



WeberWoman's Wrevenge

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WEBERWOMAN'S WREVENGE TWENTY-NINE

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CHRISTMAS

I'm not a big fan of Christmas, and neither is Eric, so we ignored it as much as possible. This was made easier by the absence of Leigh and Valma, off to visit friends and relatives for a month. With no one else around, we weren't inadvertently reminded of the allegedly festive season - aside from having 10 days off work, that is.

We did, of course, exchange a few gifts, many of which we then proceeded to eat or drink. What can you get for the man who has 13 computers? Why, another bottle of overproof rum, of course. (Then you have to taste-test it, to ensure it's of suitable standard.)

I flew to Adelaide for five days to visit a friend who'd left CSIRONET just before I did, and for much the same reasons. We had a lovely goofing-off time, reading books, walking her dog, sleeping late, and catching up on a year's worth of gossip. Just the thing to recover from one incredibly busy year and gear up for another.

Eric gave me a coughing ashtray for Christmas, which I donated to the office 'library' (one of the common areas, non-smoking in theory but not in fact). This device sat there for several days before someone discovered what it was. Then it did the rounds of the offices, with people reacting mostly with good humour (some thought it hilarious). Igor, one of the smokers, eventually commandeered it, after disconnecting the battery so it wouldn't cough at him. I still haven't told anybody it's mine.



TECHNICAL WRITING

I hadn't realised how many people who read this fanzine are, or have been, technical writers, until I wrote about my own experiences. Here's two of the responses.

Bev Clark
10501 - 8th Ave NE, #119
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10 January 1988

...your day as a technical writer isn't a whole lot different from mine... I do technical reports, proposals, press releases - often things that involve translating technical into English for an audience with lesser or different technical knowledge. I'm one of the few English majors I know working in anything related to what I was educated in. And I can't think of a better subject area for an SF fan. Nor working environment: where I work, people want convention reports when I tell them I'm spending my vacation at worldcon. One of the lab managers and the general manager have serious discussions over lunch about the relative quality of the sequels to Dune. The chief scientist talks to reporters about Star Wars and Isaac Asimov's Three Laws and how they apply to actual work in robotics. The hardware troubleshooter for the parallel processors has Dr Who posters on his office walls; his office mate has a Star Trek poster.

Buck Coulson
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21 December 1987

My own tech writing was back in the days of typewriters. It was the ideal job for me, since I was the entire technical writing department for the Honeywell factory in Wabash, Indiana. I wrote the text, did the illustrations, and sent the results off to Minneapolis to be printed. Minneapolis shoved the results into a copier, and those were the instructions that went out with the parts.

I had my own office and a minimum of supervision. Officially, I was under the chief engineer, but he had no idea of what I was doing, and let me alone pretty much. My real bosses were hundreds of miles away, and they made no objections to anything I did because if they objected to my work, one of them would be shipped out to the sticks to do it in my place. As long as the customers didn't bitch too much, nobody cared, and evidently the customers didn't complain.

I still recall my problems doing an instruction sheet in Spanish, though. I know nothing about Spanish, so I had to do it by translating, word by word, from a Spanish-English dictionary. Since then, I've quit laughing at the instructions that come with Japanese products... I'm sure I created a lot of amusement in Quito or La Paz or whether the damned thing went.

BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS

The big excitement around Sydney this past January was related to the beginning of the Australian bicentennial celebrations. 1988 marks 200 years of white settlement in Australia. On January 26, 1788, the first fleet of convict ships reached the Sydney area to set up the new British penal colony of New South Wales.

I am among those who think that it's a bit tacky, at least, to make a big celebration about what was in effect the invasion of an inhabited continent (celebrating the date when Australia became a federation in 1901 would be quite a different matter), but I am not adverse to enjoying some of the events that are being held as part of that celebration. (Any excuse for a party...)

In January there were some quite good events centred around sailing ships. One was the arrival of a fleet of tall ships (some of them square-rigged, and several quite large) from countries all over the world. They tied up in Darling Harbour, a redevelopment area soon to include an aquarium, a convention centre, a maritime museum, and other historical and cultural attractions - most of which haven't quite got finished on schedule. Predictions were for huge crowds to visit the ships, so I went over very early one morning to have a look around. I beat the crowds, but was unable to get on any of the ships, as they hadn't opened for inspection at that hour. Still, even an exterior look was enjoyable.

On 26 January (Australia Day, a public holiday), a fleet of ships re-enacting the First Fleet's arrival in Sydney sailed into Sydney Harbour in the morning and anchor near the Opera House. Then in the afternoon the Tall Ships sailed out of the Harbour from their anchorage to the west of the Harbour Bridge. And finally, after dark, there was a huge fireworks display near the Bridge. The central business district was closed to private automobiles for the day, and public transport was free. The crowds were, as expected, huge.

One of the fringe benefits of the location of my flat is easy access to some good viewing spots up the Harbour and towards the Bridge. The two spots are a bit far from the water for a good view without binoculars, but on the other hand they were not knee-deep in people, either. Most of the people who were there appeared to be locals, and we chattered to each other while waiting for things to happen. And waiting... and waiting... but it was worth it, at least for a sailing-ship freak like myself. Many of the other people had folding chairs, picnic lunches, and an abundant supply of champagne. A few had even hung Australian flags in the trees. The atmosphere was very friendly, and the weather was ideal - warm but not hot, mostly sunny, and a pleasantly cool sea breeze.

I wandered out at mid-morning, found a good spot, saw the First Fleet Reinactment come in, wandered home for lunch, collected Eric and Gordon Lingard (who'd arrived after a desperate struggle with the severely over-loaded railways), wandered back to the park, watched the Tall Ships sail away, wandered back to the flat for pizza dinner, then out to another park to watch the fireworks. What a party! (My telephoto pictures didn't come out too badly, either).

Other events of the month, which I did not participate in, included several protest marches and demonstrations by the Aboriginal community (mainly peaceful, except when the rare belligerent white person - usually drunk - attempted to provoke a confrontation) and free outdoor concerts which attracted tens of thousands to picnic and enjoy the music (ranging from opera to jazz to rock).

SEX-LINKED MATH ABILITY?

Comments on this topic continue to wander in.

Cathy Kerrigan
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Australia
January 1988

What is not considered is the fact that the genetic material that gives rise to [sex-linked] differences comprises 4.35% only of the total genetic material in our cells. There is no physical reason why women should not be as adept at maths as men, always allowing for normal genetic variation.

Theories of genetic effects change frequently, but what I get from my reading is the view that one gene may have numerous quite unrelated effects at different locations in the body, or at different times in an organism's life cycle. Therefore the percent of genetic material may be quite irrelevant to the effect that material may have in the body. I think it is quite premature to conclude that 'there is no physical reason' why just about anything may be true or not true: we simply don't know.

John Foyster
P O Box 483
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Australia
19 January 1988

Your loccers seem to me to convey their trivial approach to knowledge in their citations of 'some TV show or other' and 'recent issues of New Society'. Public and university libraries are full of more reliable information: what's the prejudice against them?

John included a 'photocopy of comment' in the form of the following article: 'Children's mathematics achievement in Hawaii: Sex differences favoring girls', by Paul R. Brandon, Barbara J. Newton and Ormond W. Hammond, American Educational Research Journal, Fall 1987, Vol. 24, No. 3, pages 437-461. I quote here from the abstract and the final paragraph of that paper:

'Most reviews of the literature have concluded that boys have surpassed girls in mathematics achievement at some point in their schooling. In Hawaii, however, some studies have suggested that sex differences ... have favored girls. In this paper, norm-referenced mathematics achievement test results for Hawaii public school students in four ethnic groups and four grades are examined for sex differences... Hawaii public school girls have higher achievement levels than the boys. The boys achieve their highest scores in mathematical reasoning, and the girls ... in computation. High-achieving girls outperform high-achieving boys. Sex differences favoring girls among Caucasian students are less than they are among Japanese-American, Filipino-American, and Hawaiian students. The relationship of the sex differences to sociocultural factors is examined, and the practical consequences of the differences are discussed.

'While the data presented here raise many questions, they strongly support the position that sociocultural factors should be considered in any study of sex differences in mathematics achievement.'

John, thank you very much for the assistance. The 'prejudice' against libraries is probably one of time, for those of us not employed in activities that give us the excuse or the opportunity to spend much time in a library. In my own case, there are many topics in which I have an interest, but I can only pursue appropriate scholarship in a small percentage of those interest areas. For other topics, I keep vaguely up to date through overview magazines such as New Scientist. I suspect that most of my readers are in the same situation. Until your letter arrived, however, I was disappointed (though not surprised) that no one among my readership was more knowledgable than I on this subject.

MANAGEMENT

My workplace has been giving me further lessons in how not to manage people.

As you know, I am one of two Technical Writers in the company. One of the frustrations of the job this past year has been a lack of resources - people, equipment, money - to do the job the way we think it should be done. We constantly have to make compromises on production quality (layout, paper quality, illustrations, and so on) in order to get the job done on time and under budget. We also constantly request more resources, and explain why. Senior management in the company only recently went from the notion that a well-written manual was a 'frill', to the idea that it was important, but was still stuck on the notion that the presentation didn't matter all that much. My supervisor Reg and I had been arguing for better presentation for over a year.

Then the new senior management came in. They apparently didn't know all this background, or if they did, they chose to ignore it. Instead they announced that (a) the manuals weren't up to their standards (with overtones of 'you two aren't doing your job properly, or don't know how') and (b) this was going to change.

We were delighted that things were to change, but not impressed with the implication that we didn't know, didn't care or couldn't cope with what was necessary. No one asked our opinions, our previously-expressed opinions were ignored, and we were told 'do it this way' (because this is the way IBM does it).

To me this is a classic example of handling people wrong. If in fact we were ignorant of what was required and how to do it, imposing a decision from above was not unreasonable, but even in that situation it can be done in a manner that makes the workers (us) feel we've been consulted, not insulted. When in fact we are not ignorant, and have been lobbying for exactly the sort of things the new management wants, such heavy-handed methods are doubly insulting.

Not everything's rotten at work, of course. Reg and I still haven't moved to the other office (long, boring story), and now it looks like we won't be moving at all, due to various changes around the place. That's fine with us.

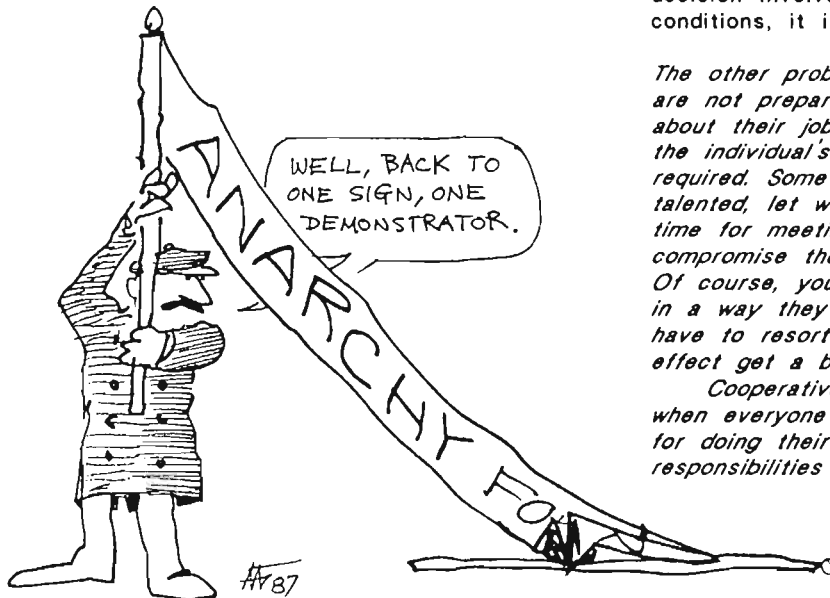
In the meantime, we've become very busy. Marketing reorganised the product lines, a good move which has lots of consequences for the workers. Something as trivial as changing the name of the machine instantly makes the manuals just a trifle obsolete. When one or two substantive changes are added, it means that we need to revise over a dozen manual sets - and do it in the time that it would normally take us to do fewer than half that many. And that's not counting the new products, of which there are several, with sufficiently new software that none of our existing material covers it. In a pinch, one can send out slightly obsolete manuals with 'reorganised' old products, but having no manuals at all for the new products is rather a different matter.

At least the product reorganisation is coinciding with the push for a new design for our manuals, so we make both changes at once. This is more work in the short term, but far less in the long term that if these two upheavals had occurred sequentially. In that respect, our management does well: it's in handling people that they fall down at times.

Bev Clark
(address earlier)
10 January 1988

I agree with your thoughts about management and what the role of managers should be. I'm very fortunate in my current position that my supervisor is that sort of manager; she's more of a facilitator (to use a trendy term) than anything else, and someone to run interference with the higher ups when necessary. How long she will be able to function that way I don't know. Her boss is a great believer in the hierarchical model of management (despite being only 38) and wants her to be more of a 'hands-on' (=directive) manager. On the other hand, the directive style of management is neither very popular nor very effective in my department, an artificial intelligence research laboratory where almost a third of the staff have PhDs and two-thirds have at least master's degrees. They tend to make fans look conformist and pliable.

Alexis Gilliland
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January 1988



John Newman
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Australia
January 1988

The issue of authoritarian management is fairly germane to my situation at work these days. The top management would be happier if my section were run in a less co-operative way! I've never believed in coercion, not even the sort you get in families where a child is hounded until they 'agree'.

Still, I come to a number of situations where absolute authority needs to be invoked. We have a fairly young team, with great ability and interest, but very little experience. On occasions when the majority of the 'workers' disagree with either what we are aiming at, or how it should best be achieved, sometimes they are just plain wrong! They may be technically correct, but if for instance there are reasons of marketing or political issues between us and other companies, which the engineering staff are not prepared to accept as reasonable, frankly they just don't know.

The important thing is for the company to be honest about what it intends to do, and in general terms how it intends to do it. Then (especially in an industry like computer software) [the workers] can decide if they want to be a part of it.

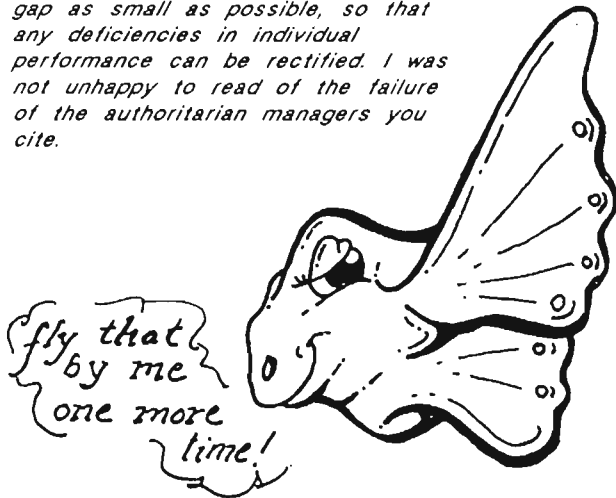
I assume you attempt to explain to the staff why certain decisions are made, so that they can thereby learn. To me 'authoritarian' includes the situation where the answer to 'why' is 'because I said so' - often with overtones of 'it's none of your business' or 'how dare you question my decisions' - rather than an attempt to explain, and thus educate. I have no real objections to higher management making certain decisions, but I do strongly object to the notion that, when the decision involves me, my work or my working conditions, it is none of my business!

The other problem I have is with staff who are not prepared to be sufficiently professional about their job. Co-operation must be based on the individual's own concern to do what is required. Some staff, otherwise excellent and talented, let weaknesses (such as not arriving in time for meetings or other team operations) compromise the attempt at genuine cooperation. Of course, you still can't force someone to act in a way they don't wish, but management may have to resort to some form of coercion to in effect get a balanced, fair result.

Cooperative management is what is possible when everyone in the team takes responsibility for doing their job and trusts those with other responsibilities and experience to do theirs.

Richard Faulder
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Australia
27 December 1987

It seems to me that a sports team is a poor model for most team efforts. A sports team is certainly an authoritarian unit. More to the point, a sports team is dealing with only a single task at a time, and only one person is actively involved with that task at the one time. By contrast, even if teams in non-sporting areas have only one goal at a time (and at work, for instance, we would always have several goals, ie research projects, that we were working towards at the same time), the individual members of the team would be working on different aspects of the work at the same time. Although the person on whom the responsibility for the attainment of the goal provides guidance, the individual team members quickly build up more knowledge about their individual tasks and progress than does the team leader. One of the tasks of the team leader must be to keep this knowledge gap as small as possible, so that any deficiencies in individual performance can be rectified. I was not unhappy to read of the failure of the authoritarian managers you cite.



I don't quite follow the logic of 'only one person (on a sports team) is actively involved with that task at the one time'. Quite the contrary! In softball, the only team sport I have played much, each of the 9 members of the team (A) in the field is 'working on different aspects of the work at the same time' when a member of team B is at bat, and there may be several 'goals' in progress at the one time: to keep the batter and any runners on base from reaching another base and particularly to keep any of those people from scoring a run. Each member of team A should know what her tasks are in relation to those goals (and the priorities of those goals), and must coordinate her efforts with the other team members. I can in fact see a lot of similarities between a sports team and a work team, nor do I see that a sports team needs to be an authoritarian unit. However, that last quibble may be merely a matter of semantics. What I see as 'leadership' someone else may see as 'authority' or 'dictatorship'.

John D Owen
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U.K.
18 January 1988

Cooperation is by far the better route, leading to contented staff and more efficient management. The OU has always been a rather over-cooperative place, in many ways, with too many decisions being made through a never-ending series of consultative committees. Of late, the style is changing in some areas to the opposite - executive order, without enough consultation, often by new managers brought in from outside the organisation to bring in new techniques (like electronic publishing). Result? Aggravation, as they fail to grasp the complexity of the organisation, and we can't get the message they are pushing. Stress all round.

Your piece on technical manual writing explains it all - I've always wondered why computer companies fail time and time again to put together decent manuals - now I know!

Amy Thomson
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10 February 1988

With regard to your comments on the Australia Card and welfare cheaters, after working with homeless women for about six months, I've come to feel that the number of 'welfare cheats' are not really worth the hoops that the U.S. Government makes poor people jump through in order to get food, financial support, and housing. It takes an enormous amount of energy to be poor.

One homeless woman had her purse stolen; she lost her dentures, her eyeglasses, and all the ID she needed to get the state to give her her welfare check. She didn't even have the money to get new identification. Fortunately, the people running the shelter pulled a few strings, and she was able to get some ID and money from the state in a week, which is record time... It took at least a month for the teeth and the eyeglasses.

My significant other, Ray, works for the Department of Social and Health Services (a state agency) as a caseworker for Developmentally Disabled people. He tells me that the people who get the most money are those who have enough resources to fight their way through the system. There are lots of poor, deserving people trying to get a little help raising a mentally retarded child who lose out... It hurts to watch.

I hope the Australia Card is a resounding failure. Losing a card like that is too easy and replacing it will probably be too damned hard.

The situation Ray describes is much the same here, you won't be surprised to learn. The Australia Card did fail, but on a technicality rather than its (lack of) merits. Feminists

generally opposed it on the grounds that so many separated and divorced women survive only because their violent former spouses can't find them after they move, change their names, etc. - as well as for the practical problems you cite if someone should lose their card or have it stolen.

Recently another scandal broke over the alleged confidentiality of government records. Our federal Health Minister and various other officials kept assuring us that the Australia Card data would be secure, with extremely harsh penalties for anyone breaching that security. Some of us, including myself, were extremely sceptical, knowing the levels of corruption in Australian governments. The scandal centred around the Heath Minister, who admitted to having leaked some confidential health records awhile back (in a good cause, mind you *cough* *cough*). This does not exactly inspire confidence in future adherence to security!

AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS

New South Wales is in the midst of a state election campaign, with the poll due March 19. I've been fascinated by the level of activity in my electorate, especially in contrast to the federal campaign that I described in Wrevenge 27. I suspect this is due to two things: the shaky state of the current NSW government, and the fact that a strong independent candidate is standing in this electorate. The sitting member is by no means assured of re-election, despite his high profile.

Richard Faulder
(address earlier)
27 December 1987

I agree that the party system in Australia minimises the chances that our so-called representative will actually represent us. Unfortunately, even when we actually get a representative (ie, we elect an independent) our interests are not represented - the party in



power sees no need to take any notice of an independent... The Australian Democrats do not enforce party discipline on their elected representatives - for them, all votes are conscience votes. Party room meetings are for the purpose of formulating a consensus approach on an issue on which there isn't time for a postal ballot of the membership. I wouldn't be surprised if the A.D.'s didn't send you any election material - the words poverty and lack of members spring to mind.

THE CONSENSUS ALTERNATIVE

When I talked about Australian elections in Wrevenge 27, I mentioned in passing the consensus or collective system, saying that 'I personally would find [it] tedious in the extreme to live with (and find hard to imagine how it would work on a large scale)'.

The December 1987 issue of the American magazine Ms. eventually arrived, and it includes an article on Iceland's feminist political party Kvinnalístinn, which 'has no leader and makes decisions by consensus.' I'll quote a bit from the article here.

'They prefer the term movement to political party, because they have something much bigger in mind than conventional uses of power. They want to change the entire social system; and they're playing hardball politics to do it... in 1975... Icelandic women had virtually closed down the country by going on strike for a day... to dramatize the importance of female labor in and outside the home, and an estimated 90 percent of the female population participated...'.

'In the early 1980s... a few dissatisfied feminists in Reykjavik... came up with the suggestion to run an all-women's slate of candidates for the City Council in the 1982 election. Unknown to them, feminists in the northern town of Akureyri were making similar plans... [Each group] won two seats...'.

National elections were due in 1983... In Iceland's parliamentary system, voters choose a party, and that party's total number of votes determines how many candidates on its list are actually [elected]... Kvinnalístinn sent three members [to parliament] in 1983 [and six in 1987]...'.

Political parties are supposed to have leaders - but Kvinnalístinn doesn't. The... party rotated the leadership function in Parliament among the three women and built up and trained a slew of roving representatives to send to meetings and campaign debates... Such active mentorship is essential to another Kvinnalístinn principle: no officeholder serves longer than six to eight years.

Kvinnalístinn's principle of consensus is another way of assuring that individual members are controlled by the issues, not the other way around. The country is small, but it still takes a lot of work - and a lot of meetings - to make sure the party's policies reflect a broad base.'

BOOKS

Here are only two of the many books I've been reading, but haven't had space to review.

Donald Kingsbury, The Moon Goddess and the Son, Baen Books, 1986.

It's rare to find a book that successfully combines good characterisation, hard science fiction, and serious sociological speculation. I was most impressed.

The main themes revolve around two ideas: that games theory can be used to try to find a way to defuse the arms race, and that earth orbit and moon colonies/industries make very good economic sense - but somebody has to invest the up-front money to put them there.

Kingsbury does an excellent and sympathetic job of portraying the dedication which drives some people to devote their lives to their work; I felt really enthusiastic about what was going on. I could also sympathise with members of the dedicated ones' families, who rarely see them, or who find that their minds are definitely elsewhere even when they are physically present.

On the other hand, Kingsbury places his chapters in non-chronological sequence, so the focus not only jumps from one character to another, but from a given character's present to past to future. This did reinforce the idea that the lives of everybody in the book were inter-related, whether they realised it or not, but it was a bit hard to follow.

His treatment of game theory was fascinating. In addition to conventional war-strategy games, his characters get involved in role-playing games, as a aid to learning how Russians think. This was handled very convincingly, and one offshoot of the work was particularly clever. Games for personal computers are developed from the Russian point of view and smuggled into Russia where they are happily played by Russian children and their parents (of course only the rich and powerful own computers, but they are the ones running the country). The parents start learning to think differently, without realising this is happening. The ultimate result... I won't tell you - it would spoil the story.

There is always some factor which is so unpredictable, or so outside the stereotypes held by the predictors, that no one takes it into consideration. For example, the third-world peasant rebels who learn how to use cheap, easily-obtainable high-tech gadgetry to fight the wars that continue endlessly in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, etc. After all, everybody knows that guided missiles cost millions of dollars, don't they? The dramatic climax of the book was frighteningly realistic.

Kingsbury's treatment of his female characters is ... different. Two are particularly important: Diana and Junie. Diana is a young girl who is beaten regularly by her father until she runs away from home at the age of 11. She is a bright, determined person who had learned early to be manipulative, and puts this skill to good use as she takes advantage of every opportunity life offers her. I usually find the child-genius in

these stories tedious, as they are just too capable of belief, but Diana suffers enough self-doubts and setbacks to make her believable. I'm not quite sure what her essential importance in the story is, other than as an example of a person who does her best to get what she wants, rather than whimpering excuses like 'they won't let me' or 'I can't'.

Junie is the wife of Byron, a fighter-pilot who wants to build a moon colony, and the daughter of Charlie, a wealthy, well-connected man who can pull strings to get her what she wants. It soon becomes apparent that Junie, while apparently a stay-at-home, classically manipulative 'power-behind-the-man' type of wife, is in fact a financial genius. At first I got very annoyed at the portrayal of Junie, but Kingsbury did convince me that she did what she did because she wanted to, not because she felt she had no choice but to work behind the scenes. She used the stereotype as protective coloration, and as a way of avoiding the tediously boring details of getting things done - by organising other people to do the work. Junie has managed to create her own reality to allow her to do exactly what she likes best, and is good at, on her own terms. I can relate to that!

There are also some delightful sub-texts, like an anti-smoking theme that crops up every 50 pages or so, just for a sentence or two - a nice bit of counter-propaganda to the cigarette-puffing heroes in other books.

If you are a role-playing gamer, or know one, and especially if you or they wish you could get paid for doing the stuff you really enjoy, you'll love this book. The gamers are the real heroes, and they are portrayed most sympathetically. Is Kingsbury trying to counteract the fundamentalist propaganda that RPGs are evil? If so, he's done a great job.

Writers of the Future, Volume 3, Bridge Publications, 1987.

The stories in this series of books appear to be improving with each volume. I assume this means that the quality of entries in the WOTF contest keeps improving.

Shayne Bell's 'Jacob's Ladder' is about the escape of a group of people from a station part way up the 'space elevator' (beanstalk, skyhook) after the elevator is taken over by terrorists. Good sf, if not wildly original.

Tawn Stokes' 'No Pets' is a creepy little piece set in a far future where insects have taken over the Earth and humans are allowed to live in vast apartment blocks but don't really have any function. The main character has an illegal pet which the Landlord comes to evict. What happens then takes two rather neat twists.

Dave Wolverton's 'On My Way to Paradise' portrays a fascinating blend of future technology and third world poverty. The main character does limb regenerations, life extensions, and other biotechnology work out of a shop in the markets of a slum-ridden city. A female customer turns out to be a refugee from a highranking, influential group, thus involving Angelo in rather more danger and intrigue than he would prefer.