Huge media coverage was anticipated. The SF convention alone would dwarf all those puny British Worldcons. I managed somehow not to dwell on the echoes of publicity for other gigantic SF jamborees which never actually happened, like Space-Ex 84 and Project Starcast. The only thing we learn from history....

Hull looked OK, as I noticed while the crammed car sped out of it. One of the little things the grandiloquent literature had managed not to mention was just how far out of town Humberside College actually is. The guest accommodation had dwindled somehow to austere student bedrooms (no bath or shower but lots of friendly notices saying things like DO NOT REARRANGE THE FURNITURE AS THIS MAY CONSTITUTE A FIRE HAZARD). I will not mention the communal toilet, except that its enthusiastic flush left a *wholly misleading* pool of water to be negotiated by seekers after relief.

We found Terry already wearing the broad, evil grin of one who rather likes watching unsinkable vessels go down at the touch of a passing ice-cube.

When we'd all walked quite a long way to a pub with a much-praised restaurant and the committee had started buying drinks, Brian perked up no end at the opportunity to convey to them that the large sign RESTAURANT CLOSED FOR REDECORATION very possibly meant what it said. Unbelievable complications ensued.

Saturday: Day One! The luxury breakfast was somewhat delayed, there being about an hour's difference between the committee's and the canteen's understanding of things, but it was certainly memorable. Not so much for the strange steamed-looking institutional bacon and other familiar convention joys, as for the subsequent queueing at a cash register where this aged and misanthropic canteen lady very slowly added up the prices of everything—"slice of bread, ur, that's, ur, 5p". We expostulated mildly at this waste of time, pointing out that we famous writers had freebie tickets. It was pityingly explained that a freebie ticket was worth only £1.85 of rigorously checked breakfast credit. A hiss of indrawn breath could be heard from stray students when the big spenders failed to go back and use up surplus pence on half a sausage or a fractional slice of bread.

Now, the convention. Suspicions that the record-beating SF convention idea was a last-minute extra, advertised exclusively through tatty flyers in the Wellington, were subtly confirmed. What had been laid on for us was a bare dingy room containing a bare dingy table behind which Terry, Brian and I sat glumly while a very small trickle of people looked in and went away again on ascertaining that we were not all-action computer games. (Bob Shaw was supposed to be coming too, but wisely didn't. I spotted one actual visiting fan.) This was the entirety of the SF bit, so besides the lack of any programme there was nowhere to give the advertised readings ... which discovery was the high spot of the day.

In a corner of the house of exile, the chap with the portable Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy computer was dispensing merriment. I can never remember his name: the first line of his address is, hilariously, "Hurling Reliant Robins III", and his on-screen Hitcher database is full of jokes as good as that. Relentless unfunniness is what we are talking about here. Or to be charitable, a failure to recognize that even Douglas Adams does not do Douglas Adams one-liners well every time, and does recognize the need to separate them with a bit of narrative. But "Hurling" means well, he flogs print-outs of the stuff for charity (that word again), and

I do try not to cringe when, each time I see him, he looms up and demands an amusing inscription for the latest such wad of paper ... which inscription is not allowed to be any of the ones I've done before and forgotten, as those have been entered into the main text.

In another corner, the "Octarine" SF/fantasy humour mob were struggling to create an instant fanzine. This proved a lifeline. We all wrote stuff for it because there was nothing else to do.

Let me make it clear that no actual cruelty was involved. Every hour or so, we were issued beer and sandwiches. Toilet access was allowed. Visiting privileges could probably have been negotiated. All the same....

I sneaked out for an inspection of the rival delights and found that our minute ration of visitors was a fair sample. Dozens if not scores of people must have been flowing through the event every few hours. Out on the campus boy scouts were much in evidence, giving displays of Basic Tent Lurking and touting noxious-looking hot dogs.

After some research I found the book room hidden in a tangle of buildings. This contained copies of our stuff, but was deserted. I bought a paperback I didn't want, out of sheer pity for the despairing chap behind the trestle tables who had believed the publicity and ordered things in fifties. Local Book Dealer Slays Charity Committee And Self.

The main hall had a dozen tatty stands of computer stuff for sale (not state of the art, not cheap). The stands were tatty because they'd been hastily cobbled together by the organizers when the city council failed to lend some as promised. The council's failure was ascribed to the fact that Hull's own municipal festival began on that same day, and miraculously coincided with the students' rag week.

One began to suspect that the 40,000 visitors who daily pass through Hull in hope of a computer/SF event were being ensnared by desperate fun in the city centre.

Brian cracked first. "A bookshop, I need a bookshop...." Dramatic montage of bus stops, the Stableford nose for books twitching through central Hull, the sudden triumphant dive into an arcade, the discovery that the place now sold only remainders. It had begun to rain heavily and didn't slacken until we returned. The event's signs were hand-crafted in felt pen on sheets of corrugated cardboard (including the main one at the main gate), and all now lay soggy and detumescent. A body of water had appeared between the main area and our room, helping to curb that excessive flow of visitors.

Very late on Saturday the media took an interest when, as reported by my sources, someone from the local paper popped in and said, "What's all this then?" Useful publicity in the following Wednesday's edition was practically guaranteed. Meanwhile, our massed skiffy guests became homicidal when the

promised Saturday night party proved to consist of a loud empty disco and a louder TV set on which all the surviving organizers were watching the World Cup. Terry preached open sedition to the Escape Committee. We stole out to a takeaway and made our own entertainment: that is, I tried to eat Chinese gloop without a knife or fork, and the other two fell around so painfully they nearly dropped their chips.

When Terry didn't appear at Sunday's grim breakfast, Brian and I suspected the worst. He'd made his break. (It later turned out that he'd decided that sleeping in was more soothing than a breakfast like that.) We looked in on the SF ghetto, and the last straw for Brian came when he was asked to pay for the instant fanzine with his piece in. For charity. Explosion of noted author. (This might conceivably have been a joke. I wheedled one by post later on.)

The Reading contingent grabbed its luggage and slunk off. Actually, lingering traces of conscience made me suggest that we first visit the book room to sign anything required, but the afflicted dealer hadn't felt up to opening that day. Boy scouts watched and reported our every move as we headed to the station: "You were *seen*," said Terry in a gleeful phone call. After a few days the whole ghastly mess almost began to seem funny.

One of the mighty organizers wrote to me later. "We hope you enjoyed the weekend, even though it was shorter than you intended! The show was a success...." What? The ingredients of success appeared to be mounds of left-over (that is, unsold) games software for future sale, plus other donated goodies and in particular "the face of severely handicapped (and very intelligent) boy Carl when ICI presented him with a complete Amiga system". Only a rotten curmudgeon would sneer at that. But is it barely possible that the donations could have been raked in and the success notched up without actually needing to stage a shambolic weekend in Hull?

Cosmic Synchronicity

I thought my tiny disagreement with Harlan Ellison was cleared up years ago. But Terry came back from the 1989 World Fantasy Con to remark that "HE becomes incandescent at the mention of you." Brian returned likewise from 1991's International Conference on the Fantastic: "Your name came up and HE spluttered for an hour." "But I kept telling him, 'Dave Langford's *nice* really,'" said Jane Stableford. "So he never finished a sentence and we still don't know what he's got against you," concluded Brian. I dunno. I did once comment favourably on a certain Chris Priest polemic (and got quoted without permission in *SF Chronicle* when Andy Porter felt too nervous to do his own review). Which brings us almost uncannily to....

The Last Dangerous SGLADION: Chris Priest

I wrote the following material for the next planned issue of my fanzine Deadloss. Like the man who is the subject of the articles, the pieces are beginning to get a bit close to their sell-by date, so I'm grateful to Dave Langford for the timely loan of the shelf space here.

The last issue of Deadloss was published in several editions through the winter of 1987/88, dealing at great length with the non-appearance of **The Last Dangerous Visions**. Unlike some people, I do not find Mr Harlan Ellison's life and career endlessly fascinating, and so I was not planning to return to the subject. However, people kept asking me what sort of responses I had received from Mr Ellison, and urged me to publish them. I felt I could only get away with describing them if I dropped them surreptitiously into the midst of more interesting material. But circumstances have meanwhile changed, and now I am incapacitated (see below) it seems unlikely Deadloss will appear again for several years. If ever.

Getting a response out of Mr Ellison was not at all the idea, even though to some Last contributors this alone might seem like progress. Deadloss, however, penetrated the defences and provoked at least five known responses from Mr Ellison¹. Here are the descriptions of three of them I would otherwise have tried to bury away among anecdotes about the famous, reviews of worthwhile books and long accounts of life at home. CP

1. Please Stand Up So Everyone Can See You

I have already mentioned some of Mr Ellison's reactions elsewhere: a half-hearted and disingenuous sideswipe at me in his film column in *F&SF*, a "returned" copy of Deadloss (which I hadn't sent), and a death threat issued through his British mouthpiece Michael Moorcock. Of these, only the threat showed any spirit, although even this could not be (and was not) taken seriously. When I published details of it Mr Ellison at first denied he had uttered any such thing. This later changed into an implausible claim that he hadn't "meant" it (which of course overturned the earlier denial). Make of this what you will, but it all sounded to me like the spluttering of a man who had lost an argument and was falling back on the clichés of television scripts.

Many months later, the Ayatollah Khomeini simultaneously started, finished and lost an argument with the author Salman Rushdie by issuing a *fatwa*, or death threat, against him. One of the many ways in which this differed from Mr Ellison's threat was that it *was* to be taken seriously. Mr Rushdie packed his bags and went into hiding, while I continued to walk free. But through the

ensuing protest and outrage from Western intellectuals I kept remembering the cowardly and smutty little death threat Mr Ellison had made against me.

I wondered then, and I wonder now, what is Mr Ellison's position on the Salman Rushdie affair? Whatever his other failings, he has always been eager to identify himself with liberal causes. If he has pronounced on the subject I haven't heard about it. Does Mr Ellison still believe in freedom of speech? And what about the freedom to publish disagreeable facts or unpopular ideas at the risk of offending a minority? Or does he now believe that writers who offend the sensibilities of others deserve to be silenced by death?

Mr Ellison has a duty to make his views known.

2. The Brown-Nosed League

Another indirect Ellisonian response came to my attention when Dave Garnett sent me a photocopied page from an American fanzine called **Aboriginal SF**. The extract was from a self-serving article by Mr Ellison (apparently due to be reprinted in a book) about his 'part' in the New Wave of the 1960s. Writing about the 'Dangerous Visions' books, and Last in particular, he said:

*"... despite the inordinate delay in my finalizing **The Last Dangerous Visions** (and the meanspirited attempts to sabotage it by the likes of Christopher Priest, a man whose work was rejected for the third volume, thus making his 'objective criticism' more than slightly suspect), I am convinced that ..."*
(And so on.)

This is untrue, and the slur on my motives constitutes a professional libel.

The facts surrounding my story "An Infinite Summer", and its withdrawal from Mr Ellison's non-existent anthology, are a matter of record. It was certainly not rejected by Mr Ellison. This could for instance be confirmed by the literary agent who submitted it, and who later withdrew it on my instructions. Anyway, Mr Ellison knows what happened.

So why should he lie about it?

Most of the people who wrote to me about Deadloss said it had convinced them (as I had been convinced all along) that this non-book will never come into being. By saying as calmly and factually as possible what Mr Ellison had done, and (more significantly) what he had not done, the Deadloss essay left him with no excuses. Furthermore, all the familiar Ellisonian delaying tactics and prevarications were listed. Even Mr Ellison himself must know, in the darkest recesses of his heart, that his project is doomed.

He still can't bring himself to admit it, but since he is a public figure with a reputation for frankness

he has to say *something*. Lying is one of the few courses left open to him, and here he is, lying in his teeth.

Because the article appeared in an obscure (to me) fanzine I wouldn't have taken much notice of it, but the prospect of seeing it come out in a book was disquieting.

I therefore wrote to Charles Ryan, the editor and publisher of *Aboriginal SF*, and made two requests. The first was that he should publish a retraction and apology, giving them the same prominence as Mr Ellison's offending remark. The second was to let me know which book publishers were planning to reprint Mr Ellison's article, so I could approach them and request that they remove the remark. (I also enclosed a copy of *Deadloss* for Ryan, so he could judge the argument for himself.)

It took Ryan two months to get around to replying. I imagine that he used the time to get in touch with Mr Ellison, because his short reply said:

"We will run the pertinent part of your letter in the next (July) issue of Aboriginal. You should be aware, however, that Harlan contends that there were two submissions, the first he says was rejected while the second was withdrawn before he could act on it. Frankly, I think the dispute is between you two. I don't encourage warfare between nations or people since the latter often sets the stage for the former."

This reply was most irritating.

That Ryan had gone back to check with Mr Ellison might seem reasonable enough, but I felt in doing so he was missing a significant point. This was that my main complaint was against *him*, Charles Ryan, not against Mr Ellison. It was Ryan who published the libel (without checking with me first, I can't help noticing), and it was Ryan I had asked for the apology. I had not asked him to print my short letter or any part of it, however "pertinent". (Since he never sent me the July 1989 issue of his fanzine I've no idea what he eventually published, if anything. And I still don't know in which book, if any, Mr Ellison will be renewing his lie.)

I continue to want an apology from Ryan, because if people read and believe Mr Ellison's remark they will think I wrote the essay in *Deadloss* out of revenge.

Mr Ellison's revised version of events (that I submitted two stories, not one) is simply an added lie, one thrown in to cloud the truth, using a familiar tactic of muddying the water with dishonest claims and counter-claims.

Charles Ryan's remark about "warfare" is perhaps the most irritating part of his letter. With this humbug he is setting himself on a pedestal above the "dispute" he thinks is going on between Mr Ellison and me. Much of my real argument against *Last* is that third parties have *allowed* this tiresome

non-book to maintain its wraithlike existence by their inaction. If Ryan had any guts he would judge the facts as they are, and not dumbly accept any old spur-of-the-moment fib that Mr Ellison produces. By acceding to Mr Ellison's falsehoods he aligns himself with them.

I have gone into this exchange of letters in some detail because there is a central principle at stake: in the serious and semi-serious fanzines (one of which *Aboriginal SF* apparently aspires to be) we have fandom's main source of independent and unbiased free speech. So long as the people who publish them believe anything a personality like Mr Ellison says (especially when someone else points out firmly that it was untrue) then they are at best apologists for the self-important. When it's a serious subject (e.g., one for which a death threat is seen as a suitable response), it is crucial they should seek to be objective. Otherwise, they join the forces of repression against free speech. Their magazines become worthless and contemptible.

I hope no one reads the grovelling Mr Ryan's *Aboriginal SF*, that if they should be unfortunate enough to be sent a copy they will throw it away unread, and should they be subscribers to the thing they will cancel at once, and demand a cash refund.

3. We All Have to Die of Something

At the beginning of 1989 I received a communication from Mr Ellison's present wife, Susan. I found in the envelope several sheets of paper photocopied from an unsigned article. This had appeared in *Christopher Street*, a magazine published in America for homosexual men. Was I being warned of a shock announcement from Mr Ellison's office?

The reality was far less exciting. Calm examination of the text revealed that doctors had discovered a new and deadly disease, and it was *one from which Mr Ellison is now suffering*. Indeed, the article mentions Mr Ellison by name, and his wife (no doubt on her own initiative) had kindly outlined the mention in red ink, so I should not miss it.

Now, although I naturally worry about the health of my colleagues, why should Susan Ellison take the trouble to send me this? Could it be because I allowed a slightly sceptical tone to enter the proceedings whenever *Deadloss* mentioned her husband's illness?

It would be difficult to explain to her that in this, as in several other subjects, *Deadloss* was acting as a conduit of consensus thought. Indeed, in several places I emphasized that much of the essay's argument was an attempt to sum up what a lot of people were saying. For many years, Mr Ellison's famous illness (which has laid him cruelly low when it comes to editing anthologies and writing novels, yet which comes up with accurately timed

remissions when other tasks are necessary, such as making speeches at conventions, giving interviews to comics magazines, brawling with other writers, producing a monthly film/TV column for *F&SF*, writing film/TV scripts, pursuing litigation, and so on) has been the cause of much sarcastic merriment in the worlds of fandom and professional writing.

Despite this, I decided at least to keep an open mind and I read the article. It was hair-raising stuff. Although the article describes him as an 'author of popular "magic realism" novels'², I ended up feeling nothing but sympathy for him. By some incredible stroke of bad luck, Mr Ellison is now suffering from an illness, actually a Syndrome, that not only has the same symptoms as his last one, but is just as incurable! Furthermore, it's *brand-new*! No medical encyclopaedia lists it!

With only the anonymous article to go on my information is a bit imprecise, and without a medical background I can only interpret the symptoms in lay terms. But the more I learned about this terrible and enervating disease, the more I realized that it links Mr Ellison and me in an extraordinary and touching way.

I have so far mentioned this only to family and close friends, but a debilitating syndrome has recently been disrupting my life too. The symptoms are almost identical! Here is a summary:

- According to the article, Mr Ellison turns out to be suffering from a disease for which there is no known cure. I also happen to be suffering from a disease for which there is no known cure.
- Mr Ellison's symptoms, listed in the article, include attacks of fever, intermittent muscle pains and weakness, headaches, depression and interruption to sleep. My symptoms include attacks of fever, intermittent muscle pains and weakness, headaches, depression and interruption to sleep.
- Mr Ellison's disease makes him prone to confusion, forgetfulness, lack of concentration and short-term memory loss. My disease makes me prone to confusion, forgetfulness, lack of concentration and short-term memory loss.
- Mr Ellison no doubt feels tired late at night, and groggy when he first wakes up, because *I* feel tired late at night, and groggy when I first wake up. Mr Ellison is likely to break one or more limbs should he fall heavily. I am likely to break one or more limbs should I fall heavily. Mr Ellison will probably develop symptoms of senile dementia in the next few years. I am likely to develop senile dementia within a few years (but not as few).
- Mr Ellison's disease prevents him from starting his first novel. My disease delays my ninth novel. Mr Ellison's disease has prevented him completing *The Last Dangerous Visions* for

nearly 20 years. My disease means that I shall probably not live long enough to see his book completed.

Mr Ellison's new disease is called "CIDS". This stands for "Chronic Immune Dysfunction Syndrome" (according to the article it was previously known as "Chronic Epstein-Barr Syndrome" or "Endogenous Depression" ... both familiar terms to Ellison watchers). Most cases occur in Southern California. It is very serious, and nothing I have written here should be seen as irresponsible mockery.

My disease is called "PISS". This stands for "Postnatal Infant Screaming Syndrome". Cases of it have been discovered in all parts of the world.

Sharing these appalling symptoms as I do, I can only wish my fellow-sufferer a speedy recovery, and pass on the hope that he will get his first novel started soon. (My ninth is already under way.)

Christopher Priest

1. This does *not* include hearsay reports, which were the source of a rather touching description of a SFWA event where Mr Ellison was said to have burst into tears when my name was mentioned, claiming that I had ruined his career.

Another kind of hearsay is the complaint, presumably arising from Mr Ellison himself, of bad manners. In this alternative reality, which has been going the rounds, I had the gall to attack Mr Ellison after being welcomed to the hospitality of his Los Angeles home. I have not only never been to Mr Ellison's house, I don't actually *want* to go there, having seen enough of it on TV, thanks all the same. It's true to say I might actually have seen Mr Ellison twice in person, but it's difficult to be sure. Both encounters happened in densely crowded rooms, and from where I was all I could see was the crown of his head.

2. These six words contain two and possibly three errors: Mr Ellison does not write novels, therefore cannot be called an "author" of novels. His short stories are fantasy or science fiction, and have nothing whatsoever to do with magic realism. As for being an author of *popular* magic realism novels, I suppose if you are spinning a fantasy you might as well spin one that sounds attractive. However, I was in a charitable mood when I read this, and assumed that someone at the magazine had taken it down incorrectly over the phone.



MJ-Balls Reprise

Charity, bloody charity. When I filled most of *Sglodion 2* with polemic leading up to the plugging of an Excruciatingly Worthy Cause, I was chock-full of honest anger, sincerity and all that stuff. It's hard to sustain this over a full year of rephrasing the issues for different audiences, and now I (and co-conspirator Paul Barnett) mainly feel tired....

Anyone who wants the documents—SG2 and various fund news-sheets—is welcome to send a quid for photocopies. For other newcomers, the condensed version goes: British UFO writer Jenny Randles had been pissing freely on the excesses of far-out UFO-conspiracy-theory loons, was written up in the *Manchester Evening News* in terms sufficiently distorted to permit a libel action, was sued (along with the paper) by said loons, and had no money. We disliked the idea of any writer getting bankrupted for (a) uttering the common-sense viewpoint almost universal among scientists and SF people, and (b) being creatively misrepresented in a scummy provincial newspaper. Hence the fund.

(To those who confidently informed us that no British solicitor would take on such a case, we cautiously remark that the solicitor concerned is himself a UFO, ahem, enthusiast of extreme views, and that one of the writs he issued was on his own behalf. I understand the Law Society is having its ear bent over this.)

People were generous. MJ-Balls brought in over £2500. This was only a fraction of what the case would have cost to fight in court, and lack of funds—along with the fact that the newspaper itself refused to fight on—forced a settlement.

To those who informed us that no court would allow the wallies to win a case like that, we observe that as so often in British justice, the money ran out long before the court stage. In the 1920s A.P. Herbert satirized the legal status of Magna Carta, and not much has changed. His judge quotes: "*To no man will we sell, to no man deny, to no man delay, justice or right,*" and continues: "But we in this Court are well aware that these undertakings have very little relation to the harsh facts of experience. It is the whole business of the honourable profession of the Law to sell, delay and deny justice—to sell it to those who can afford it, to delay it if the client has money, and to deny it if he has not; and many of us wish that we could sell more justice than we do."

The reluctant settlement kept the total bill including defence costs down to around £3750. Jenny managed to meet the difference herself. As though this were TAFF, she is inclined to restart the fund for the benefit of the *next* such victim; good, but Paul and I are too shagged out to join in this.

There were lots of nice moments, from the first anonymous £100 cheque to the Auction of the Cloth of Gold at Microcon this February, where enormous

sums flowed from an audience scarcely visible to the naked eye. Notes of encouragement came from Greg Bear, Arthur C. Clarke ("This sounds the sort of fight I'd love ... but I am very limited in time and energy."), Martin Gardner and many more; David Brin madly volunteered to testify if the case ever got to court; a million other writers and fans (listed in the above-mentioned news sheets) chipped in with cash and signed goodies for sale. Gosh.

Of course there were low points too, and none lower than when on John Brunner's eminently sensible-sounding advice I sent the entire story to that pundit of pundits, that champion of rationalism, that doyen of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal ... Isaac Asimov. He wrote, in full:

One of the things I've learned in my half-century as an s.f. writer is that what happens among s.f. fans is of no interest to anyone in the world. I would suggest that you ignore fannish squabbles and go about your serious business. In fact, if you really want to write books and do real s.f. don't waste your time publishing a fan magazine.

This really put me in my place, you bet. I hope that all the rest of my readers who are "of no interest to anyone in the world" will feel suitably crushed and cast away childish things.

My thanks again to everyone involved, except Isaac Asimov.

Feather-Footed Through the Plashy Fen

Even in the boring old Reading townscape, we're surrounded by arcane life. One night as I tottered home from a London trip, a high-speed fox whizzed across the road and into next door's garden. I never saw it come out again, but not too long after (instead of the usual rock groups) this garden proved to contain a horse, which makes you think.

Another midnight, a terrifying white shape crashed through overhanging branches and pancaked in the local canal: when I'd stopped twitching I reasoned that it must be a swan, but what was a swan doing on top of a tree? ("They have enormous difficulty in the comparatively simple act of perching.") It's similarly boggling to be buzzed in broad daylight by a heron not quite as big as a 747, flapping serenely down London Road towards—it seemed—an appointment at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

We have also had ducks about the place, but they yielded to treatment.

Closer to earth, there was the epidemic of tiny moles. "Our front garden," I pointed out to Hazel, "is riddled with tiny moles who construct crumbly earth volcanoes with a hole one centimetre across."

"They can't be moles," she argued. "They must be large ants."

In the days that followed, the passers-by who are so generous with their bounty of burger wrappings, Coke bottles and depleted lager cans were much intrigued by this shambling figure which kept sneaking out and peering down minute holes in the grass. Eventually a small black bee with a lurid orange bum emerged, sneered at me in a way that indicated it knew all about squatters' rights, and flew off to ravish some dandelions.

Bee knowledge master Terry Pratchett explained soothingly that it wasn't like the totalitarian collectives of hive bees. "Yours," he said with authority, "are self-employed." Further outposts were discovered in the compost heap, which had taken to buzzing menacingly when prodded. A thought experiment immediately sprang to mind: the pear tree likes to hurl its fruit groundwards from thirty feet up to make a satisfying *splat* and crater, while the irritable Heap lay brooding and vibrating under that very tree. Ergo ... when autumn came, we stayed indoors a lot.

Indoors is no escape from the insect hordes who, not able to tackle their hulking human oppressors by brute force, have devised pitiless stratagems of guilt and fear. The aim of the Shrivelled Window-Sash Ladybird, for example, is to emerge from its ancestral breeding or hibernating grounds in our woodwork and to cling to the corner of the sunniest available window until we notice its withered form and feel bad. Visiting recently, a bemused Rob Hansen followed me around the house on ladybird patrol: coaxing the little bastards on to a convenient postcard sent by Eileen Gunn from Samarkand, and ejecting them before they could complete their act of suttee. What Rob was thinking is uncertain.

The Great Red-Bellied Inverted Beetle can inspire panic on its rare flights: it whirs and clatters across the room like a midget helicopter with rotor problems, to crash-land with great precision in the middle of whatever Hazel's reading. Being too inept to spread serious fear, this one also is fond of the suicide strategy. Every day for a period of several summer weeks, it or one of its cronies is to be found upside-down and helpless, perhaps feebly waving its little legs. Discover it too late and it is an ex-beetle. "My ichor is on your hands," the tiny corpse conveys. Rotten imperialist humans, providing flat surfaces on which harmless coleoptera can't right themselves.

Different emotions attend the discovery of that other beetle known to science as the Small Brown Oh God It's Not Woodworm Is It. Its natural habitat is bedroom floors, suspiciously near wardrobes, cupboards etc, and its natural state is dead. Though too big to fit in any woodworm-hole we've ever met, the things inspire all sorts of dread. Mutant hero woodworm? Death watch? Perhaps even the terribly boring marine worm? We keep nervously inspecting furniture, books and limbs for large enough holes.

Taxonomists should note that this one is not to

be confused with the much smaller Lesser Pasta Beetle, which has the nasty habit of being vibrantly alive, unless you've actually cooked the pasta. This insect is attracted to the habitat of anyone who buys remaindered lasagna from a delicatessen about to close after several years' lack of custom. Driven by ancient migratory urges deep-programmed into its very genes, it then makes its way across the shelf to the poppadsoms. At this stage its characteristic cry is a muted *phut* from under the grill.

With arthropod cunning, the Doomed Carpet Woodlouse seeks to implicate us even more directly in its passing. Like those unfortunate sods before the dread car of Juggernaut, it flings—well, places—itsself where my bare foot is about to descend on the way to a morning cup of tea. This is a memorable experience yet to be commemorated by Dean R.Koontz or Stephen King.

Evicting woodlice is a losers' game. There are fourteen to fifteen billion of them constantly in residence, spilling over from the gigantic garden and cellar populations like Mexicans into the USA. It must be a savage life out there: you keep meeting specimens with only a single feeler at the front, which looks vaguely piratical. (I keep hoping for one with a row of tiny wooden legs down one side.) They like it indoors and resist eviction, hauling in all their legs and pretending to be limpets. Thousands of guilt points are scored if you squash one when trying to get a grip and eject it humanely.

Here, technology has been dazzlingly useful. To lift a recalcitrant louse, the superior intellect merely takes one of those sticky "post-it notes" and applies same to the beast's dingy grey armour. A flick at the window, and the victim is exiled for at least ten minutes while it finds its way back to a door-crack or airbrick. Can I patent this?

Meanwhile, perhaps the most disaster-prone of all our local life-forms is the Tiny Misplaced Puffball, a fungus which every year tries to grow at the edge of the front path ... until every year it succumbs to the jackboot of a postman who likes the short cut over the grass. This year, though, the grass also harbours the burrows of many a self-employed bee. The Royal Mail could be about to live in interesting times.

In next issue's nature notes we will discuss the eerie Call of Nature felt in our back garden by every cat for miles around, and the possibility of a target-seeking, servo-controlled laser deterrent which would operate on renewable energy sources and harmonize with the environment. "Cats," says Hazel, "are not environment."

Dead Letters

Rob Ainsley: Something that nearly crept into a recent issue of *Classic CD*.... We've been experimenting with those infernal optical character

readers to scan CD reviews in and save having to get them typed up. Usually the sort of harmless mischief it comes up with in trying to decipher faxed photocopies is referring to Beethoven's Symphony No 3½, or claiming that Mozart was born not in Salzburg but in Salford (the latter being on our user dictionary, the former not). But it excelled itself with Kodaly's *Hary Janos* suite, which somehow came out as the "Hairy ?anus" suite.

PS: I'm told that the scanner insists on referring to Monteverdi as "Montevedildo". I have no explanation for this. [1/91]

Mike Christie: Thanks for *Sglodion 2*. I'm sure I would have enjoyed it anyway, but the fact that nice Mr Kincaid once made me review a Whitley Strieber for *Vector* added enormously to my pleasure. It wasn't *Communion* or *Majestic*—it was the second one, whatever that was called. I have expunged everything about the book from my mind, with the exception of the sensation of awe I had, while reading it, that such incandescent gormlessness could ever be printed.

[*Transformation*. You overpraise it. DRL]

One thing about Westercon 43 that surprised me (compared with British conventions, anyway) was the ease with which one could get free admission. Sherry got in free on the grounds of having made some professional sales, and I got in free on the grounds of being the spouse of a guest. Our guest membership numbers, sequenced independently from the hoi polloi, were 149 and 150. I hereby challenge you to name 150 people in Britain you think are worthy of a free membership to anything....

Something that I failed to notice about the convention was the preponderance of nerds wandering around dressed as Jabba the Hut that I had been led to expect by years of scornful Brit reviews of US cons. Sure, the nerds were there in force. But so were they at the last couple of Eastercons I attended. Maybe Britain has finally managed to pay off the transatlantic nerd deficit, and only my relatively short fannish memory prevents me from remembering halcyon nerd-free days at conventions in Manchester, attended by seventy-six trufans with neither costumes nor fashion sense. Maybe.

One last, delicious comment from Bruce Sterling I shall relay without editorializing. We were talking about politics, and Bruce dismissed both capitalism and Marxism as utterly dead, spent forces, saying that nobody with an ounce of intelligence could be a Marxist these days. I asked him what the flaws in Marxism were, that he felt were so utterly irreparable, and he replied (I paraphrase from memory): "I don't know all that much about Marxism. But I don't need to—you don't need to study phlogiston to know it's wrong."

[PO Box 330, Hutto, TX 78634, USA, 7/90]

Diana Wynne Jones: I don't think I've ever been so ill so long and so bizarrely. I mean, I know ridiculous things are always happening to me, but who else in your acquaintance gets themselves *poisoned* by a homoeopath? My agent kept ringing me up and protesting, "But they mix it with water so many times that they don't give you *enough* to poison you!" Yes, they did. Did you know that in the back-to-front world of homoeopathy, the *more* times you dilute a given poison, the *more potent* it is said to be? The one I went to kept bleating that she knew I was likely to react strongly, so she only gave me a very low potency—in other words, she gave me quite a hefty dose of some obscure poison, and my body, being unacquainted with Looking Glass World medicine, promptly went on the blink for three months. I feel quite sorry for it.

[9 The Polygon, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 4PW, 4/91]

After the BBC's uncritical homoeopathy programme, Bob Shaw dropped a wide-eyed letter to the *Radio Times* asking if, by the theory of Dilution Is Strength, you should give your kids twice as many pills as you would take yourself. He was severely dealt with. Any dilution made by a layman would not be a true homoeopathic dilution and would not count. (And the kids should get a half pill just as in real life.) I suppose it's necessary on commercial grounds to rubbish the approach of buying one (1) dose and dissolving this in a jug of distilled water to form a lifetime supply. Each time you took a swig and topped it up, the remaining fluid would become even more terrifyingly potent! It doesn't seem to work on gin, by the way.

Arnie Katz: I knew Whitley [Strieber] quite well during the years just before he blossomed as a writer of horror, fantasy and science fiction novels. We (Joyce and I) used to get together with them at least once a week for dinner. Whitley and I shared an interest in simulation boardgames, and we played regularly. We never had a fight, but Whitley's penchant for really infantile practical jokes eventually convinced Joyce and I to see the Striebers a lot less often.

I remember one conversation with Whitley that is, in retrospect, quite interesting. We got on the subject of hoaxes as a way to make money. I expressed the opinion that a bogus evangelical religion would be a good way to separate the gullible from their cash, and Whitley said that he thought he'd rather try a flying saucer hoax. I told him about the Shaver Mystery.

I saw him on television last night, on one of those tabloid-style news shows that are so popular in

the US. he retains the ability to tell an absolute untruth in a very convincing manner. His deadpan delivery was always superb, and he's getting really slick now. I think one of his secrets is that he never tries to disguise the obvious weaknesses of his story or her own credibility. He rushes to point them out and then, by minimizing them, conveys the impression that the objections aren't valid.

[330 S Decatur, Suite 152, Las Vegas, NV 89107, USA, 9/90]

Truly, all knowledge is in fanzines. After sharing another TV panel with Strieber, Ian Watson tells a fascinating tale of how the slickness lasted precisely as long as the cameras stayed live ... after which spitting, snarling and raving broke out in all directions. Ian himself had never before been called a bigoted lackey of the scientific establishment.

Joe McNally: I don't know if it's really within the scope of the language lessons, but I've been reading a book on Japanese comics (*Manga! Manga!* by Frederick L. Schodt) and came across the following comic titles, which prove once and for all that the little yellow sods are mad:

Fighting Mah Jongg! Blood-Spray Mah Jongg Tiles. No-Panty Mah Jongg—With the Tables Turned! The Wild Animal's Mah Jongg Tiles in Shinjuku. The Lewd Mah Jongg Devil. Wild Rider Mah Jongg Tiles at Sunrise.

The above are all, as you may have guessed, Mah Jongg comics.

Also: *No-Panty Angels. Perverted Flight of Love. Lolita Complex ABC's. Lewd Labia Diary. Lured by the Infinite Climax. Ascension to the Flower-Garden of Worm-Eaten Taboos. Women! Live for the Sacrificial Ripe Love! ... and finally ... Enema Rock Climbing.*

I feel that the last three may have lost a little in translation.

[106 Somerton Road, Belfast, BT15 4JG, 5/90]

Brian Stableford: Abi Frost's attempt to raise the cultural tone of *Sglodion* and add to its educational value is very welcome, and certainly requires the kind of high-powered intellectual response that I alone out of all your readers am qualified to provide. I have not had the good fortune to read the book to which she refers, but like all great critics I have long since reached the stage at which I can offer infallible judgments based on the most cursory of second-hand reports, and I can say without hesitation that Professor Koestenbaum's is a book whose revelations are long overdue.

There is, of course, nothing new about Koestenbaum's basic premise—that the act of literary creation (whether collaborative or not) is either an expression of or an evasive substitute for sexual intercourse. In his classic essay on "The Orgastic

Pattern of Fiction"¹ the eminent critic Robert Scholes long ago pointed out that "The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act," amplifying this statement with incontrovertible argument. ("What connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself.") Even Freud, in his early essay on "The Paths to Symptom Formation"², was shrewd enough to observe that men only take to writing fiction because of their inadequacy in attracting women, and that what they write is nothing but symbolically-cloaked masturbation fantasy. Koestenbaum, in referring these insights specifically to the phenomenon of writerly-collaboration, is merely—as it were—putting the icing on the cake (which he will then, if I read his argument correctly, both "have" and "eat").

Abi puts her finger on an issue of seminal importance when she calls attention to the fact that Professor Koestenbaum wrote this book *all by himself* (her italics!). Anyone who can follow the logic of his argument will be able to extend it easily to the realization that the activity of the commentator on literature is actually a species of voyeurism, and that the publication of one's commentaries is a kind of flashing—both of which practices are symptomatically connected with the inability of the critic to write fiction himself and thus (metaphorically and/or literally) achieve true orgasmic fulfilment. You will note that in saying this I am being exceptionally brave and honest, having myself been guilty of publishing the occasional work of criticism when my creative juices were—so to speak—not up to the task of generating fiction; but in my own defence I must point out that the bulk of this work has been done for reference books which have, in effect, been collaborations between dozens of people, some of whom have even been female. (I sometimes fantasize about writing the classic essay on "The Orgastic Pattern of Reference-Book Production", just as Professor Koestenbaum must be perennially tempted to write on the subject of "Postal Trysts and Post-Coital Tristes: The Symbolic Significance of the Letter-Box in Collaborations by Mail(s)".)

Of course, the truly *amazing* thing about Koestenbaum's observations on literary collaboration as an evasion or expression of sexual feeling is what it reveals to us about the sad state of modern marriage. There are hundreds of male writers married to female writers *who never collaborate with them at all!* It is a dreadful and rather shocking thought that the only successful marriage in the entire history of the sf community has been that between Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore. (Those of

you who would immediately wish to spring to the defence of L.Sprague de Camp should bear in mind (a) that most of his collaborations with Catherine de Camp have been on works of non-fiction rather than fiction; and (b) that L.Sprague de Camp also belongs to that suspiciously large group of sf writers who have collaborated with the long-deceased Robert E.Howard.)

In keeping with the true spirit of the exercise I should like to add my own brief list of suggested essay topics to those put forward by Abi:

(a) Examine in the light of Professor Koestenbaum's thesis Harlan Ellison's *Partners in Wonder* project.

(b) What connections are there between the "unnamable" and "unspeakable" aspects of the Cthulhu Mythos, H.P.Lovecraft's career as a "reviser" of other people's stories and the sinister passion which other writers subsequently acquired for "finishing" his fragmentary works?.

(c) Discuss the contention that the popularity of Shared World anthologies is a key indicator of the moral health of a society.

(d) If Professor Koestenbaum is right (and who can doubt it?) what sort of person is a copy-editor?

References: (1) In *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979). (2) In *Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (1917).

[113 St. Peter's Road, Reading, RG6 1PG, 4/90]

Andy Sawyer: The rising in wrath of True Believers in the UFO field made me sweat with relief that my review of Jenny Randles's *Abduction* and Timothy Good's *Above Top Secret* in *Paperback Inferno* resulted only in a letter from a Mr K.Lake objecting to my disrespect for Top Government Officials and another missive describing the writer's genuine sighting of a UFO. The sweat poured down my back in gallons as I realized that I, too, had nearly become involved ... waiting at the bus stop the other day I had a Really Terrific idea for a story regarding a writer who makes a lot of money and fame from Alien-Abduction stories being carried off by aliens who want a share of the copyright. This was obviously a telepathic message from someone, but after reading the account of M'Learned Friends' involvement in the UFO world I shall wait until I've made a vast amount of money before I start this squib in case it explodes in my face.

Or to be serious (well, the idea for the story *did* happen, though I'm not proud of it)—what a bunch of wankers.

The moral is, I suppose, be it never so daft, a UFOlogist will quote it as evidence in his next book. Perhaps we will see in the next edition of *Majestic* words to the effect that "This book is fiction based on fact—except for the bits which are fiction based on fiction". I suppose I have to admit that I didn't notice the extract from your *An Account ...* despite

being only too gleefully familiar with the business. I can only put this down to the fact that Strieber's rivetting prose and command of suspense, together with the creation of a Really Original Story, had put me to sleep when the page count had barely reached double figures.

[1 The Flaxyard, Woodfall Lane, Little Neston, South Wirral, Cheshire, L64 4BT, 5/90]

The Langford UFO follies can now be laid to rest. The paperback *Majestic*, of which I did not receive a complimentary copy, has a discreet acknowledgment to my *An Account of a Meeting with Denizens of Another World*, implying that formal permission for use of the material was (a) asked and (b) granted ... neither of which ever actually happened. *Locus*, I hear, ran a story on all this in August 1990 and added that dear old Whitley Strieber had apologized. To whom, I wonder? Certainly not me.

James White: Yesterday I received a cover pull of *The Silent Stars Go By*, a big novel which the Del Rey head-eater says is my best book yet. It is an alternate Irish history/interstellar colonization/first contact/religious fanaticism/etc. plot (if you're going to mix plots you might as well mix them all) that has a Vinnie di Fate hardware cover and a back-cover blurb that isn't too bad—except that it is headed in big type with "When Irish Spies Are Smiling". Aaaargh! Normally I am the most mild-mannered of men, so why is it I keep looking at it and thinking *Kill! Kill! Kill!*

[2 West Drive, Portstewart, Co.Londonderry, BT55 7ND, 4/91]

James, I think, wouldn't mind my mentioning that although his eyesight makes it hard to cope with ordinary print, 18-point text from a laser printer is just fine. Fans with high-tech equipment please note.

Paul Wrigley: Like, *metaphysical man Dept:* I see that Peter Nicholls attacks my attack on his review of a book by Gene Wolfe (this is an infinitely recursive string, do not bother trying to find the beginning, it probably lies in some Borgesian labyrinth). How brilliantly postmodernist of him to eschew the normal practice of following up in the *same* journal [*Foundation*], but to use a totally unconnected fanzine instead! Is there no end to his genius? Well, yes actually. Like his interpretation of my letter in *F43*. Unfortunately I do not "clearly think ... [he is] a hireling of the scientologists", (anybody with a large and guaranteed income deserves *some* respect), a comment he obviously meant as a joke, but which reveals that he doesn't realize I wrote to *Foundation* partly because I like his work on Wolfe but thought that for once he had let himself go too much. My actual deconstruction of his

comment (which will point out that the major reason for the letter was to take up a substantial point that the great PN had raised which deserved further discussion: needless to say, there was none) will not appear here, of course, but in an obscure environmental magazine published by an aging hippie in the Peruvian Andes.

[302 Walker Bldg, University Pk, PA 16802]

The reference to L.Ron's merry men reminds me of a US newspaper report passed on by indefatigable seeker after truth Martin Morse Wooster. This reveals a new horror of the Gulf War, an aspect so grim that British media couldn't bring themselves to cover it. Seems that Bridge Publishing did their bit by rushing 10,000 copies of the *Mission Earth* dekalog to comfort Our Boys in the Gulf. Caught between these and the threat of chemical weapons, the troops had no hesitation in storming Iraq.

Quickies

Greg Bear: "Ah, you've compromised yourself now! Running around with those filthy UFO people, raking in the heaps of money from perverting your imagination and pandering to the tastes of such as Whitley Strieber." **Mark Bertenshaw:** "I have seen that you have written several books. What has happened to them? Do they ever make paperback? Do they actually sell?" (*Whimper....*) **Ken Cheslin:** "Remember the old answer to an exam question, 'The hydra progresses by putting its testicles on the ground and walking on them?'" **Abigail Frost** on Brian Aldiss's 65th birthday party: "They hauled on a long queue of Aldiss mates, family etc: indeed, you missed a chance to meet Kingsley Amis, who rather unfortunately looks in the flesh as if he's been stuffed and wax-polished." **Neil Gaiman** on *Good Omens*: "We've won an award from the San Francisco Wiccans, and we're on the shortlist for the Deo Gracias Christian Book Award...." **Ferry Pratchett:** "I remember, as a journalist, patiently investigating the claims of some apparently perfectly normal people who had, once you worked out the details of the glowing hemisphere that they had seen, watched the sun set." **Chris Priest:** "I find the whole business of fax only marginally less irritating than David Wingrove's beard." **Roz Kaveney,** applauding the "linguistic inventiveness" of the reputedly triff film *Heathers*: "After 'Well, fuck me gently with a chain-saw,' it all merged into one delicious blur." **David Redd:** "I cancelled my standing order to *Locus* when one issue had three different full-page ads for three different Piers Anthony novels. A man can only stand so much, etc." **A Fairly Senior RAF Spokesman:** "We don't know what it was, but can be quite sure that it definitely was not a UFO." **We Also Heard From:** ever so many of you.

Infinitely Improbable

Hazel's Language Lessons. "Gaelic: *sgriob*, the itchiness that overcomes the upper lip just before taking a sip of whisky; and *sgiomlaireachd*, the habit of dropping in at mealtimes." (Mike Christie)

Thoughts on a Convention Panel. "In the midst of my anecdote a sudden misgiving made me shiver;—had I told them about this Goat before? And then as I talked there gaped upon me—abyss opening beneath abyss—a darker speculation: when goats are mentioned, do I automatically and always tell this story about the Goat at Portsmouth?" (Logan Pearsall Smith)

That Which May Not Be Said. Helicon, the 1993 Eastercon (Jersey), produces a discussion fanzine called *HdF*. I winced a bit at issue 2, which pondered the "lack of authors" at the last Jersey con, and made a point of exempting Bob Shaw from "criticism" because he had a solid excuse for non-attendance (being in Australia). Any author who merely lacked time and/or money is presumably wide open to this "criticism". I wrote in and begged for a trifle more tact in future. Handing me the next issue, bossman Tim Illingworth said with a smile, "Of course we didn't print that part of your letter...."

Award Notes. "Australian fans were this year asked to nominate the Ditmar [award] categories they thought most desirable, at the same time nominating candidates for this year's voting; a new category that I thought of ('Best Fannish Cat') received the most nominations and should thus (you'd suppose) be instated for ever; but Sydney fans are not amused; democracy all very well, they say, but not if people are silly; no Fannish Cat Ditmar next year (when Sydney has the Natcon)—or thereafter." (Yvonne Rousseau)

Hazel's Language Lessons. Spanish: *Guia del Dragonstopista Galactico al Campo de Batalla Estalar de Covenant en el Limite de Dune: Odisea Dos*, meaning, "Bloody hell, Langford's parodies have appeared in translation." Not many people will know that the Spanish for H.Ellison's technical literary term "bugfuck" is, apparently, *mosquito impertinente*.

Arthur C. Clarke Award. Advance words of prophesy came from awesome TAFF candidate Abigail Frost: "We have put the fix in for the Clarkes, on the basis of which winner will most benefit the community as a whole. On this criterion, it's Banks (whose win would mean a decent drink-up—just picture it: editor Jarrold calls for trebles all round; Banks calls for same; Jarrold feeling unmanned calls for quadruples.... Book your hospital bed now). Second runner is Mary Gentle, who we reckon will have a party; definite last is C.Greenland ('Goodness me, I've won. How nice. Gosh.')." So much for all-potent, behind-the-scenes manipulators. C.Greenland won. (Congrats, Colin....)

Hazel's Language Lessons. "Cantonese is very

sparse and they borrow words whenever they need them. The following is now the official Cantonese for Sergeant's Mess Mini-Bus: *Sah-Jin Mes-Si Mi-Ni Bah-Si* (tones High-low High-low High-low High-low—very sing-song). This is *not* China Coast pidgin but Cantonese, since before the British they did not have words in their language for any of these particular objects, including 'bus'." (Garry Kilworth)

TransAtlantic Fan Fund. You should of course vote for my nominee Abigail, who knows about semicolons. This information may come Too Late, in keeping with the established TAFF tradition that nominators are totally bloody useless. Er, I may have been a bit quiet (busy, broke, depressed), but the fabled plastic lemon must surely go to co-nominator Ian Sorensen, who (a) published an issue of his world-renowned fanzine *Contunner* with perfect timing at Easter, and (b) did not mention TAFF....

A Reassurance. David Pringle, editor of the supremely wonderful "popular fiction" magazine *Million* (advt.), recently sent round this circular announcing the mag's tremendous popularity, its immense critical success, and a one-third cut in most contributors' rates. "Well, if you're in financial trouble...." one author reputedly began. "No, no, no," came the confident reply: "Absolutely no financial difficulty at all." Exit puzzled author.

Woolgathering. In our debate on whether Welsh sheep resemble sheep, Lucy Sussex pushes the Aussie view: "Oz sheep tend to the merino breed, which is the size of a Great Dane, with tiny ears and wool which covers the bod in a six-inch grubby layer. As a twelve-year-old in the UK, I was surprised by my first sight of a Welsh mountain sheep, which I took to be a Welsh mountain goat. It zotted in front of my dad's car, going up a precipitous slope on the other side of the road as if it had suckers on its hooves. Very impressive."

ConFiction Moments. I was talking to Suzy Charnas in the convention centre when suddenly

Algis Budrys popped out of a nearby toilet. He looked around bemusedly and popped straight back in. "Forgot his E-meter," I heard my mouth say. "YOU MUST ACT MORE RESPONSIBLY, LANGFORD," declaimed Suzy, straining to look serious. "YOU MUST NOT SAY THESE THINGS EVEN IF THEY ARE FUNNY." Promises of reform were made. Again.

Hoarewatch. Certain faraway fans have expressed horror at Martin Hoare's plight since his pancreas crashed last year and he was warned off the booze for the rest of his life. Fear not! Struggling free from intensive care, intravenous drips and tiny sips of water once an hour, Martin resourcefully got a second opinion and was reassured that after two years he'd be allowed a little beer. Two years, he calculated, would practically have elapsed by December 1990: "he a pity not to get smashed for Christmas". Relativistic effects then took over, and within three weeks I found him hurling back Extra Strong Special Kidney Bane because the pub's ordinary bitter was off.... That was all a year ago, and his pancreas has only hauled him back to the hospital once. I think this is called a charmed life.

L.Ron Hubbard's Fans of the Future is soon to be launched! Learn to do fanzines real good! In short sentences! Learn to spell bhetter! *Sglodion* is proud to print an extract from the coming prospectus:

"If you care about the presentation of your fanzine, you'll want to come. To our punctuation workshop. Not quite sure where to put that? Comma or semi-colon? Leave it. To our experts. You may be lacking. In confidence, after just one session you'll never again feel yourself. Paralysed by the distinction between a subordinate clause and a hanging participle, you'll face the fannish pedants. With a cheery smile—never again! Will your carefully-crafted phrases be sabotaged by a random scattering of ill-judged stops? Yes. You will be a master of Punctuation of the Future!"

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