



**ARE YOU  
STILL HERE?**

# ARE YOU STILL HERE?

March 2009

Cover illustration by Ann Green

## Dinosaur Talk

*Steve Green*

When Randy Byers first suggested I put together a selection of my fan-writing over the past thirty-plus years, as part of my candidature for this year's TAFF race, I really had no idea how many dead trees I'd end up wading through. If I'd manage to sell a fraction as many words during my on-off freelancing career, I'd probably be living in a stately home by now, like Sir Percy Blakeney, or Lord Peter Weston.

The material gathered here originally appeared in a wide variety of publications, ranging from traditional sf fanzines (*Apparatchik*, *Zoo Nation*, *Prolapse*, *The Drink Tank*, *Procrastinations*, *Terminus Borealis Times*) and apazines (*Omega*, *Gonzo*) through slightly more "sercon" publications (*Critical Wave*, *Matrix*) to semi-pro magazines (*Flesh & Blood*, *Mansplat!*), and its tone reflects that (*Mansplat!*, for instance, was a highbrow Seattle freesheet promoting "bathroom litter-ature for men", whilst *Prolapse* is so scurrilous, it's recently had to assume a new identity).

I'd like to thank the following for support past and present on this project: Bill Burns & eFanzines, Randy Byers, Kevin Clarke, John Coxon, Harvey Fenton, Chris Garcia, Jeff Gilbert, Victor Gonzalez, Andy Hooper, Carl Juarez, Phil Plumly, Martin Tudor, Peter Weston and Pete Young -- not forgetting Greg Pickersgill, whose leftfield query at Novacon 38 fortuitously provided its title.

This entire endeavour is, of course, dedicated to Ann, who spent more than twenty-five years as my ultimate editor. I miss her company and counsel more than mere words can express.



## Go West, ~~Young~~ Old Fan

This year's ballot form for the TransAtlantic Fan Fund, including both my and Tom Womack's platforms, can be downloaded over at [taff.org.uk](http://taff.org.uk). Voting closes 19 April.

## Future Tense

[published by Intervention, 1995]

We have seen the future, and it was last Tuesday. For those of us in the science fiction community who reached adolescence post-Sputnik and pre-Challenger, the technological revolution currently sweeping our culture - of which Toffler's communications-driven 'Third Wave' is the most relevant here - is a bizarre mix of the disquietingly unknown and the alarmingly familiar. Every kid who caught *Dick Tracy* or *Thunderbirds* knew mobile telephones would arrive one day, albeit not built into wristwatches; we just never imagined what a bloody nuisance they'd become, or how deep an intrusion into our privacy they'd become.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. As sf fans, we embrace the myriad possibilities the third millennium has to offer, yet recognize that the reality is unlikely to be as spectacular as our own visions of tomorrow. The computer upon which I'm typing this editorial is far more powerful than the steam-driven devices which took mankind to the moon, yet it is now 23 years since last we walked its surface - and a disinterested American public complained on that occasion when a live lunar transmission replaced a re-run of *I Love Lucy*.

Such indifference exposes NASA's failure to convey the true message of the Apollo missions. For all the talk of Cold War one-upmanship and technological spin-offs, the so-called 'space race' was our century's Great Adventure, the first step towards fulfilment of the Science Fiction Dream.

Little wonder, then, that those of us who once gazed across a quarter-million miles of vacuum upon members of our own species feel most bitter about that dream's betrayal. We should be reaching for the stars; instead, we reach for guns and squander human life in tribal squabbles over handfuls of dirt.

## The Legions of Entropy

[Procrastinations, 2008]

What exactly is the appeal of the zombie in contemporary cinema? Be they the brain-famished cannibals of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the shambling lost souls of Tourneur's *I Walked With a Zombie* or the crazed killing machines of Boyle's *28 Days Later*, there seems no end to the march of the resurrected across our cinema screens.



After all, it's not as if they're imbued with either the tragic alienation of the Frankenstein monster (English literature's first and greatest reanimated cadaver) or the shadowy eroticism of the vampire. Even the mummified adulterer Kharis solicits more sympathy from audiences than these personality-depleted icons of the horror genre.

But that, of course, lies at the unbeating heart of the zombie's mystique. Almost alone in our shared mythology, these creatures are totally devoid of self; they are without motivation or masterplan, the senseless personification of our own mortality. As fast as you run, whatever obstacles you place in their path, you can escape neither their frantic grasp nor the inevitability of your own demise.

The attraction for film-makers is rather more obvious. The restless undead offer a *tabula rasa* upon which virtually any theme can be explored, from a satirical broadside against American consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*) to quasi-Marxist condemnation of corporate genocide (*Zombie Creeping Flesh*).

In the hands of a gifted writer-director, they can illuminate the darkest recesses of the human mechanism and the social shells we build around ourselves; in a hack's, satiate our animalistic thirst for cheap thrills.

Zombies are the footsoldiers of chaos, the walking embodiment of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. With time, their contagion will spread throughout the globe, whereupon the twisted hunger which drives the corpse army will prove its own undoing. Only then will the dead rest again, and forever.

At the close, all is entropy.

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Q. How many fans does it take to change a lightbulb?

A. Thirteen. One to switch the bulb and two teams of six to start a fan feud over whether the first one did it properly.

[Gonzo, 1986]

“Oh by the way, you know in *Nutz* you say that for Pam (Wells) and Simon (Ounsley) you were the first actifan they ever met. Well, you were *my* first too, so that makes three! Is this the Steve Green Conspiracy Theory of Fandom...?”

[letter from Lilian Edwards, circa May 1984]

## Premature Burial

[*Zoo Nation*, 2005]

It would have made a headline case for *CSI: Birmingham*, although getting the chalk outline right could have been a bit of a bugger. Male torso, face down and flat out, surrounded by rectangles; even Mycroft's younger brother might have drawn a blank.

The truth was far simpler. Back when I lived in Britain's second city, and a year or three before matrimony forced me to clean up (most of) my bachelor lifestyle, I converted my great-grandfather's former bedroom into an office, replete with massive wooden desk, filing cabinet and bookshelves. For fannish ambience, there was also a fairly hefty Gestetner 466 duplicator, which at various points churned out issues of Martin Tudor's *Empties*, Paul Vincent's *Abdump*, Lesley Ward's *Dumble in the Works* and Tony Berry's *Eyeballs in the Sky*, as well as my own fanzines and apazines of the early 1980s. (It was Paul who began the rather dangerous tradition of rewarding my services with a bottle of Southern Comfort, and Martin the victim of the single occasion we foolishly opened the bottle *before* the print-run was finished -- see page 15 for the gory details.)

Anyhow, there was a healthy fanzine sub-culture in those days, and much of the material which slipped through my letterbox was dauntingly high in pagecount (Suffolk's Chuck Connor and Los Angeles' Marty Cantor could probably suck up a forest every month between them). I'd been active in various branches of fandom since the mid-'70s, and most of the material I'd accumulated was stored either in the attic there or back in my parents' home in Solihull (which Ann and I eventually bought in 1987, ensuring huge chunks of my adolescence never had to leave the building). The more recent stuff was allowed to pile up for future reference.

Ah yes, the pile. It resided directly behind my desk, between the two main bookcases, and by that long-ago summer had probably reached a height exceeding five feet. Like geological strata, it was reasonably easy to guess that any fanzine received six months ago could be located around nine inches down, whilst the more ancient stuff was level with your socks.

What I really didn't figure upon was the conflux between pre-WWII floorboarding and the bloody huge staples common in those days (photocopying, let alone A3 copying for ready conversion into A4 fanzines with stapling along the spine, was but a distant pipedream). Between the two, the stack behind the desk at which I religiously tapped away each night (after returning home from my day job at the local newspaper) had grown perilously unstable.

I have no idea what finally snapped the proverbial *camelus dromedarius*, as my mind was firmly focussed upon the stencil before me when this paper Aberfan began to shift. One moment, I was considering my response to the latest missive from the likes of Dave Langford or Pete Weston; the next, I caught a blow on the back of the head and found myself kissing the typewriter (didn't Raymond Chandler use that line once?).

As you've probably guessed, the incident didn't prove fatal, but it did leave me with a healthy respect for the dangers of being a fan (that, and once spending the early hours in the Novacon bar with Martin Smith). Indeed, as London seeks new games for the 2012 Money Pit, might I suggest Xtreme Fanning, featuring James "The Eagle" Bacon texting his latest conrep whilst airsurfing from thirty thousand feet perched atop a Corby trouser press? Proceeds to TAFF, of course.

## Film review: *Rawhead Rex* (1986)

[*Flesh & Blood*, 1998]

Towards the end of the 1980s, I engaged in an occasional running debate with both Clive Barker, whose eponymous 1984 short story forms the core of his second mainstream screenplay, and fellow author Ramsey Campbell upon the nature of the Monster in cinema.

Ramsey, true to the brooding and shadowy nature of his novels, held to the belief that atmosphere and subtle camerawork would always win over in-yer-face blood 'n' guts. Clive, on the other hand, argued the case for on-screen, no-holds-barred horror and pointed to his own movie *Hellraiser* as proof that it could indeed be pulled off. For my own part, I stood pretty much in Ramsey's camp and could always call upon two radically divergent movies as my own "evidence": Robert Wise's genuinely scary *The Haunting* (1963) ... and the laughable *Rawhead Rex*.

Whilst the original story is a paean to pagan supernatural, George Pavlou's second attempt to bring a Barker script to the screen swerves uncontrollably between farce and gore, failing utterly to hit the middle note which resonates through John Landis' *An American Werewolf in London*. Peter Litton, whose rubber masks had proved such a letdown in *Underworld* (1985), is unwisely recalled to bring the monstrous Rex to life, but the results raise more giggles than goosepimples.

Pavlou slipped, unmissed and unlamented, into deserved obscurity. Clive rang up his old university chum Doug Bradley and suggested he audition for the role of a demonic pincushion. The following year would indeed be a memorable one for British horror - but I still reckon Ramsey had a point.

# The Sharp End

[Omega, 1999]

Harold Wilson once claimed a week was a long time in politics; had he spent an hour on the stump with Baldrick, he'd have narrowed his timeline considerably.

It's not as if the bugger doesn't enjoy a walk. Fifteen-plus years old by our reckoning (pulled from beneath a passing car in November 1988, he was at least four then) and selectively deaf as a post, Baldrick (aka "The Fossil") bursts into a hairy flamenco whenever he spots his lead looming into view. Trouble is, it lasts as long as a Mayfly's teabreak.

This, mind you, is now irreparably intertwined with my current political sidebar. Once a member of the Ecology Party before it mutated into the Greens (no sniggering at the back, puh-lease), then (and still) a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (so sidelined, it seems, by the Reagan/Gorbachov circus that one - somewhat younger - fellow worker recently claimed never to have heard of CND), I finally took the party plunge a year or two back and became a card-carrying Liberal. (Yes, I do realise it's officially the Liberal Democrats these days, but no one in Olton - a Lib stronghold even pre-1974, when councilors didn't have to publicly declare their affiliations - was ever that convinced by Roy Jenkins and his Gang of Four).

The main drawback is that I let myself be talked into taking over one of the local newsletter routes (the previous volunteer having become too crumbly for the task). This wouldn't be so onerous if I were a Conservative or Labour supporter, but Liberals publish almost as regularly as Dave Langford - more so in the run-up to an election - and I frequently find myself lumbered with an issue fresh off the press before I've actually had a chance to drop off the one previous.

Baldrick, on the other hand, thinks these door-to-door distributions are the best invention since the bark. The moment he sees me reach for my trainers, he springs into semi-action, lethargically dragging himself across the carpet towards me, cleverly combining a purposefully nebulous sign of interest with the casual indifference of continental drift. After all, if Baldrick chooses to let me take him out for a walk, he wants to underline the fact that *he's* doing *me* the favour.

If only. Just before the May local government elections, I ended up with a bundle of leaflets to stuff into my neighbours' letterboxes. (At this point, I'll spare you all a lengthy discourse on the cretins who install said slots about three inches off the ground and compound this by fitting a wire brush immediately behind it tough enough to snare a cruise missile, let alone a humble duplicated flyer.)

Come Saturday night, shoulderbag stuffed and beer can packed (one of the boons of a semi-pro camera bag is the abundance of pockets), we hit the pavement. Baldrick does his customary war dance and I resign myself to his terrierist demands, much to the amusement of our next-door neighbours David and Chris (who, coincidentally, do the Liberal leaflet drop in our own road). Hey, it's only 150 or so houses, I tell myself.

Trouble is, my shaggy companion enjoys the chase far more than the catch. No sooner have we left our own road, Baldrick operates with as much enthusiasm as a tram which has taken a wrong turning and slipped the overhead wires. A block on, and I'm forced to unclip the lead and let him amble along in the background whilst I walk up folks' front paths. Eventually, even that's too much bother for the old scrote and he begins to catch up on the installment plan; the overall effect is like running full-motion video on a 286.

There's a danger of this changing, however, when I spot a couple of Labradors being escorted into view. In common with all small dogs, Baldrick exhibits a frothy-mouthed desire to assert his authority upon any four-legged beast with a head bigger than his entire body; it's genetic, almost Glaswegian. Eager to avoid bloody conflict and UN troops having to walk the streets of Olton, I scoop the hirsute horror up with my one free arm and head down the next path out of peril.

The woman in the house is watching me through her bay windows, particularly the juggling act I perform in order to prevent Baldrick plummeting Earthwards whilst simultaneously extracting the latest mailing from my bag to drop it into her porch.

Suddenly it struck me. For years, the Liberals' small membership size relative to the Tories and New Labour resulted in our being ridiculed as the party of "one man and his dog". And there was I, on the stump, hound underarm, the living embodiment of the joke. No wonder she viewed the entire operation with an expression of bemused condescension.

I wonder if the Monster Raving Loonies have any vacancies...

## **Science Fiction and Horror Prequels We Should Be Glad Were Never Made!**

*[Mansplatt!, circa 1998]*

When Hollywood realised Cassidy and the Kid had been sent to Boot Hill one film too early, it dusted off an old *Alias Smith and Jones* script to squeeze *Butch and Sundance: The Early Years* out its celluloid butt. And now George Lucas is down to his last billion, he's having to produce three more *Star Wars* movies to tell us a story to which we already know the

punchline. But at least we can count ourselves lucky the following dozen sf and horror projects never left the drawing board...

*Death Race 1990*  
*To the Devil an Ovum*  
*Six*  
*Blind Date of the Monster*  
*Pre-Teen Wolf*  
*The Mischievous Dead*  
*Voyage to the Bottom of the Dock*  
*Sunrise of the Still Quite Dead*  
*The Man Who Cheated Birth*  
*Two Days Before the Day After*  
*I Was an Infant Frankenstein*  
*Hollywood Chainsaw Girls-Who-Won't-Go-All-the-Way*

## **Notes to a Small Island: Nowt So Queer**

*[Terminus Borealis Times, 2000]*

Easter Sunday finds me standing at a Real Ale bar surrounded by bearded folk of generous proportions and curious fashion sense. No surprise there, then, you might think. Ah, but this is not Glasgow but Fareham, and the Gosport Folk Festival rather than 2Kon.

That said, fandom is well in evidence. Pete Wright has kindly chauffeured myself and Bruce MacDonald over from North End, whilst our genial host is Rabbi Ric Cooper, who confesses he kinda lost the previous day after a somewhat lubricated Friday staggered on till six the following morning (a typical "Novacon Saturday", he footnotes).

The lure this evening is Tom Robinson, whose work I've enjoyed immensely from the heady days of "2-4-6-8 Motorway" and "Glad to be Gay" through the jagged "War Baby" (the chart and critical smash which David Geffen bizarrely rewarded by dropping Tom from his label) to his more romantic material of the 1990s. He's joined by occasional collaborator Martyn Joseph, whose more overtly folk-oriented material reminds me of the early Don McLean (say, around the time of *Tapestry*, "recorded in occupied Berkeley") with maybe a dash of Ralph McTell and Barclay James Harvest.

It's a triffic gig. Martyn plays a thirty-minute set (including a cover of "Thunder Road", lifted from my favourite Springsteen album, the bleak and passionate *Nebraska*), then hands over to Tom for another half-hour before they break briefly to sell CDs and chinwag with the audience. Then it's back on stage for a couple of solo sets, before joining up to close the show.

Considering Tom's obviously suffering from a nasty chest infection, it's testament to his commitment to the festival that he and Martyn clock up a solid two-and-a-half hours between them (yet sadly still fail to find room for "Atmospherics", a singular omission also noted by Bruce).

Afterwards, I do the fanboy thing and get Tom to sign the newly-released CD of 1984's *Hope and Glory* (now rebranded *War Baby* and available in that format for the first time - with eight bonus tracks, including the jungle-beat 12" version of the eponymous hit). I get him to dedicate it to Ann: the tie-in tour was one of the first gigs we saw after getting married, and she had hoped to join us tonight. I also get Martyn to sign his, given that Ann's always had a soft spot for polemical folk.

It's not a view that's universally shared. Though both avow they've enjoyed themselves, Bruce (who admittedly is feeling a bit drained by his journey back from Germany) finds the session slightly overlong, whilst Pete is mildly irked at what he feels was intermittent political preaching (as a card-carrying liberal, I'm probably inured to it).

Finally, back to Gladys Avenue: wall to wall fans, copious amounts of booze, *Dark City* playing in the lounge. Hey, who needs to go to Glasgow for an Eastercon?

## ShowerHead

[*Zoo Nation*, 2006]

I have to confess I haven't bothered to check via Google which came first, but the indoor shower remains one of the greatest boons to horror movies.

It's not just that vertical ablutions mean scream queens can't shield their cleavage under thirteen layers of bathfoam, but the incessant hiss of the showerhead also ensures no endangered damsel can detect the approaching footfall of the generic maniac with an absurdly heavy knife. (For further reference, check out the extensively-researched instruction video *Hollywood Scream Queen Hot Tub Party* and the rather gorgeous Brinke Stevens' demonstration of maximising breast exposure by soap avoidance and minimising pubic flashes with careful positioning of the outermost leg.)

Meantime, mid-December, I hear some guy explaining on BBC Radio 4 that a Belgian scientist has invented a shower which offloads into the neighbouring toilet cistern, dramatically reducing water usage; apparently, he's already having discussions with hotels in Saudi Arabia.

My first thought, should all British bathrooms get one of these devices, is that should you feel the need, *piss in the shower*. Goes the same direction in the end, you're cutting out the middleman and - multiplied by,

say, twenty million thirty-second micturations per day - the thousands of hours saved would probably propel the UK back into the top ten of global productivity.

Needless to say, this is not recommended for those who prefer to take a bath. Nor should this idea be extended to more solid bodily functions - at least not without a full time and motion study.

## Film review: *Alien* (1979)

[*Flesh & Blood*, 1995]

Interviewed during the launch of his 1986 sequel, director James Cameron differentiated between Ridley Scott's approach and his own by describing the original film as a ride upon a ghost train and its successor as the big dipper; in other words, Scott galvanized his audience by having the unexpected leap out at them, whereas Cameron let them know what was coming but kept everyone firmly strapped into their seats.

Intriguingly, it was the "ghost train" element in Scott's movie - the deliberate blurring of distinctions between horror and science fiction cinema - which initially prompted the raising of critics' eyebrows. Reviewing *Alien* in *Starburst* #14, the late John Brosnan dubbed it "very annoying" and "a botched job" after concluding that "as a science fiction film it's seriously flawed, but as a horror film it works perfectly". Considering that the plot is lifted almost entirely from A E van Vogt's 1939 short story "Black Destroyer" and the 1958 sf movie *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* (which screenwriter Jerome Bixby later confessed was itself inspired by 1951's *The Thing From Another World*), there's no denying *Alien's* sf credentials, although Brosnan was certainly justified in criticising Scott for editing out the sequence (included in the recent boxed set) in which Ripley discovers her partially cocooned former lover, Dallas, and so reveals the creature's biological imperative. Still, Walter Hill did apparently tell original screenwriter Dan O'Bannon "My strength is that I don't know anything about science fiction", which might explain much about the *lacunae* in the storyline as screened.

Oddly, even O'Bannon has offered different versions of that screenplay's roots. Its core was produced in 1972, whilst O'Bannon was working on *Dark Star* with John Carpenter; entitled "Gremlins" and set aboard a World War Two bomber infested with malevolent demons, it would later be filmed in that form as a segment of *Heavy Metal* (1981). By 1975, according to Alan Murdoch in *Starburst* #13, it had acquired the title "Star Beast" - whilst the project only took on an sf slant the following year if you accept O'Bannon's recollections in the September 1979 *Fantastic Films*, and even then as a result of a suggestion from his partner Ron Shusett. In either

case, Shusett took the concept to Mark Haggard, a kind of Hollywood "matchmaker", who connected with Brandywine, the production company run by Hill, David Giler and Gordon Carroll. O'Bannon had wanted to occupy the director's chair himself (an ambition he would finally fulfil with 1984's *Return of the Living Dead*), but this was thrown out of the question when Brandywine sold the project to Twentieth-Century Fox, and he was instead hired to design the movie.

By the time Ridley Scott entered the equation, much of the final production was already in place. O'Bannon had drafted in his old friend Ron Cobb (partially due to "a debt of honour" over Cobb's on-off involvement with Alejandro Jodorowsky's ill-fated adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*) and Britain's Chris Foss (then famous for his paperback covers), and had decided to recruit the Swiss artist H R Giger, who he'd first met on the *Dune* set and whose work had inspired his screenplay. Scott, fresh from his failure in 1977 to mount the legend of Tristan and Iseult as "a fantasy, with elements of *Star Wars*, *Conan*, *Moebius*, modern technology and celtic legends", was swift to second O'Bannon's support for Giger and completed the group with the French comics artist Jean "Moebius" Giraud, who would prove a heavy influence upon both uniforms and spacesuits.

Meanwhile, relations between O'Bannon and the Brandywine triumvirate had deteriorated sharply, a situation hardly eased when Scott was shown a copy of O'Bannon's initial draft and announced he preferred this to Giler's and Hill's subsequent rewrites (both were excluded from screenwriting credits, a situation they "corrected" seven years later). Money was also a problem: budgeted at US\$4.5 million, Scott's estimate was nearer \$12-13 million and he was forced to cut it to \$8 million by losing several major scenes, including the discovery of a giant pyramid (which would have explained much of the alien's life cycle) and a sexual encounter between Ripley and Dallas (less crucial once Scott removed the balancing sequence where she is forced to kill him).

Given Giger's particular brand of necrophiliac surrealism, it was hardly surprising that the film began to take on the atmosphere of a wet nightmare: enclosed spaces, exploding eggs, clouded slime. Scott had even visualised the pyramid as a giant vagina, its entrance covered with a membrane which Kane would have to cut through before discovering the egg nest within. Such imagery was hardly lost on Alex Eisenstein, contributing editor to *Fantastic Films*, whose overwrought Freudian analysis of "the first *Heavy Metal* movie" in its January 1980 edition dubbed the creature's final incarnation "a phallic nightmare" and extended the sexual theme to claims that Ash's attempt to choke Ripley constituted "a deadly fellatio" and that the fluids which seep out of his disengaged head may be viewed as "an awful flow of semen". (Actually, Eisenstein seems obsessed with *fellatio*, so it's little wonder that he's so struck by a film featuring a

lifeform which sports the ultimate version of *vagina dentata*, but he wasn't the only critic to pick up on *Alien's* sexual undertow: as late as 1981, Brosnan was taking up space in *Starburst #40* to salivate over Sigourney Weaver's "slow, langourous strip down to a functional pair of briefs and army-issue tee-shirt". One wonders how he would have viewed that scene had the character of Ripley not changed gender during the rewrites.)

In retrospect, perhaps the greatest contribution *Alien* made to the sf/horror genre was in the characterization of Ellen Ripley, who took the resourcefulness of Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode from *Halloween* and laid the groundwork for Linda Hamilton's survivalist Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (indeed, Connor's bubbly victim in the first movie was by 1984 already looking slightly dated in cinematic terms, even if it did make her transformation all the more stunning). Hollywood might still demand that its scream queens spend an inordinate amount of time running around shadowy corridors in bikinis, but at least now they get to carry a very big gun.

## The Joy of Spex

[*Omega*, 1998]

I can always tell what kind of Friday night I've had from the state of my glasses the following morning. If they're coated with a film of dried beer, fingerprints and dog hairs, we probably stayed up till BBC2 or Channel 4 deigned to screen the decent stuff, then promptly dozed off, missed the lot and woke up to the tooth-rotting sweetness of Barney the purple paedophile.

If, on the other hand, my specs look as though they've been deep-fried in a Glasgow chip shop. Bombarded with cosmic rays till the rivets melted and then used as King Kong's toothpick, I probably spent the weekend on Portsea Island, escorted the last of my host Peter Wright's guests out in the early hours whilst he slept, took Baldrick out for a dawn stroll when Peter awakened, miraculously refreshed, and snatched a couple of hours' sleep before his daughter Rachael decided it was time I rejoined the living,

And if my glasses are in a pristine condition? Just means I got really blasted and Ann made me take them off before she thumped me. Simple, really.

"All the way through the ceremony at the Register Office, I was waiting for Jeremy Beadle to step out the side..."

[*Ann Green*, April 1985]

## Checkpoint: Ploktacon 2.0

[*Matrix*, 2002]

Among the highlights for many at the second <plokta.con>, other than the opportunity to avoid the royalist fervour over the June bank holiday (not to mention the international murder investigation after a nearby resident was discovered in instalments a stone's throw from the hotel), was guest of honour John Meaney's call upon those gathered to form a martial arts army. Fortunately, word didn't reach the CIA and the Basingstoke Hilton wasn't immediately targeted for a nuclear strike, even when the committee scheduled a Bollywood costume party on Sunday night.

The following afternoon's closing ceremony featured a live link-up with the distant kingdom of Jersey, so that TransAtlantic Fan Fund victor Tobes Valois could share his glee and commiserate with rival Chris O'Shea. A worthy campaign, well-fought by both.

## Printers Inc.

[*Prolapse*, 2007]

I'm not entirely certain how I found myself the default mimeographer for many of the fanzines published under the nebulous label "The Birmingham Renaissance", but I suspect it began when I agreed to print Lesley Ward's *Domble in the Works* in early 1984. I owned a Gestetner 466 and had already produced several fanzines for both Apa-B and the Solihull SF Group, the latter of which Lesley belonged to; she'd also been a witness at Ann's and my wedding the previous December, an event she decided to commemorate with a spoof convention report, so it would have been churlish to refuse.

Word spread. Tony Berry turned up with the stencils for his latest *Eyeballs in the Sky* and several boxes of Crowley duplicator paper. This was easily the most exquisite print medium I ever worked with, sucking ink off the drum but never smudging the following sheets, a far cry from the blue paper I'd bought in bulk for Novacon's progress reports.<sup>1</sup>

Next along was Paul Vincent, who'd already established himself as one of the Brum Group's rising stars with his first *Abdump*. Somehow (and it wasn't from me, honestly), Paul had gained the impression that the most appropriate way to express his gratitude was to present me with a bottle of Southern Comfort along with his stencils. A new *Abdump* was duly stacked into boxes prior to collation, and we cracked the bottle to toast the evening's efforts.

By the time Martin Tudor dropped by with the necessities for another *Empties* (now reaching well outside Apa-B, its original stomping grounds),

the Southern Comfort had become a fannish tradition, much like anything else within our ranks which happens more than once. Better yet, the drinking sessions afterwards, in the back bedroom I'd converted into an upstairs lounge cum office, proved tremendously fertile occasions to discuss our plans for Novacon 14.<sup>2</sup>

All went swimmingly, until the evening Martin and I made the cardinal error of pouring ourselves a glass or two *before* finishing the print-run. Those of you with copies of the early *Empties* can now entertain yourselves by discovering which issue contains an upside-down page (we've both managed to excise it out from our memories of the occasion, such as remains).\*

Sadly, the old 466 eventually cranked its last, shortly after producing the first edition of *Critical Wave*.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, I'd been lucky enough to replace it with a less advanced (but perfectly adequate) Gestetner 360, rescued during an office springclean at my then-employers. It's this replacement machine which currently sits on the workbench in my garage, perhaps awaiting the day I dust it off and get back into the groove. Hell, if *Prolapse* can reappear after twenty years...

<sup>1</sup> The order was increased significantly to accommodate the publishing plans of myself, Martin Tudor and Paul Vincent, which is why many of the wider-circulation "Renaissance" fanzines seemed to have a fixation with the colour blue. I was still using the residue for the early issues of *Gaijin*, a full decade later, and I suspect there's still a ream or two somewhere around here.

<sup>2</sup> Convenient as it might be to blame certain aspects of the Novacon 14 closing ceremony on intoxicated brainstorming, I feel duty-bound to point out those decisions were made by an apparently sober committee shortly after Martin had to step down due to pressure of work at the Post Office.

<sup>3</sup> This is possibly the first instance of what Martin and I soon dubbed "The Curse of *Wave*". Each time, we'd be thrust to the brink of disaster, then allowed to drag ourselves back into penury. But that's a story for another time.

\* [Yes, I realise I already referred to that incident a mere 10 pages ago, but there's a full three years between these articles seeing print and we *are* always been preached to about the virtues of recycling...]

# Invasion of the Body Switchers

[Mansplat!, circa 1998]

Forget George Lucas and his cornball scheme to sell us all a half-dozen copies of the same three movies (I'm holding out for the triple-X version - letterboxed and full THX sound, of course): there's a far more insidious and widespread fraud currently being perpetrated upon we fans of the fantastic, a threat at the very heart of our couchbound culture.

I speak, my friends, of body doubles, that cinematic sleight-of-hand employed by scumbucket producers to jazz up their movies when actresses give a firm thumbs-down to waving their goosebumps at the camera. And before any guy out there asks what the problem is if you still get a kick from the on-screen flesh, even if it belongs to an entirely different torso, ask yourself this: how would you react if you ordered a 32oz steak and the waiter served up a plate of soya bean substitute? Even if it tasted like steak, smelled like steak and chewed like steak, you'd damn well feel cheated. Listen up, folks, we're talking artistic integrity here.

**Stunt Nipples:** Often difficult to stage, given the proximity of face and breasts, but having your body double pull a sweater over their head at the crucial moment - like Kate Beckinsale's substitute in the otherwise forgettable *Haunted* - is a popular trick. In an altogether separate category falls Linnea Quigley's lopsided rubber chest in *Night of the Demons*, which brings a whole new definition to inverted nipples, and Sigourney Weaver's terminal indigestion in *Alien*<sup>3</sup>.

**Stunt Muff:** Talking of Quigley, she now claims to have worn a prosthetic pussy during her graveyard disco routine in *Return Of The Living Dead*, whilst Meg Tilly and Angie Dickinson called in pubic impersonators for *Body Snatchers* and *Dressed To Kill* respectively. At least Tilly's stand-in was credited: Dickinson appeared on several British chatshows and bathed in the compliments due a 49 year-old woman with a 20-plus physique; pity it wasn't hers to crow over. A suitable point, I'd say, to raise our beercans to such less inhibited scream queens as Michelle Bauer (*Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*), Jenny Agutter (*An American Werewolf in London*), Sissy Spacek (*Carrie*), Lina Romay (*Bare-Breasted Countess*) and Mathilda May (*Lifeforce*).

**Stunt Butt:** Less common, since even the squeaky clean Kevin Costner has seen fit to drop his shorts if required (though, curiously, only for his own *Dances With Wolves* - Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio lusts after another guy's skinny-dipping buttocks in *Prince of Thieves*, probably as Costner was so wooden he kept bobbing to the surface), but Britt Ekland stepped aside for a nightclub stripper in *The Wicker Man* to avoid sporting her post-

pregnancy weight gain (ironically, that actually added to her above-the-waist allure in the same scenes).

Stunt Dick: Rarer still, given the relative scarcity of full-frontal male nudity outside hardcore flicks, although Paul Verhoeven reportedly offered Michael Douglas a prosthetic erection for *Basic Instinct* (despite Sharon Stone's best leg-crossing efforts, the real one presumably sagged as much as Douglas' ass did in the bathroom scene) and Kyle MacLachlan computer-generated genitalia for *Showgirls* (wisely declined, seeing what CGI did to Jim Carrey's eyeballs in *The Mask*). (A less-than-subtle switch can apparently be spotted in the sleazefest *The Violation of Claudia*, wherein Sharon Mitchell goes down on a balding white guy but the organ the camera cuts to happens to be black, whilst a generation of porn audiences has longed for Ron Jeremy's penis to hire itself a stunt body.)

Defend your consumer rights: remain vigilant, scrutinize every frame and demand the real McCoy!

## Echo Beach

[published by Caption Remix, 2006]

There's nothing original, so they say (and "they" probably stole that aphorism in the first place). Drama entire can supposedly be reduced to a mere seven plots (six-and-a-half fewer if you happen to be Barbara Cartland), which explains the sense of déjà vu typified by watching the 1996 screen incarnation of Chris Warner and Paul Gulacy's Dark Horse superheroine *Barb Wire* and realising Pamela Anderson is channelling Humphrey Bogart in a gender-reversed *Casablanca*.

I write as one who has succumbed: the appearance of the eponymous hero in "Inspector X", a cartoon strip I produced for the amusement of classmates at age 12, was lifted wholesale from "I Spy", a regular in the 1970s weekly *Sparky*.

But such plagiarism is not always conscious. For the past couple of decades, I've followed Alfie Bester's suggestion in *Hell's Cartographers* and scribbled down passing ideas in a succession of notepads and sketchbooks. Amongst them was the synopsis for a short story: guy finds secret of immortality, is mistakenly convicted of murder, realises to his horror that this particular US state doesn't have the death penalty. Perfect plot for one of *2000AD*'s "Future Shocks", methought, even if my last submission (a mere quarter-century ago) received a two-fingered salute from Tharg the Mighty.

Fast forward to early March 2004: I'm listening to BBC R7 on our new digital radio, and catch a 1990s adaptation of Rod Serling's 1959 *Twilight Zone* script "Escape Clause", wherein hypochondriac Walter Bedeker sells his soul to become immortal and is wrongly convicted of his wife's murder, etc, etc.

Four days later, I tune in by pure chance to Oneword, another digital station, and hear *The Inner Sanctum* (a rather over-excited spin on the EC Comics template), wherein a scientist's widow traps his killer, who committed murder in order to become immortal, but now finds himself behind bars for the rest of his (un)natural.

Okay, okay, I get the point: even though I honestly couldn't recall seeing the original *Zone* episode and had never heard of *The Inner Sanctum* before, I do possess the landmark Gary Gerani / Paul Schulman tvsf overview *Fantastic Television* (which confusingly juggles the "Escape Clause" details over three columns) and the Jean-Marc / Randy Lofficier programme guide *Into the Twilight Zone*, as well as Joel Engel's excellent biography of Serling, so it's pretty obvious this particular meme slipped into my head years ago. Bugger.

Still, at least I can now devote myself to my latest story idea, positively bursting with originality: two aliens called Adam and Eve flee their dying world and crashland upon an unpopulated planet, stumble across the Statue of Liberty and fall through a time vortex before killing their own grandparents. I suspect it needs a little work, but I'm sure the guys at Dark Horse will love it.

## 2008: North Yorkshire Diary

**Monday, 9 June:** "I suspect Ann's up to something the moment she points out the sign advertising a secondhand book sale in the former Hawes Town Library, even more so when she suggests I wander inside and adds 'You *need* books', a phrase as likely to pass her lips as my own to give her the go-ahead for an illicit weekend with George Clooney. Still, I'm not going to let the opportunity pass and have soon located two well-preserved copies of *The Magazine of Science Fiction* (November '62, with tales by Arthur C Clarke, Zenna Henderson, Terry Carr, Joanna Russ and Kate Wilhelm; August '63, with Carr again, plus James White, Fritz Leiber, Kit Reed and Miriam Allen deFord). Nor does it take much time to track Ann down, expanding her ear-ring collection at the nearby crystal emporium.

"Hawes might be somewhat of a tourist trap (as capital of the so-called 'Herriot Country'), but it has much to recommend it, not least arguably the

best chipshop in England at the end of the high street. Suitably refueled, we head out across the dales, skirting Sedburgh and looping back towards Leyburn, taking a brief but occasionally terrifying detour up sixty-degree inclines to visit the isolated Tan Hill Inn, Britain's highest pub (1732 feet above sea level), where I bath my shredded nerves in a welcome pint of Black Sheep. Unsurprisingly windswept (and the setting for a famous double-glazing ad back in the 1980s), the Inn also offers shelter for four-legged travellers: as we exit, Ann and I have to step around a sheep which lies slumped across the front step like some enormous woolly draught excluder."

## Fannish Memory Syndrome

[Apparatchik, 1995]

Considering how ripe a target sf fandom - even a cultural group as small as British fandom - must appear to commercial interests, it's fairly amazing that we're only now beginning to see the acolytes of Mammon camping on our doorstep.

Unlike the United States, where the genre's profit potential was spotted as early as the mid-1970s (indeed, Joel Engel's excellent biography of Gene Roddenberry reveals that until the first movie went into production, *Star Trek's* creator was almost entirely reliant upon appearance fees and the illicit income his company Lincoln Enterprises derived from marketing Xeroxes of other writers' teleplays), the UK has remained largely free of exploitation. Until last year, the only serious incursion had been Project Starcast, announced in 1980 for 1982 with an initial £17.00 membership fee (as compared, say, to the £4.00 charged the previous year by Novacon, admittedly a more low-key event); preposterously mounted for 4000 attendees (even with foreign visitors, the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton had only attracted 3100 fans), Starcast was officially ignored by the British SF Association and lambasted by fanzine writers (one of my own columns for the late *Supernova* managed to attract an absurd threat of legal action from the organizers), eventually collapsing like a black hole and reportedly metamorphosing into a one-day mart in Westminster.

Matters changed, however, with the UK release of *Star Trek: Generations*. British *Trek* conventions had previously maintained an honourable tradition of donating their not inconsiderable profits to charity, but the two-day tie-in event hosted at the Royal Albert Hall last February by Star-gazer Productions was strictly commercial, with the fans present expected to do little more than gaze at their favourite actors and applaud the Q&A sessions (though, to be fair, my friend Ray Holloway tells me he approached it purely on that basis and actually had a great time). Two

months later, the same crew ran Babcom, a *Babylon 5* "convention", but their hubris finally reached fruition: only 1500 of the 15000 target membership turned out, whilst dealers tore their hair out at the paucity of merchandise then available for a series here consigned to teatime viewing on the minority-oriented Channel Four - one CD, one novelization - and instead filled their tables with *Trek* spin-offs. At neither event, needless to say, were the guests available to mingle with fans (which, given my experience at the Fantastic Film Festivals in Manchester, is a disservice to both parties); we are ever more in the kingdom of the couch potato.

Ironically, the regular FFF venue - Sacha's Hotel - was also chosen by Wolf 359, a fan-run composite intended to cater not only for Trekkies but any B5 fans wandering through the centre of Manchester. Judging by Mike Scott's account in *Zorn #3*, the fact that fans rather than businessmen were pulling the strings counted for naught: "I rate it the worst convention I've ever been to, and I've been to some real stinkers in my time ... the culture of the convention was utterly inimical to everything that I find worthwhile and enjoyable about sf conventions. And these people say similar things about the commercially run media conventions that are starting to spread across the face of fandom like some disfiguring disease - I can barely imagine how bad they must be."

Whilst it's difficult to see how we can prevent such events taking place, even by boycotting the more ramshackle or exploitative, their potential proliferation has prompted several British fans to consider formalizing a "convention charter" (hopefully more successful than the numerous other charters which Major's government keeps rolling out in place of actual policy). The field is presently led by Caroline Mullan, whose initial three-point proposal both calls upon organizers to ensure a suitable framework exists for "intimate spaces where members can make and maintain personal connections" and places a responsibility upon individual members to interact rather than merely spectate; as she herself is swift to point out, these suggestions (available in full on the Internet discussion group Intersmof) are less concrete guidelines than a broad identification of the fannish ethos. The pity is that many new fans, particularly those entering through media fandom, may not even be aware that such a state of affairs already exists.

"The only difference between you and Garfield is that *he's* orange..."

[Ann Green, December 1985]

## Bob Shaw, 1931-1996

[*Critical Wave*, 1996]

There's a tendency, when eulogising the recently deceased, to recall only that which portrays them in a favourable light, and to downplay the less commendable facets of their personality or career. In the case of Bob Shaw, however, no such well-intentioned distortion is necessary; he was, quite simply, one of the nicest people whose company I have ever had the good fortune to share.

My first contact with Bob, more than twenty years ago, exemplifies his generosity and good nature. It was the spring of 1975, and I had learned of science fiction fanzines through the short-lived *World of Horror*; I'd already received several copies of the *Dr Who* Fan Club newsletter, but this (curiously) was sponsored by the BBC and had little or no contact with the fabulous fannish universe the *WoH* column hinted at. Within months, a friend and I were drawing up our own plans to enter the fray, with one of those dry-as-dust serconzines pretty much endemic at the time.

By coincidence, Marvel had recently added *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction* to its black & white line, a surprisingly honest attempt to drag sf comics out of the 1950's EC vein and towards the New Wave occupied by the likes of Moorcock and Ellison (who were both represented in due course, along with adaptations of work by Wyndham, Silverberg, Weinbaum and Niven). More importantly to this tale, Marvel decided to lift Bob's "Slow Glass" concept from his Hugo-nominated "Light of Other Days" for use as a framing device to give each issue an overall cohesion; instead of EC's Crypt Keeper, shopkeeper Sandson Tyme would startle his customers with visions of distant worlds and strange futures.

Despite this peripheral involvement and the somewhat variable quality of the strips, Bob wrote to offer his congratulations and - apparently on an editorial whim - his address was published in full. I'm unaware as to whether he was subsequently buried in fan mail, but I grabbed the chance to contact a Real Skiffy Writer and, surfing a wave of teenage chutzpah, even included a short questionnaire for use in our proposed first issue.

As it turned out, the fanzine took a further two years to materialize, by which time Bob had replied to this and several other letters, the "interview" had turned up in another location entirely and, best of all, I'd had the opportunity to meet him in person. Better still, it was in a Novacon bar, which is on a par with joining John Huston on safari or Ernest Hemingway at a bullfight. He was entirely at ease, and within moments so was anyone who took an adjoining seat. As I swiftly learned, no matter how successful he became as a science fiction author, he never really evolved from the youngster who tapped at Walt Willis' front door a half-century ago

and immediately boosted Irish Fandom by fifty per cent; at heart, he remained a fan.

It's difficult to put into words my admiration for Bob. I enjoyed and respected his sf novels, adored his fanwriting (frequently reprinting the lesser-known pieces in my own fanzines) and always valued our occasional chats at conventions, or on the telephone. Our final lengthy exchange was a short while before Novacon 25, concerning a less than favourable review I'd given *A Bit Of BoSH* in *Critical Wave* (entirely down to the editors, I must add); then as always, Bob was supportive, understanding and, above all, honest. In a sense, we ended as we began, fan talking to fan.

Despite his achievements in professional print, Bob's is a greater loss to fandom than to sf as a whole. I doubt he ever regretted that balance for a moment.

## Fannish Memory Syndrome

[*The Drink Tank*, 2008]

To ancient China, to rescue a princess kidnapped by a coerced genie. Or rather, to the Birmingham Hippodrome, where *Torchwood* lead and occasional *Doctor Who* companion John "Cap'n Jack" Barrowman is treading the boards as the eponymous headliner in the theatre's golden anniversary pantomime, "Aladdin".

(A few words of explanation for non-UK readers: "Panto" has been a yuletide staple of British theatre for nearly three centuries, a bizarre cocktail of slapstick, inuendo, music hall, base comedy and showtime. Rather bizarrely, the male lead is often played by a woman ("the Principal Boy") and the secondary female character ("the Dame") is traditionally essayed by a male comedian in drag. No wonder Brits are less hung up on gender distinctions.)

Ann and I are accompanied by our younger god-daughter, Heloise Tudor, whose devotion to the revamped *Doctor Who* verges upon the obsessive; I've lost count of the conversations we've had about the Timelord's previous incarnations, his assorted nemeses and the likelihood of Daleks landing anywhere north of Birmingham. With her dad Martin pretty much below the fannish radar these days, other than appearances at Novacon, it's good to see a new generation stepping into the breach.

It's impossible to tell who's more excited at the prospect of seeing Barrowman in the flesh, Ann or Heloise, whilst the rest of the audience seems split equally between fans of his telefantasy work and those enticed by our star's parallel career as a guest judge on a series of promotions for West End musicals thinly disguised as talent shows.

Meanwhile, Barrowman is obviously having as much fun on stage as those in the stalls and upper circle, momentarily reduced to giggles on more than one occasion. Better still, the much-publicised 3D animation sequences complement the cast's performances, rather than swamp them. The show runs for more than two hours, and they get few opportunities to catch their breath.

Later, Ann turns to me and says "I shall see him always *in sequins*". Should put an interesting spin on the new season of *Torchwood*.

## Roofworld

[*Omega*, 1998]

It's not only the future which remains an uncharted continent: the past is just as capable of sneaking around and biting you on the butt. Shortly after I returned from running the Eastercon fan lounge last year, Ann exiled me to the attic; no, not like the hideous mutant twin in some Lovecraftian potboiler, but because the second floor of our home contains the accumulated debris of my near-forty years on this planet.

Old fanzines, books, comics, toys, film posters, lost religious relics... The attic is crammed to the rafters with the odd, the obscure and the patently useless, much of which has never actually left the premises, a curious side effect of buying the house you grew up in. More terrifying, there are glimpses of other potential life paths left untrod: computer manuals from a two-year *cul de sac* in the mid-1970s when I hedged my career bets by taking a programming course at college; layouts and synopses for comic strips; the clockwork cine camera with which I toyed at becoming the next Ray Harryhausen; heaps of notes for novels and short stories aborted or stillborn. It's strangely both unsettling to see so many youthful fancies buried under so much dust.

The only real constant is box upon box of fanzines, the bulk collected in the long-ago days when such material was the mainstay of British convention auctions, but very nearly as much archived during the past decade. That's the great strength of fandom: like attics, it never demands you act your age.

## Fannish Memory Syndrome

[*The Drink Tank*, 2008]

To leafy Tanworth-in-Arden in the heart of Warwickshire, where Ann and I replace our houseguest Chris Garcia's cancelled visit to Peter Weston's palatial *manse* in Sutton Coldfield with a pilgrimage to St Mary

Magdalene Parish Church, last resting place of 1970s singer-songwriter Nick Drake.

We grab a pint at the Bell, once a regular filming location for the notoriously inept British soap *Crossroads* (coincidentally, later a regular acting gig for Drake's sister Gabrielle, she of the purple wig and silver mini skirt in *UFO*), then stroll across the road to view the simple headstone ("We rise, And we are everywhere") and the scattered offerings around his grave. Afterwards, Ann and Chris stroll around the church itself, notable for the stained-glass windows designed by pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (whose display at Birmingham's city art gallery is reportedly equalled only by those in Paris and New York).

It's a spiritual interlude in Chris's TAFF tour, plus I'm delighted he's at last had a glimpse of real English countryside and maybe a sense of this nation's subtler heritage. Sadly, we have less than twenty-four hours left in his company, just enough time for a gathering of the infamous MiSFITs at a Chinese restaurant in central Birmingham and a couple of episodes of *Torchwood*.

Three days later, I find myself at a rather more sombre fannish gathering, the funeral service for veteran Birmingham sf fan Ray Bradbury. Multiple generations of the Brum Group are in attendance, including Rog Peyton, my erstwhile *Critical Wave* partner Martin Tudor, Chris Morgan and his wife Pauline (aka Pauline Dugate), Vernon and Pat Brown (the former shortly to guest at Novacon 38), David Hardy, Tony Berry, Dave Holmes (Rog's righthand guy back in the glory days of the Andromeda Bookshop) and Peter Weston (finally back from the family duties in Bournemouth which scuppered Chris' visit).

Like Burne-Jones, Ray was somewhat of a polymath: sculptor, cardplayer, magician, dog breeder, publican (and those are just the interests I know of). As chronicled in *Prolapse #10* (currently available via eFanzines), he decapitated this very correspondent at the first MiScon, later presenting me with the shiny badge he reserved for all such "victims" (as a mark of respect, I wore it for the funeral). In 2002, we attempted to organise a full-blown magic show for Novacon, a plan which finally came to spectacular fruition a full five years later; I take some solace in that.

The service ends with a round of applause from his fellow entertainers, which I take to be a traditional salute at the fall of the final curtain. Still, if it's true that real immortality lies not in our brief passage between womb and coffin, but in the memories of those we leave behind, Ray's going to remain with us for decades to come.