

A Propos de Rien

For the August 2005 mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association by Jim Caughran, 43 Dingwall Ave, Toronto Ontario M4J 1C4, Canada; email address is caughranJim at gmail dot com. Dingbats are Monotype Sorts, chosen randomly.

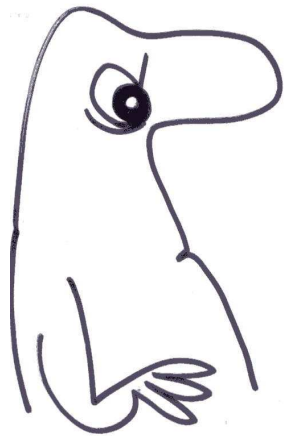
Reading and sauntering and lounging and dozing, which I call thinking, is my supreme happiness.

David Hu

I read a book or two.

Future: Tense. The Coming World Order. Gwynne Dyer makes a convincing case that the war in Iraq is simply the United States flexing its muscles, sending a signal to the world that the old rules no longer apply and the US is in charge. Europe, except for Tony Blair, did not accept this. And the sooner the US loses, says Dyer, the more likely we are to avoid another world war.

It definitely had little to do with a “war on terror”. Hussein had no special weapons, and the secular Iraq government was anathema to the Islamists. As well, it



was a propaganda victory for them, the sort of attack they hoped to provoke but which the US avoided in Afghanistan.

(Dyer minimizes terror as a real danger: more Americans are killed each month by gun incidents than were killed in the WTC.)

Since the United Nations was established, a little bit of law has applied to war. Aggressive war is “illegal”, though of course, might makes right. There were mixed results, but at least countries had to justify their attacks through means such as the Tonkin Gulf incident, and some smaller countries may have been dissuaded from attacking their neighbours by the threat of UN intervention. GW Bush’s Iraq war changed all that; the US will make war when it sees it to be in its interests.

Dyer sees the world situation without UN control as similar to what happened before WW1, with alliances pushing toward an Orwellian world of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. China and perhaps India will approach the US’s economic power, changing the pecking order. The US dollar is currently supported despite the US trade and budget deficits because it would cost others too much if it fell; if it should fall anyway, the reaction in the US could be to blame the rest of the world.

There are too many variables to be even as tentatively certain as Dyer. Epidemiologists and climatologists are nervous about prospects; a virulent flu or a change of ocean level could radically change prospects. Some other incident or regime change could shake things up dramatically. But with the

neo-conservatives in charge, Pax Americana is dangerous to international peace.

Neal Stephenson, *Quicksilver*. Huge book (925 pages, small type), of intrigue during 1650–1700. This is volume 1 of a trilogy (of which I'm now reading the 2nd volume), and moreover is continued in the twentieth century by *Cryptonomicon*, which was another huge book. Leibnitz and Newton are major characters, Pepys, James II, etc., minor characters. Daniel Waterhouse was Newton's (fictional) roommate when he was a student at Cambridge. Waterhouse, a member and official of the Royal Society, is also the court Puritan for Charles II and James II. The narrative includes the Plague Year (1665) and the London fire (1666), and notes that Puritans expected the apocalypse in 1666 after all of that. Add a trip through Europe with Eliza and half-cocked-Jack, as Eliza goes from slavery to nobility.

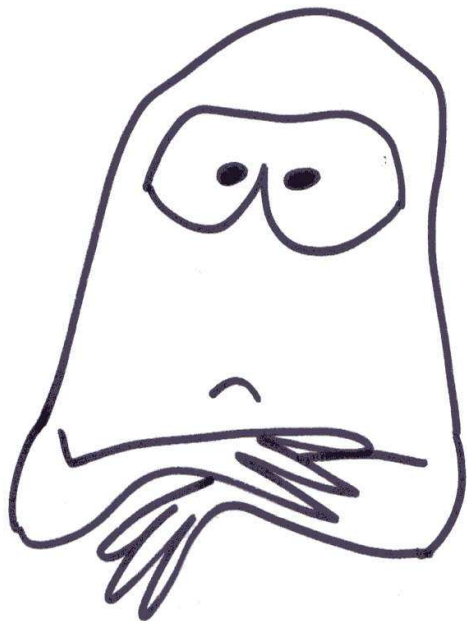
I tried to look up Pepys' Diary for an incident involving him, to discover that Pepys' last entry was conveniently a year or two before.

Well-written, action and suspense is maintained, and he fuses history with the fiction well. And consider this passage from a letter to Louis XIV:

Of my journey to the Hague, much could be written in a vulgar and sensational vein, if I felt that I could better serve your majesty by producing an entertainment. But it is all beside the point of this report. And as better men than I have sacrificed their lives in your service with no thought of fame, or of reward beyond a small share in the glory of la France, I do not think it is meet for me to relate my tale here; after all, what an Englishman (for exam-

ple) might fancy to be a stirring and glorious adventure is, to a gentleman of France, altogether routine and unremarkable.

I arrived in the Hague on the 18th of October and reported to the French embassy, where M. le comte d'Avaux saw to it that what remained of my clothing was burned in the street; that the body of my manservant was given a Christian burial; that my horse was destroyed so that he would not infect the others; and that my pitchfork-wounds and torchburns were tended to by a French barber-surgeon who dwells in that city.



Zombies of the Gene Pool, Sharyn McCrumb. Fun because of the fannish references, not great otherwise. The mystery only unfolds in the last few chapters, and is solved almost immediately without any suspense. While Laney might be offended, Laney is dead. I don't see why there were reports of people affronted.

Word Freak, by Stefan Fatsis. Good book. Partly a study of tournament Scrabble, partly a study of some of the

top players, partly a story of his own determination to join the expert ranks. Well-written throughout. It had a motivating effect on me; I would read some of it, then put it aside to study words.

Salt, by Adam Roberts (a penname for Adam Charles, according to the library). Read on Hlavaty's recommendation of the author, in *NICE DISTINCTIONS*. Two cultures, as far apart as they can be. One is an anarchist camp, altogether too much like that of *The Dispossessed*, the other an overdrawn hierarchical, proprietarian, religious state.

Roberts creates a pretext for conflict--some of the Senaarians fathered children among the Alsists, and must have their paternal rights. The Alsists leave everything with the mothers, and, since they have no concept of anything but individual rights, respond to requests for access with a shrug that infuriates the heirarchists.

I found the ensuing war very depressing. While the Senaarians are expected to Follow



the Leader and Raise the Flag and so forth, the Alsists also went for revenge, the usual game of "The other side are inhuman and need to be taught a lesson." There was probably an anti-war message, but I was more anti-war than it, and didn't see it. Writing is very good, lyrical and descriptive. (LeGuin did the plot better)

Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrel, by Susanna Clark. 770 pages of well-written book, amazing first novel, about the reestablishment of English magic in the early 19th century. Very good. It will be good to see more of Ms Clark. Interesting was the use of magic to aid Wellington in defeating Napoleon's troops. I half expected a spell at the end to erase all memories of magic, leading to the present time.

Dan Brown, ***Digital Fortress***. Confusing set of attributes. The writing was clumsy. Initial premise is ridiculous, and there were several errors along the way. Plotting is tight and tense. The bastard kept me reading.

Peter Robinson writes good novels that happen to be crime novels. ***Cold is the Grave*** (2000) is another Inspector Banks novel. It undoes his tension with Chief Constable Riddle, which must have been too limiting for Robinson. The murder is, perhaps, inevitable, but the developments are not and the ending is surprising and tight.

Film: ***Walk on Water***, an Israeli film about a Mossad agent. It started out with assassination of a Hamas leader, and I thought that the Mossad was just helping to make the whole world blind. But he was more complex than

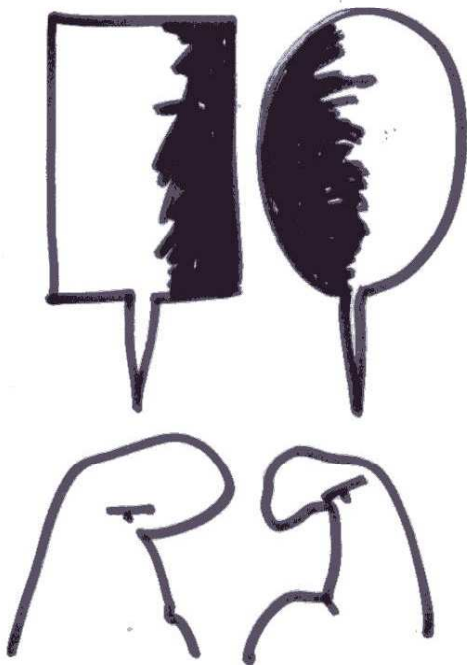
that. Good story with a lot of twists; very well done. Characters were very well done.

Film: **The Aviator**, about Howard Hughes. Amazing what can be accomplished with a large pile of money. Hughes' compulsions made him successful, but also nuts. It was interesting to see a young Katherine Hepburn—Cate Blanchett didn't look a lot like Hepburn, but sounded very much like her. I suspect the facts took a few detours—it seemed to be implied at the end that Hughes quickly went nuts, but he went on for several years in charge of Hughes Aerospace. The list on Wikipedia of actresses and actors that Hughes bedded is amazing. I particularly liked Hughes beating up on Senator Brewster, who thought he would beat up on Hughes. I wonder if that part is realistic.

The CBC broadcast a radio adaptation of **The Dunwich Horror**, by HP Lovecraft. It was recorded at the Shaw Festival, in Niagara on the Lake. The fear seemed well managed in the play, with multiple narrators overlapping each other for effect. Something else was happening on the stage, however; the audience laughed at odd moments, not only when the narrative was overdrawn. I don't know what happened; there are some things I was not meant to know.

But it was great to hear a good radio play once again.

Comments on comments on



May Mailing

Bob Sabella's excellent LIGHTENING seems to have taken a walk. I couldn't find it when I was writing comments. There was another mysterious zine, half-size pages three and four on each side, with no author listed on those pages. It, too, disappeared.

FOR FAPA—Lindsay

A world-wide housing bubble seems to be on. It makes it hard for people trying to buy a first house. Should interest rates go up, it might burst. ★ Amen to the perversity of paper and postage costs too high to make use of publishing tools. ↗ Memory hole became fmfzen, but most of the traffic is now on trufen (groups.yahoo.com/group/trufen/). ⇨ Term limits were a reaction to FDR having been President so long, when the Republicans got back into control of Congress.

Magazine Boxes: Good looking fan-zine; I like your colour photos.

FANALYSIS—Schaffer

THE CORPORATION pointed out that it was funded by corporations out for a buck. ♠ We can hope the Repubs get bitten by their economic and war policies, but if the effects are delayed, they could also bite a later Democratic administration.

OPUNTIA 56.1—Speirs

The Nazis thought Einstein's theories the epitome of Jewish science, and denied them. So they would be unlikely to clone Einstein, as in the Caselberg book. I met Einstein's son, once. He was an engineering prof at Cal.

Opuntia 56.3: What is it about mountain provinces or states that makes Social Credit, Reform / Conservative, or Republican parties thrive? ♣ Your remarks on the Internet sound like things

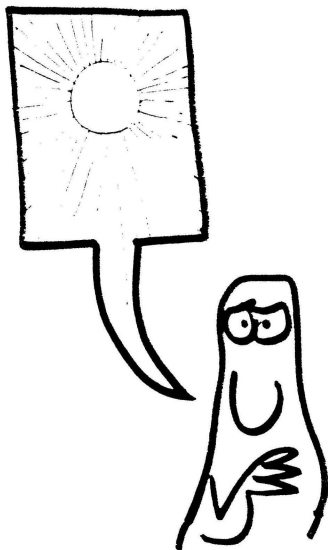
you've invented to justify your non-participation. ♠ I suppose that club-zines are slowly dying out, replaced by club websites. ♣ Bush increased the US government's oil supplies, and it was one factor among many which increased the price. ♣ I had never seen a resemblance between Sawyer and Ellison. Nor do I now. ♣ You don't have the Internet to update your clock: Before the Internet, there were programs that would compensate for fast or slow clocks by resetting the time every so often. They had to be trained that your clock might lose 4 seconds per day by your intervention. ♠ "Incidence of and risk factors for nodding off at scientific sessions" sounds like an IgNobel winner.

Thrilling Typewriter: "cover your [sales] territory so thoroughly that the competitors cannot break in." Surely this is discussing IBM and computers.

NICE DISTINCTIONS— Hlavaty

Is copying one feature enough to make a movie an adaptation of a book? I suspect that writers of these things bear tremendous pressure to make everything **main-stream**, even if it's far-out science fiction. Even if they were inclined to be faithful to a book they appreciate, their employers are not and can find a dozen other writers for a dime or so.

○ I read Adam Roberts's *Salt*, reviewed above. ▼ "A recent study has shown that abstinence 'education' is full of untruths. The Bush administration has demanded the right to use testimony obtained by tor-



REASSURANCE

ture. Lying to children and torturing people to get information have two things in common: They're morally repulsive, and they don't do what you want them to. That doesn't leave much." Yeah, but if you want to govern by keeping the populace in fear, those are good ways to show you're doing something. Even a morally repulsive, ineffective something.

ND9: Wilson: "I strongly believe that a world 'external to', or at least independent of, my senses exists in some sense." Was it Bertrand Russell who reported a solipsist disappointed that he could not persuade others of his views? → I heard a lecture by Leonard Susskind recently, titled "Cosmic Landscape: String Theory

and the Illusion of Intelligent Design". He has a book coming out soon with the same title. Basically, the tautologous form of anthropism is enough: if the universe weren't such that we can live in it, we couldn't live in it. There are about 10^{500} possible universes, popping into and out of existence. Ours has constants which allow for intelligent life, but other universes may not.

BEN'S BEAT—Indick

By golly, Dunwich Horror fanfic! It's good!



COMMENTS COMMENCE—Vick

Someone said AIDS was a self-inflicted disease, hinting that only the immoral would catch it (those *other* people). In Africa, ordinary people have AIDS and have to live or die with it.

KING BISCUIT—Lichtman

Trout are predators, as ospreys are. I guess we have no identification at all with insects. ★ Another possibility for sites that require passwords is the password sharing service, www.bugmenot.com. I occasionally use it, though not for paid services. ☞ I hadn't realized that modern watches are capable of setting themselves from external time sources. I had long wished that watch programmers would include a compensating mechanism like that I mentioned to Speirs; it would not be difficult. (Calculate drift rate each time it's set and adjust when displaying the

time.) My current watch seems very accurate, however, and the need is not as strong.

APRIL—Morningstar

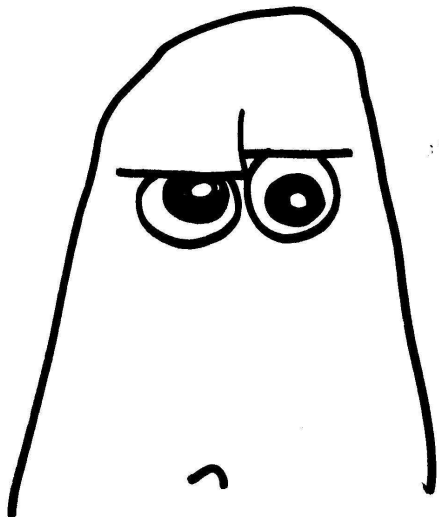
I miss the butterflies I saw as a child; with insecticides everywhere, there are few insects of any kind in the cities. Toronto recently made lawn sprays illegal, but it may be unenforceable.

SYNAPSE—Speer

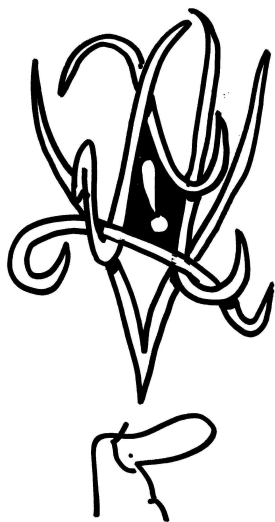
The anti-terrorist acts in both US and Canada are infringements on citizens' rights. The panic after the WTC justified just about anything, in the minds of the right. ▼ The concept of a single income tax rate is anathema to liberals, but it should be given some thought. No one suggests taxing low income people, so in effect it depends on a threshold and a rate above the threshold. If the threshold is, say, the average wage, and if all individual income were taxed without all the nonsense, it could be a good system.

The rate would be enough to cover governmental expenses and a small payment on the national debt. Most people would then avoid the yearly battle. If I were dictator, those corporations which reduced their prices to match would pay no tax. (Money leaving the country would be taxed.) If liberals realised how regressive corporate taxes are, they would demand their abolition. Current tax law is designed to benefit accountants and those wealthy enough to employ them. ☆ What do we call the chief executive of a province? Well, depending on who it is and what he's done lately, we might call him quite a few things. ☆ Minority governments have to make coalitions, and a centrist (read "slightly-right") government may be forced to social progress to carry along a lefter party. Thus the current Canadian minority government may pass national day care legislation. Or not. → "Ideal measurements in base 12": I didn't notice your extra fingers; show me next time we meet. ➤ One water

knob (or lever, preferably) for flow and temperature is better than hot/cold with flow implicit. Some showers have two knobs, for volume and temperature, but they are rare. → Molecular technology viruses: Nano-machines are supposed to course through (say) our arteries, cleaning them up and therefore avoiding



heart attacks. If some kid playing around creates a malevolent nano-machine, suddenly it could be much worse than a real virus. ➤ Canada's unemployment insurance is quite good. Immigration rebalances the age profile of the population, and younger people can pay taxes to support us retired people. → It's Girl Guides in Canada; I don't know if there are Campfire Girls. ☹ UPS=Uninterrupted Power Supply, battery plus inverter which will allow you to power down gracefully if the electricity fails. "When the UPS senses it's on battery power and that the internal battery's running down, it can send a shutdown command to the OS, which then tries to close running apps and save data, as best it can. That way, when the UPS battery finally dies and the PC loses all power, it's already off-line with your data and files safe," says Fred Langa. * Wind turbines change wind patterns. If we took *all* our power from the wind, it would change them a lot. We're not about to, however. ➤ Exis-



old man in the sky, watching sparrows and eavesdropping on our private thoughts, nor a celestial Santa Claus. I do believe in god as a metaphor for human goodness, and some other interpretations. ➡ Eliminating “really”: Mark Twain’s advice for “very” was, “Substitute damn every time you're inclined to

tence of god:
gods vary
among tree
spirits, magical
idols, protec-
tors of a people,
etc. I don't see
how you can
pronounce on
the existence of
god without
knowing what
kind of god
you're talking
about. I don't
believe in god
as a bearded

write very; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

LOFGEORNOST—Lerner

Outrageous that US POW prisons allow torture just so that enlisted people can get a sense of power from humiliating others. Outrageous that torture is allowed at all. ☒ “Van Loon” ought to be catalogued under *both* V and L; the object is to make his works findable.

FELINE MEWSINGS—Tutihasi

You tease us: “We saw some sort of purse snatching happening.” “Murray Moore gave his speech, which was strange.” Some details would help.

ALPHABET SOUP—Stevens

A second Fapan notes that the *Portrait of Dorian Grey* may apply to Silverberg.

✧ “Police officers odder than fans” Odd in different ways? ✧ “Wet in Los Angeles” Here in the frozen North, it’s been damned hot, more than 30 Celsius for about three weeks, and forecast to continue. ✧ I had a miserable time in high school, and have never gone to a reunion. ✧ Dumas “contracted for a novel and then sub-contracted to another writer for a lesser amount.” Something similar seems to be happening with science fiction novels, though the novel is usually billed as “by Well-Known Author and Lesser Author”. But sometimes the contractee is mentioned in small print on the back of the title page.

TARGET: FAPA—Eney

Many people turned out to raise Cain at the Republican convention, but they got little press. ✧ Hippies in 2004? What a concept! ▼ I liked your “Where did those yoyos learn aircraft recognition?”

VOICE OF THE HABU—Wells

Good on yer for getting a job. ● Asperger’s has a range; at some point it becomes a disorder.

ROAD WARRIOR—Feller

Enjoy your new car. I had expected to drive my 1998 Volvo (my 7th Volvo) for a long while, but I had to consider the prospect of putting some money into it. So when I received a chunk of my parents’ estate, I ran out and spent my inheritance on a new car. My Prius is scheduled for delivery August 17. I ordered it the first of June. As Priuses go, that isn’t a bad wait, but for right now, I’ve sold the Volvo privately and have no car. To compensate, I’ve added a couple of pictures of Priuses to my screensaver pics of pulp covers, spiral galaxies, fam-

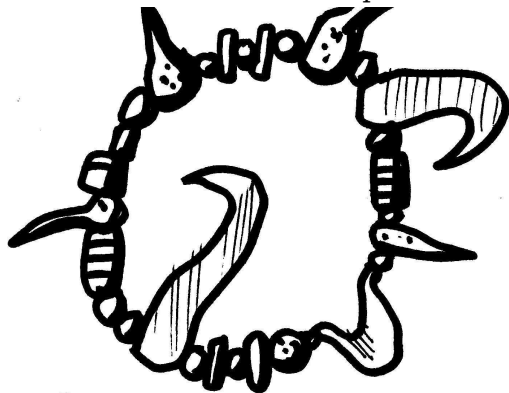
ily pictures and Rubens and Modigliani naked ladies. ■ Does ranking among hotel management companies mean anything if the company is growing anyway? ♥ A while ago, there was a report that the US may require passenger lists for flights that cross the US, but don't land, such as a flight from Toronto to Winnipeg. I don't know how or if it was resolved, but Air Canada was calculating the extra cost of going around the lakes. ♦ The trouble with going back in time and using future happenings as science fiction is that it would be too unbelievable.

EDGAR'S JOURNAL— Ogdens

Nice looking fanzine. → Summarizing mental illness in a page or two is probably futile. My depression is controlled by drugs; am I mad? ○ From your account, Talbot Mundy might have been considered mad, but he compensated. Finally.

FISH WRAP—Cantor

Certainty kills the quest for truth. Religious fanaticism is the antithesis of science. And of religion; blasphemously they tell god how to do its business. ☆ “Canada is cold.” I wish it were; these last few weeks have been brutal. → After my first cataract operation, of which I had been quite scared, I wished the other eye would go so it could see as well as the one with the implanted lens.



Eventually it did, and I now have one eye that sees close and one that sees far, and rarely need my glasses.

SWEET JANE—Eklund

Without a typewriter, I have filled in forms by scanning the form, using it as a background (or watermark) and adjusting the print to fit. ☆ “Frig” used to be used in the phrase, “Don’t frig with it!” Now it may be supplanted. “Holy shit” is still current.

ANNEX—Searles

Enjoyed the Stoddard obit. ☆ Quite correct; junk mail is not new to the Internet.