



Even More Balls

More Balls 3—August 2005
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It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was pretty confident I could waffle for England on the subject of culture. I like museums, I enjoy art galleries. Heck, I even spent nearly every Friday in June at the theatre. Suddenly it was July and I'd spent every weekend away from home. Real Life was in the way of my fanzine production.

Luckily I had friends who not only promised but delivered articles. I started to whiz through my own and then toward the end of Saturday my keyboard developed a fault on the "n" key. Instead of a gentle caress it needed to be prodded with unreasonable force - while this is okay for general noodling (or, in fact, oodling) it's not useful when you have an article to write. Still. All done.

So much Balls I needed an index

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A Culture Ramble

by Claire Briailey

'Yoghurt,' said Mark. 'Art. Literature. And Melvyn Bragg.'

It was Ang's fault. She mentioned in the second issue of *More Balls* that she planned to produce *Even More Balls* for Worldcon.

'This bigger issue,' she wrote, 'is even going to have a theme - Culture - and I hope to have some other contributors.'

It was my own fault. In sending a letter I fell for her comment hook and found myself asking, 'Would you like an article?'

It was Mark's fault. I hit on the device of asking him to tell me whatever came into his mind when I mentioned culture. And there I was, all set for the fanzine version of *Ready Steady Cook*, armed with a set of last-minute ingredients that sound like a rejected title for a Martin Millar novel. All I have at my disposal apart from those topics are a standard article structure I can produce from memory, whatever half-baked anecdotes I can find in the recesses of my hard drive, and the basic tools of fanwriting - starting with the willingness to embarrass myself in the interests of engaging the reader quickly, although from a standing start all I can muster is the admission of a more than passing familiarity with daytime TV. Oh, and the fact that at the point I got the subject matter I was naked with a notebook in my hand, standing in a darkened bedroom in the middle of the night; if that's like daytime TV it's changed a lot since I was a student.

Obviously to make this challenge more realistic you should be able to switch to, say, Max beavering away in the other corner of the fanzine, creating some marvel of

personal and authentic fanwriting despite having to work with the subject matter of cinema, music, Rosie Millard and some gunge To-bes scraped off the old loaf of bread the previous morning. Actually that one might be easier; I suppose it isn't done to swap...?

(Colours swirl. Strange shapes start to bulge out of the screen and fanzine pages rush past in the opposite direction to dates flicking back on a calendar. Everything's going wibbly-wobbly, and giving me a startling flashback to my first major fanzine article in the process.)

OK, red leather seats, bright blue carpet that really doesn't match, the most enormous and gaudy piece of furniture I've ever seen, men in tights... Got it: it's 1998 and I'm back in the House of Lords, sitting in the officials' box, or rather in the overflow chairs on the floor down by the side which means I can't see the Government benches at all.

Even the Lords are showing signs of change since the Labour party won their huge popular majority in May 1997; every time I come over there seems to be another Government backbencher making his maiden speech. Today yet another new bug is rising to the challenge. And I recognise his voice, which I know is extremely distinctive but which I can't place, because it's entirely out of context. Maybe I'm hallucinating. Maybe it's just the same accent or something. Maybe someone else will whisper to me any minute now, 'Doesn't this chap sound like...?' and I'll know it's not just me. And I'll even know who it is that I'm being reminded of. And he chunters on; he must be something to do with broadcasting, be-

cause he has a proposal to get TV companies to use one of the plethora of digital or cable channels available as a training channel for media students to give them actual experience to enable them to get jobs. So I've probably heard his voice on the telly but, nonetheless, it's not a voice I expect to hear in the House of Lords and I still can't place it.

I look at the order paper. Lord Bragg, it says. I remember that the Minister's planning to be nice to him, because he's new Labour as well as a new Peer. So who is he? Not Billy Bragg, obviously. (Yes, it's true, I honestly was that dense, but to be fair Billy Bragg's provocative and interesting proposals for reforming the Lords weren't as well known seven years ago.) It wasn't until the Bishop of Southwark, going next, mentioned *Start the Week* that I finally realised. Well, really, how was I expected to know? If they'd played the theme music to *The South Bank Show* when he stood up it would have helped. And it would have been very jolly, too.

So I was there when Melvyn Bragg made his first speech in the House of Lords. There were unexpected advantages to that job, provided you could spot them when they were actually happening.

(Wibbly-wobbly again. Red recedes. Green light attacks. Indigo undulates with sickening speed like a shuddering snake...)

Actually I've always wanted to have synaesthesia. Last autumn I saw a *Horizon* documentary on the BBC, *Derek Tastes of Earwax*. I realise that right now it doesn't sound like the stuff our dreams are made of – and the associated images that arise from *that* statement open up a whole new dimension of wrongness. But to me the programme was actually about a new dimension; one to which I can relate, as well, rather than likely to make my brane leak out of my ears. *Horizon* was exploring synaesthesia, the joining up of senses. I've been fascinated by the condition ever since I first heard about it and realised I may

have some mild experience of it, which has in turn made me want to know what it would be like to have full exposure.

There are science fictional resonances, of course. My casual paraphrase above doesn't even attempt to replicate the typesetting of Gully Foyle's classic synaesthetic experiences in *Tiger! Tiger!* but the first time I read that it gave me one of the most jaw-dropping moments of *sensawunda* I've ever experienced in SF. The effect on the imagination of both protagonist and reader of coffee experienced through synaesthesia in Jeffrey Ford's 'The Empire of Ice Cream' (which should have won a Hugo Award in 2004) is not so much jaw-dropping as mouth-watering. And Steve Aylett mentioned during an



Possibly related?

interview at the BSFA London meeting early last year that he has synaesthesia: something which provided a new insight into his writing for me, particularly the way he uses language because of its shape and rhythm and texture as much as for its meaning. It's almost like looking at one of those Magic Eye pictures only with a much sharper snap of awareness – and without the background layer of concern that I'm doing something really weird to my 'normal' perceptions and indeed to the physical structure of my eye. (Insert here your own allusions about discovering science fiction.)

The *Horizon* programme included people who have a sensory association of colours with words and numbers, people for whom sounds have texture and words have flavours (hence the title), people who see colour in music and for whom numbers

and dates have a physical presence around them. And since approximately one in a hundred people are meant to be synaesthetic, maybe some of you are sitting there wondering what it's like *not* to be able to do this. I feel pain in colour and shape, although much less so than I did as a child, and both those sensations and this programme make me feel like a character in an SF novel who gets to understand about the next stage of human evolution even while they're realising that they are, at best, just the missing link. It's really quite depressing to know that most of us can't experience the world in that extra way.

With all the work *Horizon* needed to do to explain the variety of ways in which synaesthesia can manifest, it

could only begin to explore what this might mean for the rest of us. Holding out the tantalising possibility that synaesthesia is simply the exaggerated, super-connected form of something most of us experience through our regular senses and that we can, therefore, all do it a bit, the programme floated some ideas about expressions of creativity and the evolu-

tion of language in humans. It seems at the very least to offer us another way of thinking and communicating about art, while also providing the beginning of yet more mind-expanding stuff about why and how art (and art forms of all types) offer us another method of communication.

It left me with my mind all full of *sensawunda*, and yet still wanting more. Why doesn't science fiction itself do that more often?

(Wibble-wobble, wibble-wobble. Hey, is it just me or was anyone else expecting that to turn into an old advertising jingle?)

I don't know much about art, but I know I want to have walls big enough to hang some of the stuff I've seen in galleries in Glasgow, Canberra and London over the past five years. And still to have somewhere to put the books, obviously. Flick wrote in the first issue of *Shiny!*

about art that takes itself too seriously. As I commented to her in response, I don't trust any art form at which I have to work too hard. I can live with being unable to explain *why* I like something in terms that are meaningful to anyone else, and I like things which start off good and then reveal more and more as I pay more attention; but if a few moments' study doesn't show me something I like at once, it's probably never going to work for me and even if it did I'd be worried about coming over all pretentious, having convinced myself that something has to be good if it's that difficult. I'm also too impatient to stand around worrying away at something that isn't giving me instant gratification on at least one level. So I tend to go round art galleries and museums at speed, especially if there are other people there (for which read 'in the way'), waiting for something to really grab me that I can then just fall into and marvel at open-mouthed. I wonder whether this is why I often like really big art; I simply can't miss it to start with.

A friend of mine at school was an excellent artist, working on as large a canvas as the school could provide with layers and layers of oil paint that didn't convey anything close up other than colour and shape and texture. I liked that, conceptually, particularly the texture; but mostly I liked it for the contrast with the moment when I could back away across the art room and suddenly hit the point where it sprang into focus. Again, it's rather like the Magic Eye experience (it's a sail-boat!) but with an unsightly physical element to the figurative idea that art is bigger than the humans that create it.

I don't wish I could do that, though. I wish I could draw. There are so many situations and experiences that I'd love to be able to capture in a few focused lines. It would stop people complaining at us about using clip art in our fanzines, too. I find myself wishing I could draw more often as my memory seems to work less well; a picture would certainly be worth a thousand words if I can sketch a scenario quicker than I can fix the setting and the participants and the actual words. But then I think in words; I can sometimes visualise an idea (Max's superhero persona of Mrs Lemon, for instance) to the extent

that it seems to me to work far better as a picture than anything I can do to write the anecdote – which is precisely why I want to be able to draw it so that other people can see – but mostly ideas come together for me as language.

And most artists assure me that if you want to be able to draw, then you learn how to draw. There's no mystique about it, they say; you need to learn the skills, and practise, and keep practising, and just do it. But I still think that there needs to be a vital spark of a visual imagination to make the monster twitch in the first place.

(Twitch. Lurch. Swirl. Judder. That's your lot unless you want to pay to go round again.)



More than just fermented dairy produce.

Thinking about this outside the *Ready Steady Fan* format – a concept which I was startled to find Mark had invented independently, although his is a quite different sort of gameshow – I realise that 'culture' could actually mean a lot more to me than the mid-night remit I was handed. It could be about society and community and background, although there's often a subtext in speaking about 'cultural awareness' that we think culture in this sense is something that belongs to other people. And it can be allied to 'civilisation', which may explain why both terms have undertaken a linguistic slide towards being an indicator of nice refined sophisticated people, and thus lost some of their broad utility as words.

Permit me two quick brief anecdotes to illustrate some of this, which not coincidentally make use of my final topic. A gentleman of my long acquaintance (no, not Mark. Although I'm not going to confirm or deny any more identities in case I get to the

point of having to choose between lying or giving it away)... where was I? Oh yeah; there's this bloke I know who has, well, a bit of a nervous tic. Nothing major, not even physical, just an inability to let certain conversational hooks go by. And one of them is a reflex assumption that if a woman is buying yoghurt, particularly natural yoghurt, it's because she has a yeast infection. I don't even know if that really works as a remedy; it hasn't happened to me and I don't know anyone who's been prescribed yoghurt for any affliction. Personally I buy natural yoghurt because I like eating it, and I refuse to believe that supermarkets continue to stock it primarily because other people use it as medication. So I get mildly irritated by this suggestion that a simple grocery errand is a sign of, ahem, inner turmoil, and I tell myself it's because it's an irrational assumption. But really it's just the same reaction I have to quite a lot of supposed jokes that hover in the area between slightly smutty and certainly crude; I find myself thinking, with no pun intended until I reflected on it in the context of this article: Oh, that's really just a bit uncultured.

The second is something told to me recently by a colleague which may illustrate a problem with the popularity of TV cooking programmes, such as the one on which this article is very loosely based, if they assume that their audience have become more informed by telepathy rather than more tested forms of communication; they need, I suspect, to explain things more, particularly if they're dealing with a set of mixed cultural assumptions. The caterers we no longer use at work experimented with themed menus, and on one occasion they offered curry with trimmings. So my colleague went to the canteen for lunch and enthusiastically collected her rice, and bread, and indeterminate curried meat, and yoghurt, and cutlery, and sat down to find... that the yoghurt was strawberry flavoured. With real fruit bits.

There. Done it. Just in time.

Next time I offer someone a fanzine article I'm definitely going to have one ready that I prepared earlier.



In January 2005 Prince Harry arrived at a party wearing an SS uniform. The British press responded with typical restraint and for about a week the photographs and resulting discussion dominated the papers. On livejournal Flick decided to provide some helpful advice on avoiding such situations in future.

Fancy Dress: additional prohibited items for royal princes

By Flick

1) Roman senator costume:

Rome killed and/or persecuted a significant proportion of early Christians, thus offensive to Christians; implies that one thinks Italy has not changed since Roman period, thus offensive to Italians.

2) Nun: cross dressing, so offensive to transgendered individuals; nun, so offensive to Catholics; will almost certainly be taken as containing hidden meanings about one's father's sex life.

3) Arabian prince: implies that all arabs wear funny hats and shoes, therefore offensive to muslims; will almost certainly be taken as containing hidden meanings about one's father's religious choices.

4) Harry Potter: implies belief in witchcraft, therefore offensive to all major religions, particularly evangelical Christians; involves drawing on a fake scar, therefore offensive to all people who have a disfigurement.

5) Baby: offensive to the incontinent; offensive to those with learning difficulties; will almost certainly be taken as containing hidden meanings about one's father's sex life.

6) Knight in armour: implies that one supports a return to feudalism, therefore offensive to 98% of population (to be chosen by random ballot); traditionally involved in rescuing distressed maidens, therefore offensive to feminists; traditionally involved in killing dragons, therefore implying support of hunting, therefore offensive to people who live in towns.

7) Convict:

offensive to convicts, particularly those being held against their will; dated nature of prison uniform suggests that the wearer is out of touch with modern life, particularly for the disadvantaged portion of society; will almost certainly be taken as containing hidden meanings about one's role in life.



8) Chinese Elvis: requires make-up and/or surgery to alter appearance of face to something more Chinese, therefore morally equivalent to blacking up, therefore offensive to both blacks and Chinese; Elvis died of a drug overdose, therefore implies either a substance abuse problem or an unsympathetic reaction to those with substance abuse problems; Elvis was in the US army, therefore implies support of current US administration.

9) Airline pilot: offensive to all those who were killed, injured or otherwise involved in the attacks on the World Trade Centre, as that involved an airliner; many airline pilots could also fly a military aircraft, therefore implies support for conscription; during the second world war, many airline pilots did fly military planes, which bombed Germany, therefore offensive to Germans.

I could go on. Indeed, I might. But right now, I need to go to work.



Bollocks To Alton Towers.

Robin Halstead, Jason Hazeley, Alex Morris and Joel Morris (Penguin Books)

Not a cry from a dying royal but rather the title of a book I'm dipping into at work. Subtitled **Uncommonly British Days Out** it takes us to all the places eclipsed by the giant fun-parks, historically notorious castles and publicity hogging mega museums. It covers such delightful places as The Ripon Tramp Museum, Kelvedon Nuclear Bunker and Gnome Magic. All these attractions share a certain eccentricity of both subject and, apparently, staff.

What I particularly enjoyed is the great affection shown by the authors for the places featured. While funny (only someone with a sense of humour would visit The House of Marbles) it manages to avoid the mocking tone employed by many of these small hardback books. It even manages to include a rough map plus address and other contact details.

I've visited a number of the attractions featured in the book and agree that Edinburgh Camera Obscura is "incredibly simple, highly memorable and a little bizarre" and Williamson's Tunnels are "scrupulously constructed, mad, useless and simply enormous". I'm also regretting not spending more time in Scotland this year so I could get to the Keith and Dufftown railway (although I must admit this is mainly due to it's termination at a distillery).

While useful for tourists it's essential for locals too. I never knew, for instance, there was a lawnmower museum a mere 20 miles from my home. Go buy now!

Local Colour Supplement.

*This is just a night
In the City of Culture
But everyone's whacked
And looks like vultures [1]*

Liverpool is full of lavish buildings from the 19th and early 20th Century. Most famous are “The Three Graces”; The Royal Liver building, The Cunard Building and the (ex-)Offices of the Docks and Harbour Board. These are the buildings that give Liverpool one of the ten most recognisable waterfronts in the world [2] plus the oddly shaped but internationally-famous liver birds.

Luckily for you, dear reader, this is not going to turn into an essay on architectural styles. For a start there's only a few days until I have to have this dressed, pressed and ready for Worldcon and on top of this I have no knowledge of architecture beyond “Oooh! Pretty!” Add the attention span of, um, something not very attentive. Instead I'm going to provide a picture tour of some of the unusual architectural delights, most of which are undergoing renovation in preparation for hosting City of Culture in 2008.

- [1] Lyrics from Dirty Dancehall—The Zutons
- [2] According to my friend Brian. I've never seen a reliable written source of this information.



The Bombed-Out Church

The top of Bold Street. A bit of a cheat, this. As far as I am aware there are no plans to renovate St Luke's in preparation for 2008. Hit in the bombing of World War II the church has stood as a reminder of the damage of the war since it was hit in 1941. When the war finished the structure was reinforced with girders and cables but otherwise left untouched. The barriers you see at the front are part of extensive road improvements in the city centre.

Although the building itself has been left untouched the garden is well-tended and kept as a memorial for the victims of the Blitz. The white building in the background, to the right, is an occasional victim of a laser show, as is the church itself. It's a strange and not particularly pleasant sight.



Under construction?

Walking along Rodney Street you pass another ruined church, St Andrew's. I've no idea if this was hit in the Blitz or not. It looks like it's undergoing renovation until you peer a little closer. The scaffolding seems to have been in place for years, there's little evidence of movement in the grass and the railings are in need of a lick of paint.

I'll be keeping an eye on this one.



The main reason I chose this shot of the store. I imagine this is what you look like when you try and assemble the bathroom.



You don't need a blow-up to see more evidence of the city road-works. A recent Liverpool Echo article reported a 15% drop in trade at nearby businesses. The effect is such that Rapid is reporting on the progress on its website.

If you look on the fence you can see that the smaller businesses are also taking steps to keep their customers informed.

Rapid Hardware. Renshaw Street

Those who complain about the demise of independent retailers in Britain's towns and cities could take heart from the tale of Rapid Hardware. I remember as a kid visiting the hardware store on Renshaw Street. Then it was probably one, or maybe two, store fronts and a place one could buy tools, paints and all the little bits and pieces you need to finish a job. Now Rapid sprawls the whole length of the street with a kitchen and bathroom department, furnishing shop, specialist garden shop and a **whole store** just for paint!

I love going to Rapid. The result of its slow creep along the road is a labyrinthine store with multiple entrances, exits and tiny little alcoves stuffed with ancient rawl plugs. Unlike at the DIY superstore your paint tin will be individually priced, when you reach the counter you will be met with the comforting *ching* of a mechanical till and they even have an ink stamp for your cheque. I've never tried to pay by credit card but I bet it gets done on the old card printers (actually, I imagine they've converted to chip and pin now. That'll be a disappointment). The best part is having your nails/screws/whatever packed into a brown paper bag instead of a stupidly huge plastic carrier

You can bet, too, that they have what you are looking for. When I wanted to paint my house a colour that wasn't beige they had the shade I needed. Admittedly it was right at the back of the shelf and covered in dust but doesn't that just add to the charm? And the lead poisoning is hardly noticeable.

Two views from the same spot.

This is a weird one. Just as Mount Pleasant begins we pass a small memorial garden (below) hemmed by extensive renovation work. A couple of years ago I was looking into Unitarianism in Liverpool and discovered that this is a memorial to Renshaw Street Chapel—a short-lived structure which nevertheless attracted many local notables to the congregation. The writer William Roscoe is buried here and the Rathbone family had a strong association with it.

Notice how lovely the railings are here compared to those outside St Andrew's. The helpful man passing was quite bemused that I wanted the railings in my photograph.

It's now opposite an ugly multi-story car park.



The Grand Central Building

Originally a Methodist centre the Grand Central Building is a fantastic art nouveau construction sat right in the middle of Renshaw Street. While this shot of the back of the building doesn't feature the intricate stonework it does neatly capture what I find marvellous about the city at the moment. You're wandering along looking at a corrugated fence and then—boom— you look up at a monumental dome and wonder what it was, and what on earth it is now..

Recently Grand Central was a bar complex, closed, was renovated and went up for sale last year. I thought it was still closed but a quick web search seems to point to part of it becoming a gym for John Moores University. This must come as a comfort to the local Methodists who probably cringed if they passed late at night and saw the scantily-clad drunken girls spilling out.

Talking Balls

Much to my amazement I received *letters* following the publication of **MB1**

rich brown (DrGafia)

My first LOC arrived soon after MB1 appeared on eFanzines. Reproduced in all it's glory because, as you can see, it was longer than any of the articles.

MORE BALLS made an interesting read on efanazines but in future you probably need to put your email address in it -- embedded so it can be clicked on for response, if that's a possibility -- if you ever hope to get much in the way of feedback. Most of which, I'm convinced, would be positive, if that's the concern.

I realised soon after publication that I'd missed the address from MB1. The proof-reader has been soundly thrashed

You know, you may have hit on something quite profound on your first page. At least, it hits a responsive chord in me, since I've long felt that, if there's one big problem shared by virtually *all* fanzines, it's something that can be summed up in a single word: content. Every blasted one of them seems to feel they have to have it. Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why that is? Why must they all conform? And who says? Are there no individualists left in the microcosm, or must everyone march in lock step? Why does not some bold young fan editor come along and throw down the gauntlet, saying as he (or she, I'm no sexist) does so, in no uncertain terms, "An end! No more! Enough!?" And maybe a few other things like that.

I mean, fanzines of every kind and description are just full up, right up to the bottom of their final pages in most cases, with articles and columns and editorials, and sometimes even artwork, and sometimes ending pages with just fillers, but, still, all of it seeming to sit up and beg for thoughtful response, intelligent feedback, meaningful egoboo -- and, really, who has to go to a great deal of bother just to provide that, if not

people like me? And it just keeps going on and on.

All that content, on both sides of that equation, takes a lot of time and effort and thought. Time and effort and thought which -- once we get over our plebeian and so-last-century notions of "content" -- could be given over to something useful. Like manufacturing magnetic golfballs.

Right now we're publishing them -- fanzines, I mean, not magnetic golfballs -- editing them, writing for them, drawing for them, responding to them. So isn't it about time we started asking ourselves where it will all end? And if it *will* all end? We're coming up on 75 years of fanzine publishing next May, and in all that time, from the hektograph to the internet, I don't think anyone has ever really stopped to think about that.

Stop to think about that. You've come up with one really solid idea for cutting down content -- increasing the size of your type. Where do you go from there? Perhaps -- I realize this is probably revolution I'm talking here -- making the pages smaller. Hey, this is the internet; why should paper conventions determine the size of a page in the modern age? We need some free form thinking here.

Smaller pages. Larger type. Fewer words. Each issue smaller than the one that came before. Until, finally, ultimately, it could be brought down to two pages that wouldn't even have to contain any real words or drawings at all. Maybe 30 pt type on a 1x1" page. The first page would be simply a dash, "--", indicating that there is more to follow, while the second (and final) page would, perhaps in 48 pt type, be a period, ".", indicating that the reader had reached the end. The response could be every bit as elegant and simple -- a "?" from people who didn't understand, a "," from those who want you to slow down, a "." for people who want you to stop and a "!" for people who wholeheartedly approve of where you're going. Why, the possibilities are virtually finite.

Tempting.

Still, bad idea to publish nothing at

all. That would not do. I've never been one to advocate going to extremes, so I certainly don't want to start now.

Truth to tell, I *did* kindof like the content on the second page, so perhaps you'd best leave this notion to someone else. Farm it out, see if you can get them to pay you for the idea, maybe cut me in for a bit of it. *I'm treating the publication of the idea as establishing our copyright. I'll let you know if anyone bites.*

What you were saying about driving hit a *really* responsive chord, even though I've been driving for 40 years or more, and was even a cab driver for about six years. But just today, I did one of those boneheaded things you were talking about. Most week-days, I drive my ex-wife's daughter to her ballet class. It was *extremely* cold this morning, with a little snow on the ground, so my ex called to say if it was too icy in my neighborhood (my little VW can't back over a small snowdrift) she could do it, instead. But the roads were dry, so I said I'd do it. A block or so from my house, though, I noticed I was having real problems getting my car up to speed. I pulled to the side of the road, made sure none of the tires were flat -- that had happened a month or so back, but not this time. Got back in, started up and *again* just couldn't get up much speed. Again pulled to the side of the road, checked all around: Nothing. With a sigh, I decided I'd best get back to the house, give my ex a call, let her know that something -- weather-related, I assumed, but didn't know (I'm so mechanically disinclined people won't let me go near a wheelbarrow) -- had happened to my car. As I neared my driveway, however, I happened to look down, and realized what the problem was -- my handbrake was still on.

All of which reminds me of that old joke: "I hope to die just like my grandfather, peacefully, in my sleep - not screaming in terror like the other passengers in the car he was driving at the time."



In contrast I received this from
James Bacon:

nice to see more balls

James more cock



Lloyd Penney

Potatoes...my wife Yvonne has a recipe that will turn a potato into candy. It's basically boil a potato until it's soft, and then add icing sugar until it forms a heavy paste. It's good, and it's good for freaking people out when they enjoy it, and you tell them it's made with potatoes.

*I'm highly impressed by the sending of unsolicited potato recipes and encourage them. Unsolicited **potatoes** are another matter*

Not bad for commenting on a two-page fanzine, hm? If you decide to put more More Balls on paper or .pdf, let me know, and I'll write up another letter, just like this. Guess you'd have to have a letter column, hm? Or not... If there's another issue, I'll see you then.

True to his word Lloyd sent me comments on MB2 even though publication problems mean it's yet to make it onto eFanzines.

Well, I don't have a LiveJournal, or any kind of blog, unlike about 80% of fandom these days, so I'll have to take what your fellow LJers are saying about you. Especially about potatoes, I suppose. If saying Oobledegoo! at various politicians can get rid of them, want to come over here for a few weeks? You could turn Ottawa in a ghost town, and by association, a sane city.

I'm afraid my powers of Oobledegoo! Have been greatly exaggerated. If they worked Westminster would be empty.

I read Lord of the Rings when I was about 10 or 11, long before my mother was bringing home SF anthologies from the local library. Read The Hobbit around the same time, too. Perhaps it was started my own quest for adventure and fantasy in my reading habits. Libraries do the book loaning; I don't. I've been bitten

too many times, and this was a lesson hard-learned.

I think I've learned to only loan books I really don't like.



Claire Brialey

Be afraid. Be very afraid. You are now part of a category whose other member is Ian Sorensen. See if you can guess that you have in common:

- (a) his house is being bought to be knocked down;
- (b) he has a curious obsession with potatoes;
- (c) he writes in his fanzine about his bizarre experiences with cars;
- (d) he has produced another issue of said fanzine just before I managed to send a letter in response to the previous one.

(Clue: one of these things is not true. So far as I know.)

Answers on a postcard, please.

Nonetheless, at least I now know it's not entirely my fault after all; you're possibly the only person who even pretended to pay attention to my Novacon exhortations to write more for fanzines, and I refuse to believe my influence could extend to a second issue.

Do not underestimate the power of the Croydon side.

Your suggestions about how to fill space suggest to me that you have been in APAs (Amateur Press Associations). I remain convinced that every APA contains at least one member who wants desperately to remain a part of it, but not enough to actually make time to contribute properly. So they produce the minimum activity requirement (minac) – i.e. the lowest number of pages at the longest interval sufficient to retain their place. Thus you've considered and rejected many favourite tricks: making the font bigger, writing about the dilemma of filling the space, writing about food, printing a picture of your cat etc. However, I'm afraid you failed at the relatively elementary tests of:

- having an enormous heading that takes up half the front page;
- increasing the margins, the spacing between lines and between

paragraphs, and any other creative use of white space you can think of, up to and including a blank page;

- using lots of standard clip art;
- reprinting stuff from magazines and newspapers that you found funny or bizarre;
- *writing* about your cat;
- printing *pictures* of potatoes (OK, no one in any APA I've been in has actually done that. But you could. Mr Potatohead is a step in the right direction, but you could do so much more. We demand Potato of the Month!)

Be careful what you wish for.

- using all the space to moan about having nothing to write about until it, and your readership, miraculously goes away.

You do read my livejournal, don't you?

Alternatively, you could continue with my preferred option in this case, which is to include more of your own writing about stuff that interests you. (I've always found your stories of work disasters averted to be hugely entertaining, for instance – in a way that's probably thoroughly unsympathetic of me. I have hopes that the 'Culture' issue you promise includes some potential for Tales from the Lab, even if that is stretching a point...)

I did try and write something amusing about my time at the bench but I've been away so long (coming up to five years) that my memory is hazy at best. Everything I wrote seemed to turn into an essay on mitotic mapping in Aspergillus, anyway, revealing far too much about my fascination with fungus and not enough about the funny world of lab dynamics.

I also enjoyed the roundabouts in #1. My father has often claimed that he'd like to borrow a tank to drive around in for a day, not least to have the ability to drive over roundabouts without anyone feeling much moved to argue.

When I drove the Morris Minor I longed for a front-mounted water cannon. What bliss!



The Childers Express

By James Shields

When I was very small, a politician by the name of Erskine Childers ran in the Irish presidential election. He was considered something of an outside chance, but my Dad made a bet with a colleague that he'd win. After everyone got over the upset (with the possible exception of Tom O'Higgins, the losing candidate), my Dad took his winnings and 'invested' them in a battery powered Lego train set, which my grandmother named the 'Childers Express', and I played with it for many years after. Unfortunately very little of the original Childers Express remains today, but its legacy lives on.

These days kids have it easy. Not that we had it particularly hard, but kids now seem to always have the latest cool toys that the television tells them they need, the latest video games, designer clothes and they always have it now. Our multi-channel web-enabled interactive culture is bringing up a new generation of highly trained consumers.

This is starting to sound like a Monty Python sketch, "you think you had it bad? In my day..." But that's not where I'm going at all. All I'm saying is that we didn't get quite so much, so we appreciated what we had a little more. Except for that spoiled brat in third Class [3]. He didn't appreciate anything.

Now, when you didn't get new toys, you had to find ways to get more out of them, and that meant using your imagination, something that is regrettably being bred out of children these days. This meant we had to think of new ways of playing with things, and is the reason I always smile when I hear stories of children being given expensive toys, and they end up playing with the box. Obviously the box had more potential for imagination than the toy.

So, given a choice of toys, it was hardly surprising we'd pick the one

that could be any number of toys. Not only that, every time you got a new set, it added a whole lot of new things we could create from our existing sets. The exponentially increasing permutations was the major attraction for kids in the seventies and eighties. Although these traits were shared to varying degrees by Mecano, model trains, Airfix kits, Matchbox cars, dolls houses and 8-bit microcomputers, I don't think anything else had quite the versatility of Lego to be a skyscraper, an Apollo lander, a crane, a truck, a fleet of alien battleships, a helicopter and a drag racer, all in a single afternoon.

I'm not suggesting that kids don't have imagination any more, but it's a lot harder for them than it used to



be, bombarded by cartoons, movies and computer games, not to mention commercials. Signs of thinking and imagining in young people need to be carefully nurtured, for they are likely to find themselves in a future where such skills are in short supply and highly sought.

One of the things Lego can take some credit for is training a generation of architects, engineers and computer programmers. Of course, the universities deserve some recognition too, but a lot of the ground work was laid by toys like Lego. These disciplines all require a certain mindset, and kids who played with Lego can instinctively see how to break down problems into logical pieces. While playing with Lego is not a prerequisite to these disciplines, I've consis-

tently noticed how those who grew up with it can 'see' how to break down a problem more readily than those who didn't. Classic Lego bricks are very good at making regular, static, shapes with right-angle corners, but not so great for moving entities. As far back as the eighties, Lego began branching out into Lego Technic, which was geared for more mechanical engineering tasks with lots of gears and moving bits. Over the years this has got more, well, technical introducing more advanced features like motors, pistons and pneumatics.

A more recent addition is the Lego Mindstorms robotics, which allow a programmable microcontroller to be connected to sensors, motors and lights, allowing quite complex robots to be built out of Lego. A clever aspect is the way programs can be built out of components in a PC, just like Lego bricks, then downloaded to the microcontroller, giving the robot life.

Lego suffered a bit of a decline in the nineties and had to reinvent itself to win back the attention spans of kids. This led to many new series or 'themes'.

Among the most popular are those based on movies, such as Star Wars, Spiderman, Harry Potter and Jurassic Park. These have attracted many adult collectors, and often spark controversy as whether Lego's designs capture the essence of the subject. They have also created new fantasy worlds such as 'Bionicles', which use new brick shapes which combine in unconventional ways, and it is rare to find a conventional Lego stud at all. These have spawned several popular television movies of their own, and a growing fan base. The poseable action figures that can be rebuilt in many different ways could be one reason for this. Many 'traditional' Lego builders don't 'get' them, but I can vouch for a new generation who love them.

Another area that Lego have attempted to branch into is computer

games. Although the results of this have been questionable, the recent "Lego Star Wars" game has proved very popular. More serious designers will be more interested in the range of fan produced Lego design software, such as LDraw and MLCad. These have the ability to link into 3D rendering programs producing truly stunning results. Lego have caught on to the potential of these at last, and produced its own "Lego Digital Designer". Although not as capable as the independent productions, it does have the edge in terms of ease of use.



Mummy!

A common complaint of current Lego sets is that they have too many specialised parts. While its true that there are now a lot of uniquely shaped pieces, Lego's designers do generally go to quite a bit of effort to produce parts that will have a variety of uses. Many of the smaller sets may have a quite limited number of useful permutations, but even before special parts this was largely true. Lego have clearly identified people who grew up in the 70s and 80s and now have jobs and money as a prime market, and have produced sets specifically geared towards them. These often make large models to realistic scales. They will typically have a lot of pieces and be quite expensive, but for collectors they are well worth it. A lot of kids who grew up with Lego never seem to have quite grown out of it. Many of them continue building in-

creasingly complex models, some containing vast numbers of parts and taking years to complete.

For years, Lego collectors have formed clubs and user groups. More recently, the internet has allowed them to make contacts across the world, opening new avenues to exchange hard-to-find bricks and display completed models. Groups such as LUGNET, the international Lego user's group, and UKLUG, it's British variant have forged a worldwide network of dedicated builders. Type Lego into eBay, and you will be confronted with thousands of items from the most common bricks to rare Lego sets from the 1960s, as well as sellers' own creations. Other websites are more specific. Bricklink allows builders to search for specific bricks, and to find people who have just that brick for sale. Many of the sellers are private collectors selling off their surplus, but quite a few dedicated companies have sprung up to meet the secondary brick market. Other sites, such as Brickshelf offer a forum for builders to display their creations, and some random browsing bears testament to the huge variety of models being built.

Almost every branch of SF fandom has its own group of modellers. At this year's Eastercon, those who ventured up to the Lego room on Saturday will have borne witness to a lot of Star Wars Lego, quite a variety of other SF themes including Harry Potter, Spiderman, Star Wars, The A-Team, The Prisoner and Dr Who. At the Glasgow Worldcon we hope to introduce a new generation with Lego Battle Trains. The plan is to give kids a train base and wheels and provide a selection of bricks to let them build their fighting train on top. When they finish, they can put their trains on tracks and battle it out until a winner emerges. And at the end of it, they get to keep their creation. Today the Childers Express rolls on. The track and rolling stock may be all new, but the spirit of the original is still there. And a new generation of Lego fans are ready to take up the mantle.

Web Links:

Lego www.lego.com
 Lego Factory www.legofactory.com
 Bricklink www.bricklink.com
 Brickshelf www.brickshelf.com
 LDraw www.ldraw.org
 MLCad www.lm-software.com/mlcad
 LUGNET www.lugnet.com
 UKLUG www.uklug.org.uk

Footnotes:

[3] The Irish school system is divided into primary and secondary, with primary years being called 'classes' and secondary classes being called 'years'. Third class students would typically be 8-9 years old.



More Balls is available "for the usual" from:

*Ang Rosin
 26 Hermitage Grove
 Bootle
 Merseyside
 United Kingdom
 L20 6DR*

lister@liv.ac.uk

Or as a pdf file via that new fangled interweb thingy:

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/~lister/balls/>

A page that also includes links of interest connected with this fanzine.

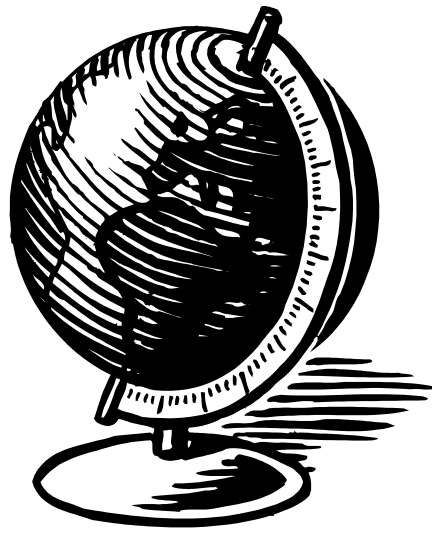
Ang's livejournal is at:

http://ang_grrr.livejournal.com/

For all you ever wanted to know about the standard of vegetable identification in the general population..

Cut

Cut



Cut

Fold

Even More Balls