

Visions of Paradise

#124



Visions of Paradise #124

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Artwork

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Out of the Depths

This was a good year both for listening to music and for reading. I bought a new Jeep Compass last summer, and it came with Sirius Satellite Radio pre-paid for one year, so my listening was enhanced from two local college radio stations (one of which I can only get for the first 20 minutes eastward, and the other for the last 20 minutes) to a variety of rock, jazz, blues, and bluegrass music. Admittedly I listen to the rock stations primarily, especially three: *The Vault*, which plays classic rock but no singles and a large smattering of progressive rock; *Little Steven's Underground Garage*, the same "Little Steven" who is also known as Miami Steve Van Zandt of the E Street Band and who selects primarily lesser-known artists making basic roots rock 'n' roll; and *E Street Radio*, playing exclusively music by Bruce Springsteen 24 hours a day. Yes, I am a Bruce fan! But I do enjoy the other stations periodically.

I bought or received as gifts 23 cds this year, ranging from *Folk-Rock Founders*, a British compilation of folk rock, bands such as Fairport Convention, Lindisfarne, and The Strawbs, to classic Jethro Tull albums (**Minstrel in the Gallery** and **Songs From the Wood**). My favorite albums this year are Richard Thompson's **Sweet Warrior**, which shows him at the top of his form, and The Decemberists' **The Crane Wife**, a gorgeous progressive rock album.

I bought and received as gifts 36 books this year (which I'm sure is a drop in the bucket compared to many of my readers), 9 nonfiction, 7 historical fiction, and 20 science fiction. I read a total of 28 books, so I am continuing to put myself farther behind in my attempt to finish reading my entire collection. Right now I have 110 unread books, which is 4 years reading if I don't buy any new books during that period. Ain't gonna happen...

I have only a single requirement for books to make my best-of-the-year list. I must have read them in 2007. Publication date does not matter, nor does subject matter or type. My favorite books of the year are:

| | | |
|----|--|---------------------------|
| 1 | Look To Windward | Iain Banks |
| 2 | The Judgment of Caesar | Steven Saylor |
| 3 | The Yiddish Policeman's Union | Michael Chabon |
| 4 | Infinity Beach | Jack McDevitt |
| 5 | Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling | Ross King |
| 6 | Galactic North | Alastair Reynolds |
| 7 | Roma Eterna | Robert Silverberg |
| 9 | Fourth Planet from the Sun | Gordon Van Gelder, editor |
| 10 | Helix | Eric Brown |

The Passing Scene

November 2007

In 1994 I was weary of dealing with an incompetent math supervisor who made unreasonable demands of his teachers, never carried through on his duties, and blamed everybody else for his failings. I seriously considered leaving teaching for a math supervisors' jobs elsewhere, but fortunately I did not do so, since the next year Fei Fei was my independent study student. To have missed teaching that year would have been terrible, since over the years she has practically become a member of my immediate family.

A good side effect of my friendship with Fei Fei was that I became friendlier with my students afterwards than I had been previously. Without her I would never have gotten as close to Veda, Amin, Denise, Kai, Padma, Preeti or Rabbit as I did. But I always assumed I would never have another student as special as she was. Last summer I was anxious to retire since there is so much writing I want to do which I have been unable to do because of the time constrictions of teaching. Plus, seeing Alan and Denise enjoying their retirement and travels made me jealous. Even though I knew this year's senior class is a particularly nice one, I still was not looking forward to devoting another year to teaching.

But, as I discussed last month, this year's students are a very special group, with several of them among my very favorite students ever, especially Sun Hee whom I did not know until this year but who has already become special to me. My friend Damaris has an office adjacent to mine, and she told me recently it is a shame that I have no daughters since I am so good with the girls in the Math Lab. I told her that those kids are like my daughters, and she agreed that many of them need a sympathetic father figure, and she is very happy that I have "adopted" them.

So my thoughts about retirement have taken a totally different turn for now. Last summer it looked inviting to stay home and read/write at my own leisure. But since she has started working with me, Jean has commented that the difference in my personality between home and school is even more pronounced than she realized. At school I am outgoing, popular with students and teachers, self-assured, and surrounded by people whom I like a lot and who, in many cases, are important to me. How can I possibly give up such an important portion of my life and restrict myself to the total hermit-like existence which I have outside school? Will I be miserable the last 20 years of my life without my students and the Math Lab? But surely I cannot keep teaching forever, since the stress of the job will get to me eventually. ☺

This is a very stressful time of year for my seniors, partly because of their extensive schedule of Advanced Placement classes (many of them take AP History, English, Science, and Language as well as having either having me twice for AP Calculus BC and AP Statistics or me for AP Statistics and Jean for Calculus), but also because of the pressure of writing college applications, including numerous essays. I have had several counseling sessions with stressed seniors, and the box of tissues on my desk has certainly gotten use. I have encouraged several of them to stay home a day to work on applications, and they have generally taken my advice. I'm not sure the other teachers approve of my advice, but sometimes the welfare of the students is more important than their being in school every single day.

I had activities this month for both my Asian clubs. The Indian Culture Club had our annual *Diwali Family Dinner* which was very well-run and enjoyable. The parents brought an incredible amount of great food, and the activities, including dancing and a contest in which the families drew posters using only colored sand, were very successful.

The Asian-American Club had a *Game Night* which was the best-attended game night we ever had. I really like spending evenings with my Asian kids, and this year is even better because I have two co-advisors, my wife Jean and Deanna, so I had them to talk with as well.

We also had two fundraisers. ICC sold baked goods and samosas—which, if you never tasted them, are an absolutely delicious Indian “finger food,” consisting of potato and vegetables fried in a dough wrapper. AAC sold eggrolls after school and we made a nice profit since we paid only 10¢ each and sold them at 2 for \$1.00. We generally get a good price because inevitably the parents of at least one club member own a Chinese restaurant. We are using the proceeds to pay for our ten-year-old adoptee in Thailand. At an AAC meeting this month the members wrote letters to him, which was nice. Although he cannot read or speak English, he has a translator who also translates his letters to us into English.

I have submitted two dozens queries for the Tibet book to various agents and publishers. So far only one publisher wishes to see the entire manuscript, so we are putting the finishing touches on it slowly in case another publisher makes a similar request, then we can decide which is the better place to send it. But at least there is a nibble of interest out there, which is encouraging.

I have a junior named Li Li who is taking Independent Study Multivariate Calculus with me. She is without doubt the best math/science student the school has had since Fei Fei graduated. As a freshman she took Honors Algebra 2 with me, but she was bored in the class, so I let her sit in the back of the room where she finished both Algebra 2 and Precalculus on her own. Last year she took AP Calculus BC as a sophomore, and she was easily the best student in the class. This year she is taking AP Statistics and Independent Study. So in three years the poor girl has had me 4 times as a teacher! She is also the best student on the Math Team. As a sophomore last year she was ranked on the top 30 students in the state out of 5,000+ competing students. Best of all, she is totally humble and unassuming. I suspect she has a bright future ahead of her.

Thanksgiving was its usual combination of restfulness and eating. We had the traditional turkey dinner, although a very small group of 5, the four of us plus Jean’s aunt Ceil who is visiting for two weeks. At 87, she is more lively than most people my own age. I spent most of the weekend getting school chores done, including sending lots of college recommendations. A side effect of having so many nice students is that I have already written 84 recommendations this year, as well as critiquing numerous college essays.

For several years I have been thinking about writing a book about the immigrant experience in Parsippany, spurred primarily by Fei Fei and her husband Silvio, as well as a few of my former students whom I have “interviewed” for background material for the book. But I’ve never come up with a “hook” for the book, and unless it has a theme running through it, it would only become a collection of individual students’ stories, which could be deadly boring or repetitious.

So in an effort to spur my thoughts on the process, I have started writing a story set in the same future history as most of my other stories, in a futuristic version of the Math Lab with me and several of my students as characters. Whether this will help me think about the nonfiction book, become a decent story in its own, or be a waste of time will soon be determined.

My principal and I have been friends since 1979 when he was a guidance counselor. He is retiring in January, so I was one of a half-dozen speakers at his retirement dinner. I am not normally a good public speaker, but several people told my speech was good, which was a relief since I was nervous about giving it. I woke up the night before at 2:30am and began rehearsing the speech in my head—not surprisingly, I knew the whole speech from memory even though I had only read it once since writing it. I was exhausted when I got home from the dinner.

Besides all my unread books, I have a huge stack of magazines on my desk which I have not read because I devote my limited reading time to books. They include **Archaeology**, **Historical Novels Review**, **Solander**, **Smithsonian** and **Paste** (which expired a year ago but they kept sending me issues). I enjoy all those magazines, and don't want to let any of the subscriptions expire, except **Smithsonian** which is monthly and impossible to keep up with. None of this has stopped me from joining a cookbook book club, so I ordered 4 new Italian cookbooks—Mario Batali's **Molto Italiano**, Lidia Bastianich's **Lidia's Italy** and **Lidia's Family Table** and Giada De Laurentiis' **Everyday Pasta**—plus a nonfiction book **Heat**, about a *New York Times* reporter who quits his job to apprentice with Mario Batali. I've been interested in that book awhile, so it will be nice to get it. I'm already planning to use some new recipes from those books.

December 2007

This was an unusually-snowy month, with one delayed opening and one early dismissal. Our usual 45 minute drive was stretched to 100 minutes once because of icy roads, and the day of the early dismissal Jean, Nancy and I left PHS at 12:00 noon, but did not get home until 1:35pm. Mark left Prudential at the same time but was home at 1:00pm, so I guess Route 10 was faster than Route 46. Andy was supposed to go to work at 3:00pm that day, but I phoned him while we were driving and told him the roads were terrible, so he stayed home. Since he has never taken a sick day, or even a vacation day, they will not complain that he told them our roads were too bad for him to get to work—which was certainly true. We live 25 miles further inland than Parsippany, but at a considerably higher elevation as well, so our temperature is usually 5° lower which, in this instance, was enough to make the roads considerably worse. The advantage of getting home nearly three hours early was that I made homemade pizza to go with the pea soup which Jean had prepared the previous night and started cooking in the crockpot using a timer.

I culled about 25-30 books from my collection, books I did not particularly enjoy and will never reread and which were basically taking up space on my shelves. I brought them to school and gave them to my brother David and George, the Physics teacher who is a big sf fan.

I nominated Sun Hee for *Shop-Rite Star* and she was selected in the Leadership category. So her picture will be displayed in the local Shop-Rite for the rest of the year. She was very happy, capping a really good week for her. She also gave her argument in A.P. U.S. Government,

defending George W. Bush against the charge of warrantless wiretapping. She was the only member of the Republican team who won her class vote as beating her Democrat opponents. Some kids in Jean's Calculus class (which Sun Hee takes along with my AP Statistics) told Jean that Sun Hee was very good. She enjoys debating and researches her information thoroughly, a good combination.

Because I have been writing more recommendations than usual this year, and possibly because so many of this year's seniors spend time in the Math Lab with me, I have gotten a bonanza of Christmas presents, including a coffee mug from Sun Hee (who also gave one to Jean); candy from Rachel, Christine, Li and Chendi; a mug and candy from Sruti; a gorgeous book **The Atlas of the Universe** from Ela; a pair of hot coffee mugs from Joy; candy and nuts from Sharan; a candle from Kruti; a Borders gift card from Shiva; toffee from Sabrina; 2 tea cups from Michelle; a chafing dish from Stefanie (which was also for Jean who is Stefanie's Calculus teacher); an art calendar from Li Li; a wallet from Jason; Starbucks cards from Shi and Yun; and two boxes of Greek pastry from Arieta. I also got a Barnes & Noble card from Diana in the department grab-bag. *wow* There is no way I will possibly receive as many gifts on Christmas and Christmas Eve as this.

The Saturday before Christmas I drove to Princeton to pick up Fei Fei who spent two days with us. We had a relaxing weekend, and I took a risk making sausage-stuffed calzones; it was a risk because Fei Fei spends a lot of time in Italy with Silvio eating real Italian food. The second day her parents came for dinner (pea soup and zucchini bread), then they all drove home together.

As usual, Christmas Eve was the busiest day of the holiday season. During the day I cooked *calamari/shrimp/scallop salad*, a huge vegetable salad for 22 people, vacuumed, went to the YMCA, picked up bread at Panera's, wrote a half-dozen college recommendations, went to my brother Stephen & Doreen's house for three hours of Christmas Eve dinner and gift-exchanging. After we got home, the four of us went to Midnight Mass with the boys' friend Drew (our third "son"), then we came home and opened all our Christmas gifts at 1:30am.

My gifts were mostly items on my wish list: Bruce Springsteen's **Magic**, The Strawbs' **Hero and Heroine**, Jack Vance's four-in-one volume **Planet of Adventure**, Michael Chabon's **Gentlemen of the Road**, the Waterboys' **Book of Lightning**, and the first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Jean and Andy got a new one-coffee-cup machine, while Jean also got **The World Encyclopedia of Animals**, an Elizabeth George mystery, and the miniseries *Prime Suspect*. The boys got various cds and dvds.

We stayed home for Christmas dinner, a tradition we started when the boys were young and wanted to spend time playing with their Christmas presents. We ate spiral ham, baked potatoes, beans a la greque, applesauce and cranberry sauce. The eating orgy has not stopped yet!

The Year in Review

The most important events this past year were Jean's two knee surgeries. She had considerable pain in her knee all winter and spring, and at times it buckled while she was teaching. Although the surgeries helped, the surgeon did not find the largest floater which mostly hides somewhere

but pops out occasionally. Jean's knee is constantly sore, especially when the floater pops out, and she thinks she will need more surgery next summer. Hopefully the surgeon will be able to get that largest floater out next time.

Both boys started working fulltime jobs this year. Mark is working in real estate investment accounting and likes the job. Andy is working as a hotel front desk clerk, which is an entry-level job with weird hours and mediocre pay. He will not stay there any longer than necessary.

Fei Fei is teaching at Princeton, which is nice since we see her more than we have for several years. However, her husband's postdoc ends this year and he still has not found a college position nearby, due partly to the statewide freeze in hiring. He has been offered several research jobs in industry, and they have been offered dual jobs at several other universities. If that situation does not change, they will need to decide whether they will leave NJ (which neither of them wants to do) or whether he should leave academia.

Because I was busier than usual this year, I did not get much writing done. Now that the Tibet book is finished, I want to begin serious research for the Route 46 book (historical commentary to go with my photographer friends' several hundred pictures) and the "Math Lab" story.

My favorite cds of the year were Richard Thompson's **Sweet Warrior** and the Decemberists' **The Crane Wife**. The former was Thompson at his folk-rock best, while the latter was an excellent progressive rock album. I have been listening a lot to Sirius Satellite Radio this year since it was installed pre-paid for a year in my new Jeep Compass. I like the variety of music which is so much more varied than over-the-air FM radio, so I will probably renew it when the subscription expires next summer.

My favorite books of the year were Iain Banks' *Culture* novel **Look To Windward** and Steven Saylor's historical mystery **The Judgment of Caesar**. Both of those are free-standing novels in long-running series, which are the type of series I enjoy reading rather than endless novels stretched over three to six books. I will definitely read more books in both series.



Shapers of Science Fiction

Robert H. Davis

Editors such as John W. Campbell, Jr., Hugo Gernsback, and Donald A. Wollheim have had a major influence on the shape of modern science fiction, and have been duly recognized for it. But perhaps the most obscure blue-pencil wielding titan who guided the careers of talented writers while greatly influencing the reading taste of young readers was Bob Davis.

Who?

Although Bob Davis is almost unknown among the names of science fiction's leading editors, his influence was second to none in the era when the field was first developing its loyal readership. Davis was a newspaperman who left San Francisco in 1896 for New York City. There he became a feature writer on such major publications as *The New York World* and *The New York Journal*. Eventually he caught the eye of Frank Munsey who made him fiction editor of the influential *Munsey's Magazine*.

With the advent of the all-fiction pulp magazines around the turn of the century, Davis soon became editor of Munsey's *All-Story Magazine*. Soon afterwards he also took on the editorship of *The Cavalier*, another fiction pulp which eventually merged with *All-Story Weekly* as *All-Story Cavalier Weekly* in 1915.

The period from 1905-1920 was the Golden Age of pulp magazines. Under Davis *All-Story Weekly* was the leading publisher of science fiction in that era (known as "pseudoscience stories", a phrase created by Davis himself). Davis' most successful writer was Edgar Rice Burroughs, whose **Under the Moons of Mars** and **Tarzan of the Apes** both appeared in *All-Story*. The vast majority of Burroughs' output was published by Davis over the next decade.

But Burroughs was just one of many important science fiction writers published by Davis. The entire list reads like a Who's Who of pre-Gernsback science fiction: A. Merritt, Garrett P. Serviss, George Allan England, Charles B. Stilson, J.U. Giesy, Max Brand, Ray Cummings, Homer Eon Flint, and Austin Hall.

Davis was not a passive editor who merely sat back and waited for stories to cross his transom. He was as active an editor as John W. Campbell himself, providing many authors with the plot outlines of stories. George Allan England even dedicated his classic trilogy **Darkness and Dawn** to "Robert H. Davis, Unique Inspirer of Plots."

In 1920 *All-Story Weekly* was absorbed into part of *Argosy All-Story Weekly*. Shortly thereafter, without any fanfare, Bob Davis abruptly left Munsey and vanished completely from the genre, never to be heard from again. Yet he was the main shaper of a large readership that was tapped by Hugo Gernsback a decade later. Modern fans and writers of science fiction should all be familiar with his name.

Chronology

| | |
|------|---|
| 1869 | Born March 23 in Brownsville, Nebraska |
| 1904 | Becomes fiction editor of <i>Munsey's Magazine</i> |
| 1905 | Becomes editor of <i>All-Story Magazine</i> |
| 1908 | Becomes editor of <i>The Cavalier</i> |
| 1911 | Garrett P. Serviss' The Second Deluge published in <i>The Cavalier</i> |
| 1912 | Under the Moons of Mars and Tarzan of the Apes , by Edgar Rice Burroughs, published in <i>All-Story</i> |
| 1912 | George Allan England's Darkness and Dawn published in <i>The Cavalier Weekly</i> |
| 1914 | <i>All-Story Weekly</i> begins weekly publication |
| 1918 | The Moon Pool , by A. Merritt, published in All-Story Weekly |
| 1919 | Ray Cummings' The Girl in the Golden Atom published in <i>All-Story Weekly</i> |
| 1920 | <i>All-Story Weekly</i> merges with <i>Argosy</i> to form <i>Argosy-All-Story Weekly</i> |
| 1920 | Bob Davis leaves <i>Argosy-All-Story Weekly</i> |

Wondrous Stories

There seems to be an entire cult of fans built around the *Liaden Universe* series by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, almost as large as the cults of *Darkover* and *Pern* fans. Since the Liaden novels fall into the culture_building genre, I bought the first omnibus **Pilot's Choice** about a year ago. The first novel in the book **Local Custom** is a promising first novel in the series, an elaborate novel-of-manners which went a long way toward explaining the customs and manners of the Liaden world (I recently posted its review at my blog dated 11/24/07).

The second novel in the book **Scout's Progress** is basically a romance between Daav, the delm (head) of the most important family on Liad, and Aelliana, a brilliant mathematician who is kept subjugated by her brother, the egotistical nadelm (heir) of her own lesser family. Both of them have secret lives outside their families. Daav is an experienced spaceship pilot (scout) who sneaks away from his family to work at a spaceship repair shop with some of his former mates from his days as a fulltime pilot. Aelliana wins a spaceship through gambling—using her mathematical talents to win the game—and begins training as a pilot under Daav with the goal of fleeing Liad entirely in her ship when she is fully certified as a pilot.

Daav, meanwhile, is betrothed to another woman for the sake of his family's future, a woman he neither loves nor particularly wants, but family duty has dictated the choice. That was fine before he met Aelliana, but working closely together has started them gradually and steadily becoming more and more attached emotionally.

Neither Daav nor Aellianna know the other's real identity, so their individual plots weave in and out before finally meshing at the end. Occasionally the novel is frustrating as Daav and Aellianna's secrecy complicates their situations, but never too much so. The novel's ending is very fast-paced and dramatic as Aellianna's situation with her brother reaches a critical and dangerous level.

My main complaint was the black-and-white nature of several characters in the book. Daav is too perfect as the head of his family, displaying few shades of gray even in his dilemma choosing between his betrothed and Aellianna. The worst character is Aellianna's brother who is so totally evil as to be almost a charlatan. And the people at the repair shop display incredible amounts of camaraderie and bonhomie serving as the stereotypical "nice guys" of the novel, creating a womb where both Daav and Aellianna could feel totally comfortable in their second home. Obviously the authors prefer the simpler, lower-class scouts to the upper-class members of the powerful families. Depth of characterization is not Lee & Miller's strength as writers, although they are somewhat better at showing people in conflict (Daav and Aellianna).

From a purely personal viewpoint, this is one of the rare science fiction novels where a protagonist, Aellianna, is a mathematician, a talent which serves as both her major strength and, ultimately, her salvation. A math teacher myself, how could I not like such a character? Overall, I enjoyed **Scout's Progress**, and I look forward to reading more novels in the series.

*

I have been reading several Poul Anderson novellas lately, enjoying his particular brand of historical development and storytelling. The first story "The Big Rain," was in an old anthology **Farewell Fantastic Venus**, edited by Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison, which was sent to me by Brant Kresovitch because of my interest in the two Poul Anderson stories in it (Thanks, Brant!). The anthology is a tribute to the pre-Mariner Venus whose traditional, romantic vision was destroyed by the spacecraft's arrival. "The Big Rain" is also in a recent Anderson collection **To Outlive Eternity**, which also contains two excellent short novels "The Day After Doomsday" and "To Outlive Eternity," the original version of Anderson's best novel **Tau Zero**.

"The Big Rain" is the story of the colonization of Venus. Anderson views the planet as a desert world, devoid of water and the ability to sustain agriculture. The planetary government is totalitarian, with most colonists having few, if any, civil rights. The title refers to a long-range plan to terraform Venus, a plan which will take several hundred years, and for which the current colonists are struggling to achieve for the sake of their grandchildren.

The Venusian colonists are in a struggle with Earth to maintain their independence from the homeworld, a struggle which they seem destined to win since Earth is not willing to expend the money necessary to send a fleet to distant Venus to retain control over it. So why is the Venusian government so totalitarian? The main character of "The Big Rain" is an Earth spy studying the government and determined to overthrow it somehow. This story was written in the mid-1950s, so neither the characters nor the milieu are as well-developed as they might have been in later Anderson. There was a bit too much emphasis on the plot rather than on the world

and its people, but overall it was interesting reading.

Jumping ahead to very late Anderson is “The Bog Sword,” which appeared in Harry Turtledove & Noreen Shaw’s anthology **First Heroes**, stories devoted to adventures in the Bronze Age (a period which varied worldwide, but was generally set between 2,000 - 500 B.C.). This story was published after Anderson’s death, so it was written nearly five decades after “The Big Rain” and represents a lifetime of writing growth. Two of science fiction’s core foundations are historical development and societal change, and “The Bog Sword” illustrates both of them well, since it is set in a Bronze Age Scandinavian society which is having its first encounter with Celtic invaders wielding iron swords. The protagonists are relatively peaceful people, while the Celts are relatively hostile, a true historical reflection as the iron-wielding Celts ravaged much of Europe before being stopped by the Germans and, ultimately, the Romans.

“The Bog Sword” is a tale of conflict between the old and the new. Its characterization is far beyond that of “The Big Rain,” and its historical setting is much more fully-developed. It has enticed me to read more latter-day Anderson as well as more of **First Heroes**.

I also read “The Funeral March of the Marionettes,” by Adam_Troy Castro, an acclaimed novella in July 1997 *F&SF* which reminded me of Michael Bishop’s classic story “Death and Designation Among the Asadi.” It is anthropological sf about a bizarre race of aliens who resemble giant bowling balls with dozens of flexible tentacles who gather in the thousands each year to commence a long, graceful group dance which only ends when each participant dies from exhaustion. Watching the annual spectacle are dozens of anthropologists and linguists from different worlds, and one year as they are watching they see a human girl has joined the dance.

The story is concerned with the protagonist’s attempt to save the girl from death in the funeral dance, as well as his attempts to understand both why she should would willingly die for the dance and why the Vlhan do their deathly dance at all. The story successfully combines anthropological exploration with an exciting plot, and overall was an outstanding novella which should be a classic for many years to come.

Halcyon Days

Brant Kresovitch

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Nov 26, 2007

Re *construction workers*. On one hand, I know that builders can’t do much about the noise power tools and demolition make or the delays of suppliers or other crews. But on the other, I find it hard to cut them slack. I still haven’t forgiven the builders that busted up raised beds that My Bride and I built ourselves while they put up my garage. Not so much as a sorry, not so much as an oops, not so much as explanation as to why such thorough de_construction had to take place. Imagine my malicious pleasure when the city fined the company for violating code on that job.

Re *Sick at School*. I was sick for two weeks at the beginning of the school year. Lots of new

students bring new germs to get used to.

Re *Best All-Time Novellas*. Zelazny's "He Who Shapes" sounds like **The Dream Master**, one of the few SF novels I read this year. Psychoanalyst Charles Render can do psycho_therapy by controlling the clients' dreams. Resident in Psychiatry Eileen Shallot (female, beautiful, blind from birth) challenges him to analyze her though both run risks in such an untested situation. I thought that the thin plot and lack of incident and lack of Zelaznian laffs were made up for by heavy ideas, snappy dialogue, and good characterization (including a kind of semi_talking seeing eye dog that brought to mind Scooby_Doo).

To my horror, I noted that the only other one on that list I'd read was "Soldier, Ask Not" and that was about 20 years ago.

Re **Joseph Major's comment re Robin Williams**. I think the best aspect of *One Hour Photo* was its setting, decor, and mood. All the interiors were slick and tidy—the upscale house furnishings of the unhappy couple, the nightmarish department store where Williams' character worked—in contrast to the dark creepy obsessions of the photo guy. At an office party recently I was telling a grad student about Williams and Shelly Duvall in *Popeye* (1980). He couldn't believe that Robert Altman directed a live action comic strip musical. I told him to rent it to enjoy the ditty :"Everything is Food,"but it's a movie you like or dislike intensely.

Re **Rich Dengrove's comment: Supposedly what killed the Mars of Leigh Brackett and Edgar Rice Burroughs was Mariner IV**, which, in 1965, photographed Mars' barren surface. Right now I'm reading **Farewell, Fantastic Venus**, an anthology put together by Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss. The Venera expedition in 1968 showed that, contrary to SF depictions, Venus was not another Earth, only hotter and more humid. To give the out-of-date portrait of Venus a send off, Harrison and Aldiss put together this anthology. The collected pieces range from high literary fantasy by C.S. Lewis to pulpy Edgar Rice Burroughs. It has a dystopic novella called "The Big Rain" by Poul Anderson. It also has non_fiction about Venus.

[“He Who Shapes” was the original version of the novel **The Dream Master**. I am not sure which I enjoyed better, since I read both about 30 years. Perhaps I should go back and reread **Four For Tomorrow**, Zelazny's first collection containing 4 of his early novellas, including “A Rose For Ecclesiastes.” It is perhaps the best single-author collection I have ever read.

[Thanks for sending me **Farewell Fantastic Venus**. So far I've read the two Poul Anderson stories, and liked them both, so I am anticipating more good reading sometime.]

John Purcell

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Dec 1, 2007

You know, I think I like this new format you're trying out by blending *Passing Scene*, *Wondrous Stories*, and *Halcyon Days*. This gives you the chance to talk about things that are of interest to you, address topics to open them up for discussion (which is what *Wondrous Stories* always does

with its book and author reviews), and *Halcyon Days* is your letter column. Maintaining "Listmania" keeps things fun and interesting, and the joke pages have always been a good way to wrap up an issue.

So how long do you think you're gonna run with this to see how it "feels" to you? For what it's worth, I like this organization, so the question becomes frequency. The nice thing about e_publishing is that the technology makes it possible to knock these zines out once a month, if not faster. As you know, I have slowed down a bit by making **Askance** a bi_monthly, and that has been working out very well. But like you said last month in **VoP** #122, you will see how this works out.

Actual school construction hasn't been a problem at my institution, but its been the road construction on one of the main drags that leads to Blinn College that was a real disaster for traffic flow, especially at the start of the semester. Getting in and out of the main parking lot from 29th was blocked off, so everybody (unless you came in the back way to get to the faculty lots) had to come in via Villa Maria Road, which created a major traffic snarl for the first month of classes. As 29th Street work progressed and lanes were opened up one at a time, the snarls untangled a bit, but it was still nasty, and students (some faculty, too) were consistently late to class. The widening project of 29th Street has now been over since the end of October, so all is well – unless they start working on Villa Maria Road, and that would be a major hassle since that entrance/exit to campus really IS the main way into the parking lots.

Hmm... I better not say this too loudly so that the Bryan city engineers don't get any ideas.

I have never heard of Jack McDevitt. **Infinity Beach** and **Deepsix** sound like they'd be good introductions into his milieu, so here are a couple more books to read that I know I never will have time to read. Knock it off, will ya, Robert? Sheesh... Speaking of reading material, I have read many of those novellas listed. Lots and lots of great stories; my favorites in here (in no particular order) were "The Big Front Yard," "The Time Machine," "Born with the Dead," "Ill Met in Lankhmar," and "Surface Tension." Lots and lots of wonderful stories listed here. If anybody ever needed ideas on what science fiction to read, pretty much anything from this list would be a great way to start. I would recommend not starting with Lovecraft, though; that might turn some readers off due to its writing style and subject matter.

Richard Dengrove said that I might have forgotten about *Star Wars* being deliberately "tongue_in_cheek" when first made, and no, I did not. In fact, that was one of that film's big attractions: its marvelous sense of "this is fun stuff we're making here" without being any kind of a distraction to the story line. You could easily tell the actors, actresses and everybody else involved in the initial *Star Wars* movie trilogy (*A New Hope*, especially) were having a blast – literally – making that film. It was when Lucas began delving more into character psyches and the mythology of the saga that things got heavy_handed. Unfortunate, but the films were still enjoyable and I, for one, did find the character developments interesting and they made sense in relationship to the other films, which was a nifty concept.

Well, that wraps this loc up. Many thanks for the fine zine, and I look forward to your next one. Good luck with the end of the semester craziness. There is a lot of grading for me to do with

semester projects being turned in right now. Oh, well; it's all in the job description.

[So far I really like the freedom of “mixing and matching,” so I have no plans to change the format anytime soon. When **VoP** began as an apazine twenty years ago, it was one zine with all the component parts. Later I split it up into three separate zines mailed simultaneously (and all sharing the same issue number), much to the chagrin of many of my readers. I think most were actually happier when each component got its own monthly schedule.

[I was never particularly a *Star Wars* fan, tolerating *A New Hope* and liking *The Empire Strikes Back* slightly better, before getting totally turned off by *Return of the Jedi*. I never bothered watching any of the prequels. Right now I’m watching the first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which was my favorite of all the *Star Trek/Wars* and I’m enjoying it greatly.]

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December 6, 2007

It's getting to the point that I'm so far behind, I write more multiple_issue locs than single issue...I have issues 122 and 123 of **VoP**, so here goes with the writings already...

#122...I remember math and calculus being among my best subjects in high school. So how did I wind up in publishing?

I hate stories about how the US annexes Canada. My only consolation is knowing there are separatist movements in Texas, Alaska and Hawaii. Why on earth would the Dutch want to invade Labrador? It's cold and rocky, and there's lots of other places the Dutch could find better land above sea level.

Flash drives...I needed one for work just in case the weather's so bad, I have to take it home and work from it there. I have a 128Mb flash drive on my keychain, and I think the 4Gb drive that will be under the tree will be very handy.

Still at the CNIB...about three weeks away from the end of my probation. I wanna stay!

I don't think you'll regret those two Robin Williams movies I mentioned. *Bicentennial Man* is based on the short story by Asimov and novel by Asimov and Silverberg. I have always enjoyed the fiction of Richard Matheson, and that is the main reason I like *What Dreams May Come*.

#123...I've taken classes in a school under construction...probably, the workers are making as much noise as they can because the kids are razzing them, and a teacher or two are cursing them. That's what happened at that particular public school, anyway...

Good to know there's lots of people behind me, hoping I can last at the CNIB. There's a few people there who say, "Well, if they kept ME, they'll definitely keep you!" I can't see the bosses saying, "We're not going to keep you, but Merry Christmas anyway!" So, I am hoping for the

best and preparing for the worst. Thank you all for your support and good thoughts, and I hope I can offer some good news next time around.

My regular eye exam...my ophthalmologist says that it looks like my retinas have decided to stay in place, but a cataract is starting to form in my right eye. Like I said last loc, I am in the right place to be when it comes to vision care.

[Since it's past Christmas, I sincerely hope you still have a job. One of the reasons my life is so settled is that I lucked into a profession that has been stable for the past 34 years. Good luck with your eyes. I also have the beginnings of a cataract, but my doctor told me it might never actually form, or take decades to do so. Since they're curable, I don't plan on worrying about it.]

On the Lighter Side

Apologies to all the blondes out there, but these jokes are just too funny to resist!

Two blondes living in Oklahoma were sitting on a bench talking, and one blonde says to the other, "Which do you think is farther away, Florida or the moon?" The other blonde turns and says "Helloooooooooo, can you see Florida...?????"

*

A blonde pushes her BMW into a gas station. She tells the mechanic it died. After he works on it for a few minutes, it is idling smoothly. She says, "What's the story?" He replies, "Just crap in the carburetor" She asks, "How often do I have to do that?"

*

A police officer stops a blonde for speeding and asks her very nicely if he could see her license. She replied in a huff, "I wish you guys would get your act together. Just yesterday you take away my license and then today you expect me to show it to you!"

*

There's this blonde out for a walk. She comes to a river and sees another blonde on the opposite bank. "Yoo-hoo!" she shouts, "How can I get to the other side?" The second blonde looks up the river then down the river and shouts back, "You ARE on the other side."

*

A gorgeous young redhead goes into the doctor's office and said that her body hurt wherever she touched it. "Impossible!" says the doctor. "Show me."

The redhead took her finger, pushed on her left breast and screamed, then she pushed her elbow

and screamed in even more. She pushed her knee and screamed; likewise she pushed her ankle and screamed. Everywhere she touched made her scream.

The doctor said, "You're not really a redhead, are you?"

"Well, no" she said, "I'm actually a blonde."

"I thought so," the doctor said. "Your finger is broken."

*

A blonde was playing Trivial Pursuit one night. When it was her turn she rolled the dice and landed on Science & Nature. Her question was, "If you are in a vacuum and someone calls your name, can you hear it?"

She thought for a time and then asked, "Is it on or off?"

*

A girl was visiting her blonde friend, who had acquired two new dogs, and asked her what their names were. The blonde responded by saying that one was named Rolex and one was named Timex.

Her friend said, "Whoever heard of someone naming dogs like that?"

"HELLLOOOOOOO.....," answered the blonde. "They're watch dogs!"

Happy New Year!!