

# EMERALD CITY #85

Issue 85

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## Introduction

Well, I did manage to get to most of ConJosé after all, though Kevin and I didn't see much of each other during the week. Here, therefore, is the traditional post-Worldcon mega-issue. I'm aware that many of you will not be interested in the convention report, and even fewer of you will be interested in con-running techniques or fan politics. Therefore I have separated the con report out into four sections. The Diary is mainly reporting of what went on at the convention. The Hugos is my analysis of Science Fiction's most prestigious awards. The Verdict is my views on what went right and what went wrong during the convention. And The Backstory is all the ugly bits that some of you have been waiting for and most of you will sensibly want to ignore.

However, there is one piece of ConJosé news that you all need to read if you attended the con. Here goes: the Fairmont, in its wisdom, has elected to ding everyone who paid by credit card for an additional \$125 for "carpet cleaning". While it is entirely possible that some members did mess up their carpets, to charge everyone like this is deeply unfair and we are fighting it. You should too. If you have been charged in this way, protest the charge with both the hotel and your credit card company. And write to

me - I'll pass on your name to our Facilities people to add to their list of angry customers.

Away from the convention reportage we also have a bunch of interesting books to review, including some rather better material from my Australia trip.

Finally you'll note that *Emerald City* has acquired a new section. From now on I promise faithfully to pay more attention to short fiction. See Short Stuff for more details.

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## ConJosé: The Diary

### Thankyou Smarchers!

Before I do anything else I should give a huge thank you to the Shadowmarch crew for saving me from a potentially disastrous accommodation problem. They, more than anything else, are responsible for my being able to attend the convention. Gigi, Tracy and all the other occupants of the suite: thank you very much indeed.

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### My Panels

ConJosé saw me appearing on more panels than any Worldcon since my second one in LA in 1996. Of course this is in part because the people running programming know me well, but it also speaks volumes for the willingness of the LA committee to seek out program

participants rather than rely on people that they knew.

The first panel I did I was not even scheduled for. I was cast in the role of Emergency Holographic Kevin Standlee because Mr. Co-Chairman was rather busy (understatement of the year) and in any case felt I would be a better panelist. Thus I, an immigrant Brit, found myself on a panel called "Welcome to San José". Well I guess I had written that guide, so I did have quite a bit to say. Thankfully I also had the assistance of a more genuine local resident, Lynn Gold, who had been working on a Local Resources Guide for the convention and therefore also had lots to say. The audience sort of came and went, but I think we did pretty well.

The panel that had caused me most worry beforehand was the one called "The Future of SF as a Literary Form". I had taken this to mean asking whether SF could be accepted as "literature" (as opposed to "genre fiction"), but in fact most of the panel seemed to take it as asking whether SF had a future at all. We carefully considered that question, and we answered with a resounding "yes".

The "SF on the Web" panel needed a little bit of work on my part. Since obtaining a real job, I have not had nearly as much time for web browsing as I used to, and consequently I had not kept up with the SF web sites I used to read. Thankfully the other panelists did a fine job, and between us we came up with what I think was an excellent reading list. (Jed Hartman of *Strange Horizons* took on the job of panel secretary - if anyone wants a copy of the list I can probably get one from him.)

My final panel was called "The Joy of Reviewing". I've lost count of the number of book review panels I've been on, and most of them are pretty dull. After all,

how many times can you explain how to write a book review? This one, for reasons I haven't quite been able to fathom, went very well. I think perhaps part of it was that we spent quite a lot of time talking about why we review. Also there was a good range of people on the panel with a variety of different interests and approaches. Certainly we benefited from the presence of Yoshio Kobayashi, who reviews primarily for the purpose of recommending English language books to Japanese publishers for translation. The message of the panel, if anything, is that there are lots of different forms of reviewing, and they all have their place. For example, Gordon van Gelder and I both talked about wanting to highlight the very best of SF&F and to encourage literary quality. Steve Miller, on the other hand, pointed out that there was a huge market for comfort reading, and that he was very happy to cater for it. As long as our respective readers know what to expect and we are consistent in our policies, that is how it should be.

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### **Other Panels**

As usual I didn't get a chance to attend many panels. However, I did get a chance to drop in on a few. Here's a brief survey.

The one panel that I really had to get to was the one on the "best SF of 2001", with a panel of David Hartwell, Gardner Dozois, Charles Brown and Jonathan Strahan (recently promoted to Reviews Editor at Locus). This was my big chance to hear from the experts about books I might have missed. Even better, the panel decided to extend their remit to 2002 as well.

For the most part, I didn't learn a lot, though I do have a few names of American writers to check out. As I expected, British writers featured well and names such as Miéville, Reynolds and Jones were on everyone's lips. What did surprise me was that no one mentioned Job Courtenay Grimwood. So I did, and the reaction was stunning. "Oh, I can't stand him", said Hartwell. The others were not quite so condemnatory, but they were clearly not keen. This is very strange, because I'm not alone in the UK in admiring Jon's work (back me here, Farah, I know you will). So I caught Mr. Hartwell later in the dealers' room, and it appears that the main problem is Jon's politics. He's just too angry about First World economic imperialism, and too nice to Moslems, for American tastes. That's very sad.

One of the best-attended panels of the convention was the one on improvised story telling. Given a panel that included Tad Williams, Terry Pratchett and Phil Foglio, you can't help but get an amusing tale. Given also that the boys very quickly got into the habit of leaving each other with the most difficult hand-ons they could imagine, it ended up being hilarious. You could hear the laughter of the audience all the way down the hall.

Dragging myself away from that panel for a while, I looked in on one about Worldcon lead times. As regular readers will know, I'm a firm proponent of reducing the lead-time from 3 years to 2. I'm not going to go into the arguments again here. I'll just note that all of the people on the panel who have been involved in running a Worldcon before (Andrew Adams, Ben Yalow, Mark Olson and Tom Veal) were in favor of 2 years, while the one person who is still bidding (I think she was from the Kansas City in '06

bid – she’s not listed in the program book) was against. Why are so few people willing to learn from the experience of those who have gone before them?

There were a lot of interesting science panels scheduled, but the only one I actually managed to get to (by dint of blowing off a Mark Protection Committee meeting – thank you Mr. McMurray) was Wil McCarthy’s presentation on “Quantum Dots and Programmable Matter”. Yes boys and girls, you really can make your own artificial atoms, of whatever variety you choose to program. Well at least you can if you have access to the sort of research equipment that McCarthy has, but doubtless one day a commercial product will appear. Wil has a new novel on the way, and a non-fiction book that explains some of his work. I’ll be looking out for them.

One science panel that I didn’t manage to get to seems to have been one of the major events of the con. According to discussion on the con members’ mailing list, someone from IBM brought along an electron microscope and a web-based interface that enabled you to move individual atoms around. The audience was queuing up to try it. Did anyone out there attend this panel? I’d like to learn more about it.

As usual, we ran a panel to explain how the Hugo Award voting system works for the benefit of those people who have seen the results and didn’t understand what was happening. Thankfully the rather sparse audience was mainly interested in learning rather than whingeing. The whingeing, of course, came later. See the Hugos section for more about this.

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## **That Scottish Panel**

One panel was so memorable that it deserves its own section. After all, it has already generated hundreds of messages on RASFF. Clearly it made a big impression on people.

The title of the panel was “Socialists in Kilts: Revolutionary Scottish SF – Banks Stross & MacLeod”. Quite a mouthful, and quite a panel. As it turned out, the panelists did not include a single Scotsman, and only one Socialist, China Miéville. Charlie Stross was perhaps the most appropriate panelist, being mentioned in the title and living in Scotland. However, he did make a point of the fact that he was neither Scottish nor a Socialist. The other two panelists, presumably added to provide an alternative political view, were Laurence Person and Eric Raymond, both of whom are American Libertarians of the lunatic stripe. It was their arrogant and childish behavior that made the panel so notable.

Before going any further I should declare my own political interest. In Ken MacLeod terms I am closer to Anarcho-Capitalism than anything else. Dave Reid might have been a bastard, but he was right a lot of the time. Certainly I find New Mars far preferable to living under the iron jackboot of the Cassini Division. I have spent the last decade or so of my working life creating competitive markets in the electricity industry. I am, in short, the sort of person who, in less guarded moments, China will accuse of murdering babies in Africa. However, because I have to try to make Capitalism work in the real world, and in an industry where a perfectly competitive market is almost impossible, I am well aware of the practical difficulties involved. Messrs Person and Raymond, on the other hand, seemed to have no concept

of practical issues at all. In fact they didn't seem to care, as long as they had an opportunity to toss insults around. I have never been so ashamed of my own side in a political debate in all my life.

The format of the panel was established very early. Poor Charlie tried manfully to be responsible and sensible, and he did manage to get the mike for long enough to give a fascinating exposition of modern Scottish political history. China spent most of the panel trying not to explode, and not quite always succeeding. Person and Raymond behaved for much of the time like a couple of mischievous schoolboys poking at a caged lion with a very long stick. For the most part they had nothing constructive to say, but they took every opportunity to be snide, rude, insulting and otherwise badly behaved. They seemed to have no interest in civilized debate. Perhaps it is not surprising that two Americans would have no idea what Socialism is (or rather would assume that Socialism and Stalinism are identical and indivisible), even though they have the shining example of California to look at. But if Person and Raymond did know anything about political theory, they clearly had no great interest in displaying it.

The success of the panel seems to have been to a large extent a result of how badly two of the panelists behaved. That got people interested, and that got them talking about the actual subject. Practically, however, I only noted two things of interest arising from the panel. The first was a comment from Farah Mendlesohn along the lines of, "anyone who says, 'Ken MacLeod believes' is at least 24 hours out of date". Whilst that may have been a little unfair to Ken, it certainly made the point that the Fall Revolution series is a debate, not a

statement of belief. Person and Raymond persistently ignored this view, even after they had been beaten over the head with it several times.

The other thing I noticed (and I think I have Janet Lafler to thank for pointing this out) is that extremist Libertarians have one more thing in common with extremist Communists. Both of them believe that their political theory has been scientifically proven. In his few lucid moments, Raymond was fond of claiming how Hayek had "proved" that Socialism was unworkable, and that by implication Raymond's own political ideas would inevitably triumph. In practice, of course, every political ideal is unworkable. Indeed politics would not exist if that were not the case. Anyone who believes otherwise has nothing useful to contribute to political debate.

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### Site Selection

Well, what a surprise! Glasgow won. Jim Briggs and I did try for a few seconds to kid Kevin that there had been a massive write-in vote for Rottnest Island, but he didn't go for it. Can't imagine why.

We did, however, get by far the largest number of write in candidates of any site selection that anyone can remember. It is good to see fandom being imaginative, even if it did result in us failing the break the record for the quickest ever count.

Unfortunately, having to be on hand to get the site selection results online on time meant that I missed the first half of the masquerade. Oh well, so it goes.

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## Melbourne in 2010

On the subject of future Worldcons, there is now a new bid for Australia. It would be nice to be able to claim that this was a result of my article last month, but the true story is much more amusing. One evening some kindly fans were talking to Stephen Boucher about maybe bidding for a NASFiC, given the tendency for people to bid Australian sites for Westercons. Stephen reportedly said something like, "why would I want to chair a NASFiC, I'd much rather chair a Worldcon". At which point various people started throwing \$20 bills at him and congratulating him on the start of his bid. Stephen claims that what he actually meant to say was, "I'd rather stick a fork in my eye", but by this time it was too late. By the next day hundreds of dollars had been raised, Sue Mason had done some artwork, and Scott and Jane Denis had the t-shirts printed and on sale. The web site was up the next day. Melbourne in 2010 is the bid, and you can find the web site at: <http://www.australia2010.org/>.

I note with some amusement that SF Site's names pages report the 2010 bid as being run by a group of Australian fans. Oops!

I decided not to throw any money at Stephen at the con as I had a sneaking suspicion that he'd get lynched when he got back to Melbourne. In fact it appears that he's still alive, but I'm not sure that Australian fandom is best pleased, even though American and European fans have voted with their wallets concerning just how much they want to go back to Australia.

Meanwhile, not to be outdone, Marc Ortlieb has reportedly launched a bid for Melbourne, Florida. After all, if the Americans want to foist a Worldcon on Australia, why should Australia not return

the favor? You can find more details at: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~sfoz/othermel.htm>

And on the assumption that the Worldcon will be out of North America in 2010, Kevin and I have quietly launched a NASFiC bid for Brisbane (that's Brisbane, California, of course, which is just south of San Francisco). Kevin promises me that if it looks like there is any danger of us winning he'll persuade the WSFS Business Meeting to abolish the NASFiC before we actually have to run a convention.

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## The Hugo Ceremony

So there I was having a coffee with Farah Mendlesohn when my mobile phone goes off. "Hello", says the voice at the other end, "it's Neil, I'm at the Fairmont, what do I need to do?" Well, what could I do but hot foot it over to the Fairmont and help out?

As it turned out, this was just as well. I knew that Neil would be tired, because he had only just come back from a long UK signing tour. He was only persuaded to attend ConJosé because he urgently needed to work on a movie script with Robert Zemeckis. When Zemeckis said he was willing to meet up anywhere in the US, Neil picked San José. What I didn't know was that Neil was also very sick. His problem sounded rather like the bug I had picked up in Sydney, except rather worse because Neil needed an inhaler to help him breathe. Not only that, but he was planning to wear a suit. Yes, he was really sick.

Anyway, there being no pockets in his suit big enough to accommodate the inhaler without it looking like Neil was packing a Dangerous Terrorist Weapon, I nobly

volunteered to keep it in my handbag for the duration of the evening. This meant that I would have to stick close to Neil all evening. Oh my, what an imposition! But he's a good mate, so I was happy to do it. Good job that I'd acquired a speccy evening dress while I was in Sydney.

First port of call was the pre-Hugo party. Now it so happens that I had made sure that we tried hard to get the word out about Neil not wanting to do any signings. Kevin had even made a major announcement at the opening ceremonies. So what happens when we arrive at the party? The person doing the door check thrusts two books under Neil's nose. Well, maybe she missed all of the announcements, but I was mortified anyway. Neil, of course, was perfectly professional as always.

The party itself isn't that great an event. The point of being at it is that you are a Hugo nominee, and that you get to hear Kevin (or whoever is the current Hugo Administrator) giving the "care and feeding of your Hugo" speech. And very splendid he was too. Mr. Co-Chairman looked seriously smart in his tux. If you haven't seen the photos, check out <http://www.emcit.com/photos.shtml> now.

The ceremony went pretty smoothly. Someone had obviously read the riot act to the other award presenters and they all got through their parts pleasingly quickly. The Cordwainer Smith Award was again well judged, being given to R.A. Lafferty. Neil, who is a huge Lafferty fan, was particularly pleased by that one. I was delighted to see Pat Murphy get a Seiun for *There and Back Again*. There was some amusing backchat between Pat and the Japanese presenter about a possible Pat version of *Lord of the Rings*, which resulted

in Pat admitting that she was working on a sequel, albeit not one on quite such a grand scale. I'll be looking out for it.

Next up it was time for Tad to do his bit. He was wearing a suit too. And he was wonderful. He managed to be highly amusing and very serious in the same speech, and he had the audience eating out of his hand. This was probably my best moment of the convention, because I was thinking of that time all those years back when I lured Kevin along to Keplers bookstore to hear Tad read, and we both came away thinking, "he'd be a great toastmaster". We were right.

The results of the Hugos are listed elsewhere, so here I'll just concentrate on the speeches and stuff. Most people, of course, were pleasingly brief. But you don't ask Connie Willis to get up on stage unless you expect her to entertain, and so she did. The pun she topped it off with was over the heads of many people because it referred back to the classic SF film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, but she was hugely entertaining along the way too.

I'm not quite sure how we managed to lose Bob Silverberg. He was sat about 6 places away from me in the front row. I saw Randy Smith peering out from the wings just before the "we've lost a presenter" announcement, but he was on the wrong side of the stage and consequently would not have seen Silverberg. Still, it gave Bob something else to make jokes about as he proceeded to demonstrate that, just because he's been about for ages, it doesn't mean that he can't match that upstart Willis, wisecrack for wisecrack.

I'm pleased to be able to report that New Line Cinema did send someone to collect their Hugo. Indeed, they sent two people:

one Hobbit, and one Dark Lord of Mordor. Sean Astin (Sam) looked like he was having a whale of a time, and Sala Baker (Sauron), who had never been outside his native New Zealand before, was completely overwhelmed.

The speech of the night, however, belonged to Neil. Truly, he felt he had no chance of winning. I, of course, knew that he had, because I had already done the results pages for the web site. As the results were announced, I turned to him and smiled. "Fuck me", he said. But I didn't. It would have been embarrassing in front of all those people. Besides, I didn't want to muss my expensive dress, and he had a speech to make. Neil extemporizes wonderfully, but occasionally emotion gets the better of him. "Fuck, I've got a Hugo", will go down in Worldcon history as one of the all time classic acceptance lines.

And so we moved on to the photographs, and Neil patiently signing more books. It was a great evening.

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### **The Masquerade**

As I said earlier, having to do stuff for site selection meant that I missed the first half of the masquerade. What is more, because I wasn't working the Green Room this year, I wasn't able to get my usual collection of close-up photos. Still, I did manage to join the general fannish photo shoot after the show, and I got a lot of good pictures. Sadly I did not get the winners, who had been on quite early in the show. Sorry about that, folks. The reportage is not up to the usual standard. What I can say is that there were an awful lot of wings around this year, all of them spectacular. It was also great to see the

show taking place on a real stage in a real theatre.

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### **The Business Meeting**

For various reasons I missed most of the zoo this year. I did, however, make sure that I hung around for the vote on the Best Dramatic Presentation Hugo split. Regular readers will remember that The Millennium Philcon passed the first reading of the constitutional amendment to carve the BDP into two categories: long form and short form. Practically speaking, this means film and TV, but the rule was formulated as a time-based split for a number of good reasons. To start with it means that the categories will continue to include things like theatre and radio plays, rock operas, Firesign Theatre albums and anything else that is dramatized rather than read. In addition, telling the difference between a "film" and a "TV production" in these days of mini-series and made-for-TV movies is no easy task.

Prior to the con the fannish mailing lists were buzzing with outrage from the written-fiction purists, most of whom are opposed to having any awards for media SF. When it came down to it, however, very few of those people even bother to attend Worldcons, let alone business meetings. Consequently the meeting was so heavily in favor of the motion that it was left to Ben Yalow to make the first speech against even though he was being diplomatically undecided. Ben felt that it was wrong to pass such a supposedly contentious motion without the case against being heard. Not that it made any difference, the motion passed with a massive majority.

And it was this point that things got interesting. One of the little stories that the



opponents of the media awards tell themselves to make it seem like their righteous cause has been cheated is that the BDP split votes only pass because their opponents “pack the meeting”. These Evil, Conniving Media Fans are supposed, according to the story, to all leave the meeting after the vote. And of course it is disgraceful to not want to stick around to listen to a bunch of SMOFs indulging in Recreational Parliamentary Practice for another hour after the interesting business is finished, right? Not to mention the fact that the opponents of the BDP would never stoop to dragging along their thousands of loyal supporters to pack the meeting themselves. Dear me no, that would be immoral, so we never get to see those dedicated literary hordes.

Anyway, there is a particular rule in the Sacred Tome (otherwise known as *Roberts’ Rules of Order*) that allows you to reconsider a vote later in a meeting. The plan was therefore to wait for the Evil Conniving Media Fans to leave, call for the vote to be reconsidered, and get it overturned. Thankfully for our faith in WSFS democracy, this piece of trickery went badly wrong. Firstly the opponents of the BDP started asking about reconsider far too quickly. I was at the back of the room and I reckon that no more than a handful of people had actually left by then. This then led to Ben Miller, a supporter of the split, introducing the motion himself before any more of his colleagues could leave. And finally Mark Olson, a high profile opponent of the split, made a resounding speech against the use of parliamentary trickery. And in any case the vote had passed so overwhelmingly that I doubt that a reconsider would have succeeded no matter when it was brought.

So we have a new Hugo. Next year we will be voting on both long form and short

form dramatic presentations. The dividing line is 90 minutes, with 20% leeway on either side should the Administrators (or more likely the voters during the nomination stage) feel that a work on the borderline clearly belongs in the other category than the one for which its length qualifies it. (For example, if Spielberg were to make a multi-billion dollar, 85 minute movie.) So, keep an eye open for good short stuff. The Hugo recommendation site is already open.

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### Spending money

Yes, there was a dealers’ room. Yes, I bought an awful lot of books. Thankfully I didn’t have enough time to browse the rest of the room properly; otherwise I might have been seriously bankrupt. There were a lot of good stalls there.

This is also the first Worldcon that Kevin and I have been to when we’ve actually had something approaching a place of our own in which to hang art. (OK, so our apartment is rented, but at least we are not sharing and the lease is in our name.) So I made a point of making a serious visit to the art show. If I had had the odd few thousand dollars to spend I would have picked up a truckload of David Cherry art. There was some other good stuff too, but everything I liked was seriously expensive. That’s life, I guess, though I note that a Worldcon is a bad place to pick up a limited edition print. I might be able to pick up some nice stuff for rather less at a smaller convention.

Unfortunately I was so busy looking for bargains that I missed the star exhibit in the show. Hidden away in a back corner, a dragon was growing. It was being sculpted live in front of the membership in soft clay. And being done in soft clay, it

was not moveable and had to be destroyed at the end of the con. All that remains are photographs, and I don't have any. I really stuffed up there. Sorry folks.

Still on the subject of spending money, our auxiliary dealers' room, the Tapestry craft fair, also looked very good. I wish I had been able to browse it properly. However, San José picked Labor Day weekend to put on one of its most spectacular heat waves of the year. Normally I don't mind the heat, but after a few days of Worldcon pace I was much too tired to stay out in the sun for long. I guess it saved me a lot of money.

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## **Eating**

Having to keep clear of Kevin for much of the convention meant that I had to find my own company in the evenings. Contrary to what some of the ConJosé Executive would have you believe, I do still have some friends. The embarrassing thing is that most of them are writers. Sorry folks, I'm not bragging here, honest.

First, however, I need to report on Kevin's birthday dinner, which took place on the Tuesday before the con. We did not go to the Springsteen concert (much to my disappointment - I didn't know that it was on until it was too late). However, we did go to Menara, a very fine Moroccan restaurant. This place is the real thing: sit on cushions, traditional North African food, eat with your fingers, and watch the belly dancers. Well, actually we missed the latter, or I'd never have got Kevin out of the place. But the food was wonderful. When you are expecting your guests to eat with their fingers it helps if you make sure that any meat you serve is literally falling off the bone. Yum. Highly recommended.

Thursday night was spent in the excellent company of John and Yvonne Meaney, whom I took to Inca Gardens, the Peruvian restaurant. John is a vegetarian, and Inca Gardens does vegetarian well. I'm pleased to say that they loved it, though like Kevin and I they were thoroughly bemused by the very strange purple corn drink.

On Friday I blew off the Patrick Stewart presentation to have dinner with Sean McMullen. We were both betting on it being packed out (the lines were ominous 2 hours before the event). As it happened, Kevin called when we were heading off to San Pedro Square to tell us that there was space, but by then we had talked ourselves into being hungry, which was just as well. Fanny & Alexander is one of the higher-class restaurants in the square that I had not tried. I'm pleased to say that it was excellent, and I now have it on my list to take Kevin there.

Saturday I was just too busy to eat, what with site selection and the masquerade, so I ended up eating in the bar at the Fairmont. The food was merely OK, but the beer was good and the company, including Al Reynolds, Liz Williams and Ben Jeapes, was superb. Sorry about that photo, folks, but it was too good to not use.

I wasn't about to make the same mistake on Sunday, so I went to Shalimar for lunch. An all-you-can-eat curry buffet was just what I needed. I'm pleased to say that the food is still as good as it was when I sampled it for the Guide to San José. It saved my life too, because it meant that I was well stocked up with fuel to last the rest of the day without food.

Monday saw a large group of us, including Sean, John and Yvonne, head to House of Siam. This was an eye-opener. I

don't think I know anyone who is tougher than Sean McMullen. He's a martial arts expert, he's been a champion fighter in the SCA, he's a very good fencer; he is not the sort of guy you want to end up in a fight with. But I am now confident that should he ever challenge me to a duel then I would be able to win. If I get choice of weapons I'm picking chili eating for the contest.

By Tuesday Neil had finished the scripting work with Robert Zemeckis. Being Neil, he was looking for sushi, and Jon Singer had recommended a place in Cupertino. Enter the Cheryl & Kevin taxi service. It was kind of well hidden, but we found the place eventually. I can't remember the name – by then I was very tired - but it is close to Vallco Fashion Mall. I'm sure Kevin can find it again. Anyway, the food was superb. Thank you, Mr. Singer.

This has been a culinary tour of the South Bay, courtesy of Cheryl's stomach. Now back to the con report.

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### The Frefanzine

Of course no Worldcon would be complete without Sam Conklin's *Daily Frefanzine*. I have no idea whether Conklin intends it to be so inaccurate – you never can tell with extremist Libertarians because they delude themselves over so much – but I'm sure he doesn't intend it to be so funny.

Consider, for example, the little matter of losing Bob Silverberg. Sure, the announcement did say, "we've lost a presenter". But Silverberg joked about them losing him when he got to the stage, and he was listed as the presenter for that slot in the program. How, then, did Conklin manage to report Silverberg as

having stepped in at the last moment because the con had lost the scheduled presenter? Oh well, I guess it did allow him to credit Bob with making up that wonderfully funny speech on the spot.

Then there was the *Ansible* acceptance speech. Tobes read it correctly. Langford did say that his circulation was over 3,000. So how did Conklin manage to inflate that to 93,000? The man's a genius. Who need the *Weekly World News* or *Sunday Sport* with the *Daily Frefanzine* around?

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## ConJosé: The Hugos

### Winners

For the benefit of those of you who have not yet heard the results, the Hugo Awards for 2002 were given as follows:

**Novel:** *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (Morrow);

**Novella:** "Fast Times at Fairmont High" by Vernor Vinge (*The Collected Stories of Vernor Vinge*, Tor);

**Novellette:** "Hell Is the Absence of God" by Ted Chiang (*Starlight 3*, Tor);

**Short Story:** "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" by Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's* 10-11/01);

**Related Book:** *The Art of Chesley Bonestell* by Ron Miller & Frederick C. Durant III, with Melvin H. Schuetz (Paper Tiger) ;

**Dramatic Presentation:** *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New Line Cinema/The Saul Zaentz Company/WingNut Films) Peter Jackson and a cast of thousands;

**Professional Editor:** Ellen Datlow;  
**Professional Artist:** Michael Whelan;  
**Semi-prozine:** *Locus* (edited by Charles N. Brown);  
**Fanzine:** *Ansible* (edited by Dave Langford);  
**Fan Writer:** Dave Langford;  
**Fan Artist:** Teddy Harvia;  
**Best Web Site:** *Locus Online* (edited by Mark R. Kelly);  
**John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer (not a Hugo):** Jo Walton.

Full details of the voting figures, including the minor placings and the honorable mentions from the nominations stage are available through the *Emerald City* web site. (Well, OK, most of the data is on the ConJosé pages, but as I built those pages too you are not going to complain, right?).

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## Analysis

Well, naturally I am very pleased for Neil and somewhat disappointed for China. It is especially sad that, after finishing second on first place votes, *Perdido Street Station* dropped to fourth after the various run-offs. That, of course, is what proportional representation is all about. *Perdido* is a book that people either loved or hated, which of course shows just what a powerful novel it is.

(Kevin nit-picks me here and says I should call the voting system Instant Runoff Voting. That's the official American term for that type of vote, and Kevin says that Proportional Representation is a specific term meaning something different. But you knew what I meant, didn't you.)

The interesting thing now is the *American Gods* has won the Bram Stoker Award (for best horror novel) and the Hugo, and is a nominee for the World Fantasy Award. If Neil wins he will have achieved a unique triple crown of best novel awards, and along the way advanced the cause of genre-blurring fiction magnificently. Kevin and I will be heading off to World Fantasy Con in Minneapolis later this year to cheer him on.

In the nomination also-rans it is good to see *Revelation Space* placing joint 7<sup>th</sup>. That makes three novels in the top ten (with *Perdido* and *Cosmonaut Keep*) that got in under the eligibility extension, which shows that the system is working.

I don't have a lot to say about the short fiction as I have read so little of it. There has been some ill-mannered whingeing about Vernor Vinge's story only winning because he was GoH. The basis for this claim is that he got the least nominations but won the final ballot easily. I guess there could be some truth in that, but much of the point of the two-stage system is that people get to read things that other people nominated and that changes their minds about what to vote for.

The Best Dramatic Presentation vote is just stunning. The *Lord of the Rings* movie got around 66% of the first place votes, which we believe to be a record although *Star Wars* did similarly well. We also believe that it got the largest number of nominations of any work or person in any Hugo category ever. Wow.

This, of course, has led a lot of people to start whingeing about how the category might as well be scrapped because it is clear that the remaining two *LotR* films are obviously going to win for the next two years. Guess what? Most of the people saying this are also people who have been

coming up with all sorts of other reasons for having the BDP Hugo scrapped for years. Doubtless the rest of fandom will still ignore them.

Also worth commenting on is the fact that the *Buffy* episode finished second on first place votes but dropped to fifth after all of the run-offs. Again this appears to have been a case of "love it or hate it". The anti-BDP crowd has been busy arguing that the BDP split is a waste of time because it is obvious that *Buffy* episodes will win the Short Form Hugo forever and always. You can tell that they never watch TV, because they have clear forgotten that *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* ever existed.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy of this year's Hugos was David Cherry missing a nomination in Best Professional Artist by just 2 votes. I knew very little about Cherry before he was suggested as a GoH for ConJosé, but I've been hugely impressed by what I have seen of his work. Let's see if we can get him in next year, folks.

One of the most popular victories of the night was Ellen Datlow's win in Best Professional Editor. Much as everyone likes Gardner Dozois, it was a little boring having him win every year, and it is good to see that the voters are showing some variation in taste. A look at the vote breakdown is perhaps less encouraging. Ellen finished fourth on first place votes and clawed her way up as others were eliminated. It looks very much as if there were two camps of voters: the Dozois loyalists and the Anyone-but-Gardner revolutionaries. Ellen happened to be the most popular candidate with the latter group. And again, that's how the voting system is supposed to work.

Talking of perennial winners, Charles Brown has announced that after 500 issues

he is stepping down as editor of *Locus* and is leaving the day-to-day running of the magazine in the capable hands of Kirsten Gong-Wong and Jenni Hall. Charles will continue to be involved, of course, but he won't be the only face of *Locus* any more. Charles invited Kirsten and Jenni up on stage with him to accept the Hugo. I don't see anything challenging *Locus's* domination of the semiprozine category, but at least next year there will be some new names on the plaque.

Having said that, it is possible that two of the greatest all-time winners of Hugos will be going head-to-head next year. In his acceptance speech for Best Fanzine (ably read for him by TAFF delegate, Tobes Valois), Dave Langford pointed out that his circulation was now over 3,000 and that he did sometimes pay his contributors in something other than free copies (namely beer). That therefore qualifies *Ansible* for the semiprozine category. At the time I figured that Dave was joking, but in an interview in SFRevu (<http://www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2002/0209/Zine%20-%20Ansible/zine.htm>) he says, "Whether or not I was joking at the time, people seem determined to hold me to that!"

To qualify as a semiprozine a magazine has to fulfill two of five conditions. Two I have mentioned above, and *Ansible* clearly qualifies on the grounds of circulation. The paying contributors thing is something that I think no reasonable Hugo Administrator would take seriously. Nor does *Ansible* qualify by dint of providing at least half the income of any one person, or having at least 15% of its content as advertising. However, the fifth condition is simply that the editor can declare a magazine to be semiprofessional, and it can be argued that Dave has indeed done that. Therefore we may see *Locus* and

*Ansible* going head to head in the semiprozine category next year.

That in turn raises the question of who will win Best Fanzine if *Ansible* is no longer in contention. The most likely candidate is Mike Glycer's *File 770*. It has won before and always places well. *Mimosa*, another past winner, is folding. If it has a last issue available to qualify next year it could well get a resounding send-off, but otherwise it is no longer a contender. Personally I would like to see *Plokta* win. The issue that was available at ConJosé was absolutely hilarious, and if the Cabal can keep that up through the year they will be worthy winners.

Meanwhile there has been the usual whingeing about how the fan categories should be abolished because Dave Langford always wins Best Fan Writer (his unbroken streak in that category stretches back to 1989). The trouble is that his wins are well deserved. Langford is a much better writer than any of the other candidates. But if people want to stop him winning they should do something constructive rather than whinge.

One possibility is to introduce a constitutional amendment to the effect that once a person has one a Hugo in a professional capacity then they are no longer eligible for fannish Hugos of the same type. There is already some precedent for this in that there is a clause that says that if someone is nominated for both Best Professional Artist and Best Fan Artist in the same year then only the former will count. The usual argument against this is that fannish activities are somehow different and equal to professional activities, and that to say that professionals can no longer qualify as fans is somehow an insult to fannish work. That, I think, is just plain silly. I mean,

how would people feel if Tad Williams won the Best Fan Writer Hugo for his postings on Shadowmarch? Or if Neil Gaiman won for his online journal?

Now, I'm not going to introduce such an amendment, firstly because Dave is a mate and I would not do that to him, and secondly because it would only seem like sour grapes on behalf of a rival fanzine editor. But if the people who complain every year about Langford winning really want to do something about it, this would seem the best option.

A few words now about ConJosé's pet project, the Best Web Site Hugo. Personally I think it was a huge success. It got the fourth highest level of interest amongst nominations (behind Best Professional Editor and the two blockbuster categories, Novel and BDP). It also was right up amongst the other popular categories in numbers of voters in the final ballot. I also note that, while the category was dominated by big name sites, the winner (*Locus Online*) was the web site of a magazine that is avowedly semi-professional, and two of the other nominees (*Strange Horizons* and *Tangent*) are also clearly not big businesses. (*Strange Horizons* does pay, but it also relies primarily on donations to keep going). *Scifi.com* probably has a bigger budget than all of the other nominees put together, but it didn't win.

There has been a lot of nonsense talked on RASSF about how it is terrible that we did not create separate fan and professional categories for web sites. Firstly this would have been impossible: the WSFS Constitution only allows a Worldcon to create one special Hugo. And in any case, how are you going to tell the difference? Is *Emerald City* professional because I have all those Amazon links? Would a site be

professional if it used a lot of banner ads? In order to split categories, you have to have a clear and unambiguous way of doing it.

During ConJosé I talked to Michael Nelson who is in charge of the Hugo Awards for Torcon III. He told me that the T3 committee has decided not to award any additional Hugos (there will be no retro-Hugos, and no Best Web Site). I can understand their reluctance, but I think that Best Web Site is an idea that has worked so well that it has to come back somehow. It will be hard to get another Hugo added to the list after we've just created a new one, but I think after a few years campaigning we could make this one stick.

Finally one small point about the fannish also-rans. I thought I told you folks that I had declared myself ineligible this year, and yet I find that I got 22 nominations in Best Fanzine, 17 in Best Fanwriter, and even 10 in Best Web Site! You guys are wonderful. Thank you very much. Next year, of course, I will be eligible again, and everyone who was a member of ConJosé is eligible to nominate. Well, I can dream, can't I?

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## ConJosé: The Verdict

Before I start on this, a small disclaimer. What follows is my own opinion. Not one word of it has been written for me by Kevin. Of course I have talked to him about how the con went, but I have made up my own mind about what went well and what did not. I do have a mind of my own, in case certain people haven't noticed. I guess I'm kind of used to male

SMOFs treating me as a brainless floozie, but when I hear of a female SMOF writing to Kevin to complain to him about my convention weblog on the assumption that he wrote it for me I do wonder.

I should also add that judging the success or otherwise of a Worldcon is a tricky business. Depending on where you have been reading reports, you will have seen very different views, and for very different reasons. For example, Kevin and I knew before we even started the bid that Mike Resnick would have an awful time at the con. Or at least he would say afterwards that he did. Judging from his Worldcon reports in *Mimosa*, he hates every Worldcon he attends. So while it is sad that something he was involved in fell foul of the chaos surrounding Patrick Stewart's arrival, I'm not putting much store by anything Resnick says.

Equally we have got complaints from people who are unhappy because the con was not what they expected. This varies from the understandable (people who were expecting more media focus) to the petty (one particular person who expected the entire event to be arranged solely for his benefit). Most of this has to be filed under "you can't please all of the people all of the time". While we are obviously upset that some people didn't enjoy themselves, we knew from the start that that would be the case. We just had to try to minimize the number of people who felt that way.

I've not been following the debate about the convention on SMOFs or RASFF, but the impression I get from Kevin is that a lot of the reaction has been negative, and that much of the criticism has been of the form of "it is terrible that ConJosé did x", generally swiftly followed by people pointing out that the last N Worldcons

also did exactly that. That's fannish newsgroups for you. In fact we are coming to the conclusion that the denizens of such newsgroups exist in some strange sort of warped alternate reality in which things that have never been done before become "traditional" and things that are done at every Worldcon become "an awful innovation" when done by the current one. We should have expected it.

Finally we get complaints from experienced con-runners. Most of these are accurate. Many of them are also over the top given the seriousness of the problem that is being highlighted. It is entirely appropriate to point out shortcomings that could be improved. It is quite another thing to scream "disaster" because some small element of the con did not work as well as it might. Kevin is of the view that it is a miracle that any Worldcon runs smoothly at all. For reasons that I will explain in the Backstory section, I think he's right. And given how badly organized the con was just 6 months out I think we dodged a whole machine gun full of bullets.

Incidentally, I'm sure some of you have your own issues with the convention. Kevin and I would be delighted to hear from you if you do. However, before writing to me, please read what follows, especially the section at the end on Worldcon budgeting. Running a Worldcon isn't always as easy as it looks.

On balance, I've received massively more positive comments about the convention than negative ones. That is of course primarily by dint of avoiding SMOFs and RASFF. And in any case saying that is the con-runner's equivalent of saying "the lurkers support me". I don't expect anyone on SMOFs to actually believe that we've had positive feedback. So instead

let's try to take a look at what went wrong, and why.

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## Registration

The first experience that anyone has of a con is usually Registration. It was also the area that we were most keen to get right, given that it was a screaming disaster at ConFrancisco, the last Bay Area Worldcon, and not well done at last year's Worldcon, the Millennium Philcon.

I gather that Wednesday didn't go well at all. One of my friends from Shadowmarch was so disgusted at how she was treated in trying to register and volunteer on Wednesday that she gave up all thought of working on the con. After that, things got rather more under control, but there were clearly a number of problems.

Perhaps the biggest failing of the entire convention was that the pocket programs were delayed in arriving. That wasn't actually Registration's fault, but it made them look bad because they were the ones who had to say, "sorry, we don't have the stuff, you'll have to come back later".

There also appeared to be quite a few people whose registration information was missing or incorrect in some way. This is bad, but it is primarily a result of the lax way in which membership records were kept up until about 6 months ago. There was little that Elaine Brennan could do about it when she took over except be ready to apologize and put things right on the day.

Badge printing problems were another matter. I'm not sure what happened here. Possibly we skimped on printers, or just took an awful long time to get them working. There was also a real problem with people who were registered as



“friend of xxx” and consequently couldn’t get badges printed in advance. One person had to wait 3 hours to get her badge. That’s not good enough.

The badge holders, which included large pouches on a neck cord, and the large type on the badges, all seemed to be very well received. Curiously enough the only criticism I heard of them came from our Operations people who were very worried that a pouch worn round the neck was an invitation to muggers. They would have preferred a chain rather than the fabric cord that was used as it is less of an invitation to use a knife. Given that some people were stuffing things like PDAs into the pouch, I can see the concern, and had we been in Baltimore, Chicago or Philadelphia I would have been worried too. Thankfully San José is very safe and as far as I know we had no crime problems at all.

Where the badges did cause problems is that the pouch was apparently part of the security check. That is, if you did not keep your paper badge in its pouch you should have been denied entrance to the con. Thankfully the pouches were so popular that this was not an issue, but it could have been. It is another example of the tendency of con committees to put massively too much effort into preventing badge fraud and end up inconveniencing legitimate members rather than catching cheats. Given that similar sorts of things are now happening with “security” measures all over the country I guess we can’t be too surprised at this.

The real problem, however, was in failing to make members aware of this issue. Judging from the con members’ mailing list, about a third of the attendees were told about the pouch being required at all times. Two thirds, including me, were not

told. And this brings us to a very important point about Registration: it is a consumer service job. Clearly the Registration management tried to get the message over, because some of their workers got it right. But many either forgot their instructions or willfully ignored them. The person who registered me was so lax I had to ask for my convention publications. Had I not known to ask he would have let me go without them. There is a real issue here that if Worldcons want Registration done well they have to pick the people who work there carefully and train them well. Just picking any fan out of a gopher pool, or taking anyone who volunteers to work Reg, won’t work.

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## **Publications**

Publications is one of the areas that has received most negative feedback after the convention. This is sad, because prior to the con they were the one area that consistently got things done pretty much on time (with one notable exception – see the Backstory). But balls do seem to have got dropped in many areas.

Let’s start with those pocket program books. What happened there is that the printer grossly underestimated how long it would take him to do the spiral binding. Given that he was running late, he explained that he could not deliver the order until Saturday. This led to our Publications managers spending rather more time than they had planned yelling at the printer. Because those same people (Bob & Brenda Daverin) had also scheduled themselves to run the newsletter, this then impacted newsletter production.

Newsletter itself, of course, could have been better. It seemed to contain an awful lot of pre-prepared filler and very little news. And a couple of things should have been obvious. Firstly, having a format that requires folding the newsletter introduces an additional level of complication to the production process that you don't want to have to deal with at con. Second, the newsletter computers and printers are not just for the newsletter, they are the convention's main source of computing resources, in particular printing resources. If your newsletter managers have a religious attachment to Macs and have no PC equipment in their office, this causes major inconvenience to everyone else. Of course if your convention is so strapped for cash pre-con that the newsletter staff have to provide their own computers you can't really complain about what sort of equipment they bring, but that's another story.

Meanwhile, back with the pocket program, the layout of the grid pages left a lot to be desired. This is a difficult job, but I've seen it done better at other Worldcons. It looks like we missed out on studying previous examples for inspiration. Also I could seriously have done with a note on each page of the grid telling me which day I was looking at. I would have saved me so much time when leafing through it.

The Restaurant Guide also came in for a lot of criticism. In some ways this is surprising, because the people employed to write it, Bruce Schneier and Karen Cooper, had previously got a Hugo nomination for the restaurant guide that they wrote for Minicon. However, something that makes a great piece of fan writing does not necessarily make a good restaurant guide. As a piece of writing, ConJosé's restaurant guide was highly

entertaining. As a restaurant guide it left a lot to be desired.

The main criticism of the guide was that it was too gourmet-oriented. For example, it slammed Inca Gardens for not serving roast Guinea Pig and not being as good as the restaurants that Bruce and Karen had eaten at when they visited Peru. To my mind, that is pretty harsh when you have something as unusual as a Peruvian restaurant to offer. Besides, a lot of Worldcon attendees want something quick and cheap, not a high quality gourmet meal.

Other criticisms of the restaurant guide were somewhat less justified. Yes, it had no map, and that was poor. However, very good maps of the area were available from the concierge desk at the convention center. The fault, if there was one, was with the newsletter for not publicizing that fact early and often. Some people also complained about the size and quality of the guide given the well-publicized budget problems of the convention. In fact the guide came in well over budget. Bruce and Karen were asked to cut it, but instead offered to put up some of the money to ensure that it was printed as it was written. Finally, to those people who complained loud and long about the guide not having an index: it did, it was at the back, where did you expect the index to be?

The last stop on our tour of publications is the souvenir book. For the most part that wasn't too bad, but how we managed to get the "long list" of past Worldcons so badly wrong is beyond me. Something that can be lifted directly from previous years' publications, and can probably be obtained correct in electronic form from previous Worldcons, should be easy to get right and suggests that the editors didn't

care whether it was right or not. Oh well, at least we got *Watchmen* back in the list of Hugo winners.

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## **Programming**

Of course I'm biased, but I happen to think that ConJosé had the best program of any Worldcon I have attended. By that I mean that it had the largest number of program items that I wanted to attend. I gather that there have been furious complaints from other quarters that ConJosé had too much programming about things like books, writing and science and not enough about fandom. Well, call me untraditional, but I happen to think that less navel gazing is a good thing. Besides, all of the fan-oriented programming that I looked in on was very poorly attended.

All things considered, including the fact that 6 months out we hadn't even sent out invitations to prospective program participants, it was an absolute miracle that ConJosé had any programming at all. I note also that James Patrick Kelly, the moderator of the "SF on the Web" panel, opened the discussion by saying that ConJosé had the best-organized program of any Worldcon he could remember. Take a bow here, Ian Stockdale and Ruth Leibig, who were positively saintly through most of the political conflicts afflicting programming and seem to have done a wonderful job at Program Ops.

Of course there will always be panels that get changed or cancelled at the last minute. I don't know whether it is the fault of program operations or the newsletter that these were not well publicized, though I have my suspicions. Equally, with such a large undertaking, there will be some moderators that do a

poor job. However, it is wrong to complain that they were not told. They may have not bothered to read the notes that came in their program participant packs (I know I did), but programming did at least try.

I have not, as yet, heard much in the way of complaints from people who did not get on the program items that they wanted. I'm sure some people are upset, but that's inevitable. Of course it works both ways. Our program team was probably not best pleased with the author who wrote close to the con and cancelled all her panels and, a few days later when they had rescheduled everything, wrote and asked to be put back on them all again. But they smiled sweetly and got on with it, and it looks like she got back on most things.

One significant failure is that the Kaffeklatsches had no kaffe – nor indeed refreshment of any sort. This, of course, was a budgeting issue, and probably also in part a result of the arrogant and greedy attitude of the Hilton's management. I'll be talking a lot more about budgeting later in the session, which will hopefully give you an insight into why such things happen, but this is still a highly regrettable mistake.

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## **Events**

In the run-up to the convention many people had been very worried about our Events Division. Both John Blaker (Division Head) and Randy Smith (Hugo Ceremony) are clergymen and were not available to attend weekend committee meetings (or indeed most work nights – they work very antisocial hours). However, both seem to have done an excellent job.

Pre-con we were also worried about the venue for the main events. We had a bunch of options, all of them bad in some way. After many walkthroughs we opted for the Civic Auditorium as the best of a bad lot. It is sad that the masquerade green room was cramped, and that the facilities for professional photography were so poor, but any other venue would have been much worse in other ways. In any case, one thing that the Civic did have going for it was that it was a proper theatre. Both masquerade and Hugo ceremony looked really good up on a proper stage, with good seating. Personally I would have been prepared to suffer a lot of inconvenience elsewhere for that benefit. Ultimately, however, it is simply the case that there is no such thing as an ideal Worldcon venue. We have to learn to live with occasional facilities problems.

One area that caused Events a lot of hassle was the balcony at the Civic. Because it took so long even for fit people to get up there (you had to climb right to the top and then work your way down to a seat) the house manager, Tom Galloway, decided to encourage people to use the balcony as the house was filling. As it turned out, none of the events filled the house to capacity, so we could probably have kept the balcony closed, but Tom had no way of knowing that when he started.

By far the biggest success of Events, however, was handling the Patrick Stewart visit. Last issue I had prepared, but had to can, an article called "Attack of the 500 lb Gorilla" that detailed the panic that Stewart's impending arrival was causing. Adding a major event like that at the last minute is a major undertaking; especially as we didn't get confirmation that it was going to take place until the Monday before the convention started,

and we had timing changes imposed on us after that. The fact that it happened at all demands enormous credit to Randy Smith for managing the process and to the tech team and other staff who pulled out the stops to make it happen. That some other events, such as the Lux Radio Theater event, were inconvenienced is regrettable, but there was no way that we could turn down Paramount and Stewart when they had not only offered us this opportunity, but offered to pay for the inconvenience it would cause us as well. I mean, media cons have to pay actors appearance fees, and most of them cannot afford Stewart, and here he was offering to pay us so that he could come and do some PR for Paramount. Under those circumstances you do not tell him to go away.

Doubtless some people were disappointed not to have seen more of Stewart. Quite possibly he would have liked to stay around. Kevin, who got to meet him, said that he was very friendly, pleased to be there, and delighted with how well we had organized things. However, he was being worked hard by his studio. From arriving at San José airport he had about half an hour to discuss things with our tech people (largely making sure that the various movie clips and stuff he had brought would be shown at the right times) and an hour to talk before he had to head back to the airport for his next flight. It isn't always easy being famous.

Mention of Stewart brings me on to the Hugo Ceremony itself. One of the things that disappointed me about our ceremony is that we didn't have much in the way of displays on the big screens. We had the Best Dramatic Presentation clips (rather poorly edited), and RIP list, and that was about it. We could have done better. But the main reason that we didn't was that up until the Stewart thing happened we

felt that we didn't have the budget for the big screens. Given that we needed them for Stewart to show his clips, and that we were getting some extra money in, we went ahead and ordered the screens, but by that time Randy was far too busy managing the Stewart event to worry about preparing more stuff for the Hugo Ceremony.

The one thing that went noticeably wrong at the ceremony itself was that a couple of times the Voice of God got the "accepting for" announcement wrong. Eric Larson confesses, "I screwed up". It happens. And it is good to see someone accepting the blame for a mistake rather than trying to pass it onto others.

Something that has been the subject of furious complaints on SMOFs is that it took about an hour after the ceremony before we got the results up on the web site. That was my job, so I screwed up there. I had everything prepared, and I was fully intending to rush off to the Internet lounge to post the results. But I had reckoned without getting to be Neil's minder for the evening, not to mention how long it would take to extract him from the photographers and the fans after the ceremony. Much to my delight he let me use the DSL line in his hotel room to post the updates, so we have Mr. Gaiman to thank for things being not quite as late as they were. I would, of course, have been delighted to update wirelessly as the ceremony went along, but we didn't have the budget for that set-up.

One problem that wasn't really our fault was losing the acceptor for Best Professional Artist. Michael Whelan had told us that Bob Eggleton would be the acceptor should he win, but he had neglected to tell Eggleton, who happened to be absent when he was needed. Memo

to future Worldcons: make sure that your nominees tell their acceptors what they have been asked to do.

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## **Exhibits**

From the moment that Larry Smith agreed to run our Dealers' Room I was confident that we be OK in that area. I gather that Larry can be a bit abrasive at times, and having a well-known dealer in charge of the other dealers is always a big risk. But I was confident that he'd get the job done.

What did not work as well was Larry getting promoted to overall control of the Exhibits area after Michael Siladi was fired. The art show people caused a lot of trouble and needed a manager to keep them in line. In the event the art show didn't sell out and looked like it had been cunningly laid out to appear bigger than it was. As for the Exhibit Hall (hall two), it showed almost MilPhil-like barrenness. Putting the autographing in there was a stroke of genius on someone's part as it used up a lot of empty space with queues. Also the layout was quite well done, but it could not disguise the lack of actual exhibits.

There are two reasons for the failure of hall two. The first is that there was no one in charge of it. It needed a hall manager who was prepared to seek out potential exhibitors and find the staff to make the exhibits happen. No one was prepared to do that. In addition, even if we had had someone, they may have found the job too hard. When I was running publicity I encountered substantial resistance from other people on the committee to the idea what we should have any outside exhibits. While various complaints were made, the real reason for the objections seemed to be that people were opposed to having non-

participatory activities at Worldcon, especially as I had made no secret of the fact that I wanted such exhibits precisely in order to give casual attendees something to make them feel that they had got their money's worth. Several people on the committee were strongly of the opinion that people who are "not part of our community" should not be encouraged to attend Worldcons and should not be catered for. While such attitudes persist amongst con-runners, I think it unlikely that we will ever see a well-done exhibit hall (except maybe in LA where it is relatively easy to get studios to donate stuff).

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## Facilities

As I mentioned earlier, there is no such thing as an ideal Worldcon venue. People who complain that San José should never be allowed to run another Worldcon because... (the Fairmont was too far from the convention center, there were queues for the elevators, the program rooms were too far apart, it was too hot, and so on) will manage to find a way to rule out every potential Worldcon site, except possibly Las Vegas which would be too expensive. Kevin has this story about how what fans actually want is a convention center with a huge Motel 6 attached, which has only luxury suites at Motel 6 prices, has only one floor, and is in no part more than a hundred yards or so from any programming room or the dealers' room. OK, so he's being sarcastic, but at times he seems very close to being right.

The main problems with ConJosé's facilities have been listed above. We felt that the distance from the Fairmont to the convention center was survivable, but we had not reckoned on the weather being

hotter than average, or on the construction of the Marriott causing such inconvenience. If ConJosé 2 ever happens, the Marriott will provide a lot of extra hotel rooms. It might even be a possible rival to the Fairmont for the headquarters hotel, but given that we only ended up in San José at the last minute after San Francisco made it clear that we were not wanted, we didn't have the option to wait for the Marriott to be completed.

Other people have asked why we didn't use the Hilton as our party hotel. That's quite simple, we tried and they turned us down. No corkage waiver, no parties. We've also been asked why, if we put the dead dog party in function space on floor 2 of the Fairmont, why all parties could not have been down there. The answer is the same: corkage. By Monday night we knew that we had \$600 that we could blow on paying to have a downstairs party space, but how many other party throwers would have had that sort of money in addition to their room rental?

The elevator situation was, I think, handled quite well. By devoting half of the elevators to express service to the main party floors (which the hotel ran because you needed the magic key) and letting us put Elevator Party Hosts on the other half, the Fairmont gave us the best of both worlds. The few times I had to queue I found that things went very smoothly and quickly.

The location of programming rooms in the McEnery Convention Center was a major headache. The building is laid out like that to allow them to host two small conventions simultaneously. We needed the whole building. As it was, we made the best of a bad job by opting for 90-minute program slots and 75-minute program items, thus giving people a full

15 minutes to get from one item to the next. It wasn't perfect, and some of the signage could probably have been better, but it would have been a disaster if we had gone for 60-minute program slots because more program items would have over-run and people would have been very late getting to their next panel.

Prior to the convention there were the usual problems with hotel rooms. San José simply doesn't have enough hotel rooms close to the convention center for a Worldcon. Thankfully the excellent light rail system means that those people who did not get into a downtown hotel were not too badly inconvenienced, but we really could have done with that Marriott being finished.

The biggest hotel screw-up was neither the fault of the convention nor of the housing bureau. The Hyatt Sainte Claire, for reasons best known to themselves, managed to double-book a lot of their rooms by taking bookings themselves for the same rooms that they had allocated to the housing bureau. They acknowledged that they were to blame, and they fixed the problem at their own expense by offering the affected people cheap rooms at another Hyatt down the light rail line. It was unfortunate, and possibly our facilities people should have been keeping a closer eye on what the hotels were doing, but I'm not sure we could have done much about it.

One thing that I did learn from watching the hotel situation unfold is that fans often have themselves (or their fellow fans) to blame for their hotel problems. All of the people who were double-booked into the Hyatt had presumably ignored our exhortations to book only through the housing bureau form on our web site. To a certain extent, those people who booked

direct with the Hyatt have only themselves to blame. I also noticed that while many fans who had memberships left it until the last moment before trying to get a hotel room, many also booked a hotel room before they made up their minds whether or not they would attend. Consequently the supply of hotel rooms ran out more quickly than expected because they were being snapped up by people who did not have memberships at the expense of those who did. It wasn't until the last few weeks that things got sorted out. I'm not sure what can be done about this – I just can't see anyone getting the IT in place to ensure that someone has a membership before they can book a room, and it would probably cause more disruption than it is worth. The lesson has to be that you should book early.

Another thing I learned is that the success or failure of an element of the convention can be critically dependent on a single person. I have lost count of the number of times that Kevin said, "thank goodness for Glenn Glazer". If Glenn had not been tirelessly tracking down and resolving every hotel problem as it arose, our facilities would have been seen as a screaming disaster on a similar magnitude to the infamous Baltimore housing bureau.

Finally on Facilities, I have no idea what the Fairmont think they are up to with this "carpet cleaning" charge. We had no inkling of it until it turned up on people's bills, including Kevin's. I'll report again next month.

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### **Internet Lounge**

One area of the con that I saw a lot of was the Internet lounge. It seemed to me that it was a lot smaller than the one in Chicago, but it wasn't terribly busy. One reason

may have been that most of the machines were Unix-based, which might have put some people off. It didn't worry me, because all I needed to do was hook my Ethernet cable up to the hub. Thank goodness for laptops. Life is much easier that way.

Other than that, the service from the lounge was available at every time I wanted it and the speed was better than my DSL line at home. Don't know what I would have done without them.

The lounge staff seemed very helpful, if prone to talking in acronyms a lot of the time. At one point I saw them helping some guy take his laptop apart to fix a keyboard problem. That's dedication.

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### **Hospitality**

Apparently some of our Hospitality staff are deeply upset because they were unable to put on the sort of service that they wanted to give, primarily, I think, due to lack of staff. That is a shame, because Geri Sullivan worked miracles with this division. The "fanspace" at the entrance to the convention center was one of the highlights of the con (except, presumably for those people who have a serious allergy to inflatable aliens or humor - I'm sure there must be some). Equally the innovation of coming and distributing bottles of water to people queuing for events outside the Civic Auditorium was unexpected, enormously welcome, and a sign of seriously smart thinking. If the con suite was perhaps not quite as good as it might have been (and I've heard no complaints), then I'm sorry, but no one is perfect, not even Geri; and certainly not Geri when she is strapped for cash and assistance. Miracles only go so far.

(Kevin has a nice story here. Apparently early on in the con Craige Howlett happened to notice an area on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor that looked really good. He raved about how spectacular it was and how the people running it must have spent a fortune decorating it, only to be told, "Craige, it is our con suite, and you know that they didn't spend a fortune because you were on the budget committee".)

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### **Administration**

Early on ConJosé had a huge Administration division that attracted functions like bees to a honey pot. Then, over time, it began to shrink, and bits of it got hived off and either given to other divisions or made into divisions in their own right. I'm told that after a few days the con office itself closed down, passing what functions it was doing along variously either to the Facilities operations office in the Fairmont and Program Ops in the Hilton. So are the mighty fallen.

Most of the problems here were, I think, management and organizational issues. I'm going to talk a lot more about them in the Backstory section. Here I'll just say that if you are going to have a division whose primary job is to provide services to other divisions, then it is essential that the people running it have vision and are proactive; otherwise their customers will end up duplicating the services that they can't get, and their competent department heads will go off on their own.

A case in point here is Logistics. Much to Kevin's chagrin (he works in the logistics industry) we were very late getting someone to take charge of this department. Huge thanks are therefore due to Dawn Plakson and Rick Kovalcik for coming in at the last minute and doing



the job (and Rick isn't even local). The point here is that Rick didn't actually meet his Division Head, Tony Cratz, until the dead dog party on Monday night. Why?

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### **Media Relations**

One area that I was briefly involved in was the press office. I recruited Bart Kemper to run that department, and while I have since felt deeply guilty at some of the things he had to go through, I must say that he and his team did a superb job. We had excellent coverage in local newspapers, on local college radio stations, and even on the BBC web site. Whilst all of this coverage has tended to use the awful "sci-fi" word and occasionally point out that SF fans are a bunch of geeks, it has been far better than I expected. Thank you, Bart.

Where we did learn a painful lesson is that fannish groups posing as professional media organizations are nothing of the sort. A certain group of people from Southern California (they'll know who they are) first of all conned their way into free memberships (largely through repeated use of the 'if dad says no ask mom' strategy) and then proceeded to threaten us that if they didn't get treated with the red carpet they thought they deserved then they would give the convention a bad write up. That's not professional journalism, that's greed and blackmail. Thankfully the con-runner grapevine is very effective in such circumstances. They certainly won't get away with any such stunts at future Worldcons.

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### **Worldcon Budgeting**

OK, last subsection here, and probably the most important bit. During the last few months of ConJosé I learned an awful lot (from talking to Kevin) about the process of budgeting a Worldcon. It is a difficult business, and I think that the details need to be more widely understood.

Because each individual Worldcon is a separate organization, it has to budget accurately. There's no possibility of making up the loss next year. If you make a loss, that's it, your organization is bankrupt. So you have to get things right.

The hard bit here (other than fans not understanding how to do a budget, of which more in the Backstory) is that much of your expenditure comes during and after the con. (Reimbursement of program participants and convention workers amounts to over 10% of a Worldcon's expenses.) Furthermore, a large proportion of your income will come in at-the-door memberships. Consequently you end up with contingency funds that people who don't understand budgeting demand you spend immediately, and there is this desperate hope that the at-the-door revenue will cover the (theoretically discretionary) reimbursement costs.

The inevitable consequences of all this, because the prospect of bankruptcy is so terrifying are as follows:

1. Things that Worldcons would like to do don't get funded because it is uncertain whether the money that they have will be needed elsewhere.
2. Worldcons are often able to appear to be spending money like water during the event, but this is only because anticipated contingencies have not eventuated.

3. Worldcons end up making a profit, which ignorant fans then complain about loudly, not realizing how hard it is to hit a precise target in an \$800,000 budget that has massive volatility towards the end of its life.

It would be nice if we could somehow derive some statistics from previous Worldcons that would give us a guide to how the uncertainties typically pan out. However, despite considerable research by Mark Olson and others, the only conclusion that anyone has been unable to come to is that there is no such things as a typical Worldcon. Up until about 6 months out, all of them follow the same pattern, but from then on the figures are all chaos. Almost certainly this is primarily a result of the vastly differing levels of competence of the convention committees. Some of them do well, others not so.

Being in the risk management business myself, I suspect that there is something that could be done with probability distributions that would allow a convention committee to proceed with a firmer budget with, say, 95% certainty. Whether any of them would be prepared to take the business risk of doing so is another matter. Kevin tells me that some of the SFSFC Board were stunned and appalled when they were told that it was possible that ConJosé might make a loss. Presumably they felt that this was only a hobby and that such awful things should therefore not happen. It ain't true, people. Running Worldcons is a business, as the next section aims to show.

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## **ConJosé: The Backstory**

### **Worldcon and Management**

All of this looking at individual successes and failures of ConJosé is hopefully somewhat interesting. In any case no one has complained too loudly about similar (if not quite so extensive) analysis of prior Worldcons. But having now seen a Worldcon from the inside I have come to the conclusion that most of the problems of Worldcons stem from a single source. There are, as I have alluded to earlier, problems that result from conservative fans not wanting to allow the convention to change to adapt to a changing nature of fandom. But almost everything else that goes wrong can, I believe, be blamed on failures of management.

Last year I passed on a number of sage pieces of advice about Worldcon running. Included in these was that you should not appoint the senior members of your committee on the basis of their importance in local fandom. One of the reasons for this is that you tend to end up with people who are more interested in status than doing their job. But more importantly, if said people have only ever been department managers in local conventions rather than working on Worldcons, they may well have difficulty upgrading their view of conrunning to cope with the new challenges. More generally, because running a department at a local con is not generally a serious management challenge, these people probably don't have any of the skills that are needed for a Worldcon division head.

Most science fiction conventions use a two-tier management structure. There is an upper tier (quite often only the chairman), and a lower tier (the department heads). In smaller conventions

the department heads are their own departments, and even in larger ones the job of department head is still that of a doer rather than that of a manger. Worldcons are different. Because they are so big, they have an additional level of middle managers called division heads. These people are (or at least should be) largely managers, not doers. Their jobs involve communication, recruitment, motivation, budgeting, project management and a whole bunch of other things that you don't often get to learn to do unless you have had a management job at your work.

The other scale issue with a Worldcon is to do with the budget. Many local conventions can be treated solely as hobby. They are run by a bunch of friends, and the budget is sufficiently small that if things go wrong, no one is going to be badly hurt. Larger local conventions are generally on-going events that are relatively stable (compared to a Worldcon) and therefore don't present the same sort of management problems. Worldcon is huge, is fast approaching a million dollars in turnover, and has thousands of members all over the world, all of whom have paid a lot of money to attend and expect a certain level of commitment from the people putting on the show. Consequently, the senior and middle management of a Worldcon has to behave, to some extent, like the managers of a million dollar turnover business.

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### **“It's only fannish”**

Sadly, ConJosé's early management missed this lesson entirely. Tom Whitmore had a fine record in fandom, had been an excellent vice chair at ConFrancisco, and was expected to do a fine job with

ConJosé. I for one was delighted with his appointment. But things didn't turn out as we expected.

Whitmore's primary strengths as a manager are mostly at a personal level. We knew he was not a detail man, and hoped he'd recruit someone who would fill that role well. He didn't. More importantly, his desire to keep all of his committee happy led only to division, frustration and, eventually revolution. For example, Whitmore was incredibly reluctant to make any policy decisions. Nothing was minuted, because without any written record Whitmore could always change his mind the next week in order to pacify some upset committee member. Worse still, Whitmore took to strenuously protecting people who were not getting their jobs done. If we were to complain about failures by other committee members, so the doctrine went, we were making those people unhappy, and happiness was the prime goal of the convention's management.

The most egregious example of this attitude in action came over the question of mailing Progress Report #2 outside of the US. Worldcon progress reports are very expensive to post. Inside the US we used special bulk mail rates. Posting to addresses outside the US has similar opportunities for money saving, but you have to jump through an awful lot of bureaucratic hoops to get it done. It isn't an easy job. Michael Siladi and Craige Howlett volunteered to get PR#2 posted overseas, but they never did it. Siladi now blames Cindy Scott, who was in charge of our account with the USPS. Scott blames Siladi, and Howlett, who switched from the Siladi camp to the Whitmore camp after being made vice chair, is perhaps not the best of witnesses. Whatever, the progress reports were not sent.

Thanks to a very strange piece of decision-making, we had printed 8,000 copies of PR#2. This decision was taken by people who were obsessed with the idea that it was a Worldcon's obligation to give copies of every publication to every member, and therefore we should print as many copies as the maximum number of members we expected to get. We could, of course, have done with some of the money wasted there later in the con. However, the massive print run did mean that, although the original copies of PR#2 intended for non-US members were still in the possession of Siladi and Howlett, there were enough copies left for Kevin and I to send new copies out to fulfill the convention's obligations to its non-US members. To her credit, Cindy Scott helped us get this done. However, Kevin and I were given a very stern warning not to say anything about people failing to do their jobs, because that might upset those people. The official doctrine was that it was more important that committee members should be happy than that the convention's members should receive their progress reports. If Kevin and I had not stepped in to get the job done, it is entirely possible that our non-US members would never have got any publications. ConJosé's management simply didn't see this as important.

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### **Oppress the willing**

As time went on, Whitmore's determination not to deal with committee members who were failing turned into distaste for people who were working hard. Those members of the committee who worked hard were also those most likely to become irritated with their less committed colleagues. That caused dissent amongst the committee, and for Whitmore

there was no greater sin than causing dissent. Occasionally, some of us would simply get others people's jobs done. Kevin and I got away with the PR#2 work because it wasn't officially anyone's job (well, in theory Publications should have been responsible, but let's not go there). However, woe betides anyone who strayed onto the territory of some other committee member. It quickly became clear that complaints about people interfering on your territory were an excellent way to get Whitmore to take action against those people. Kevin, who hated to see jobs not getting done, was always falling foul of this.

Eventually Whitmore took to slapping down anyone who had caused him trouble at the slightest excuse. For example, on one occasion one of the committee managed to mis-interpret something I said about the web site and ignited a flame war against me on the committee mailing list in which I was accused of doing almost exactly the opposite of what I had actually done. Kevin and Cindy Scott both leapt to my defense and tried to stop the debate. However, Whitmore slapped them both down, saying that he felt it important that healthy debate should take place amongst the committee. Quite how railing at a committee member for something that they haven't done counts as healthy debate is a mystery to me. But from then on my job on the web site became impossible. The chairman had commanded that the rest of the committee regularly attack my work. Keeping committee members happy apparently only extended to those people who did not cause Whitmore any problems.

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## Revolution

Some six months out, Whitmore's lack of management ability finally engendered revolt. Our programming division was in complete chaos, we had no budget, and we didn't even know how much money we had. The exact nature of the financial uncertainty has never been determined. Michael Siladi originally estimated it as around \$60,000. Whitmore's supporters angrily retorted that it was much less. But there was never any dispute that the amount was in five figures. No business can afford that level of financial uncertainty, and no Worldcon can afford the uncertainty in the state of its membership registrations. Whitmore, however, continued to protect his friends and appointees. To him, annoying details like budgets, membership registrations and putting a program together did not seem to be important. Indeed, it seemed that he was still in the "it is too early to start exerting ourselves" mode that he had adopted in the first year of the convention's life.

So there was a revolt. Several members of the Board of SFSFC (the parent corporation of ConJosé), supported by a number of ConJosé committee members, asked to have Whitmore unseated. We tried very hard to do this in as sympathetic a way as possible. Kevin spent ages on the phone to the great and good of fandom (particularly past Worldcon chairs) and to other SFSFC Board members trying to find a solution to the problem that everyone could accept. However, Whitmore and his supporters refused to negotiate. There was talk of people being loyal to Whitmore rather than to SFSFC or the convention, and at the SFSFC Board meeting some of them pointedly played games on their laptops

and ignored the debate. The vote to unseat Whitmore failed by 6 votes to 5.

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## Revenge

You might think that such a narrow victory would lead to attempts at reconciliation, but quite the opposite happened. Some of the rebels, including Kevin, had too much stature within fandom for them to be attacked openly, but Whitmore was spiteful in his treatment of others. Although, in defending his refusal to deal with committee members who were not performing, Whitmore had made impassioned pleas for staff to be treated humanely and given every possible chance to mend their ways, he then proceeded to fire Michael Siladi without warning, and with the only reason given being that he found Siladi difficult to work with. And this despite the fact that Siladi was unemployed and in the process of conducting a suit for unfair dismissal against his former employers.

When Kevin and I challenged him on this point, Whitmore claimed that Siladi as "threatened to make life difficult" for Craige Howlett and his wife. If this is true, it is certainly a good reason for discipline. But within days of making this statement, Whitmore was backing threats of a lawsuit against me that he knew could cost me my job and my home. He did so without any attempt to determine the truth of the complaints that had been laid against me. As far as he was concerned, it was simply a convenient excuse to get even with me for having supported the attack on his leadership, not to mention a means of attacking Kevin through me.

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## **Common sense prevails**

Thankfully the obvious and vindictive nature of Whitmore's revenge, not to mention his continued failure to act on most of the convention's management problems, got through to the SFSFC Board. A month later they insisted that Whitmore accept Kevin as co-chairman. I shudder to think how badly the convention would have turned out had they not made that decision. Kevin might not always be the most diplomatic of people (although he has learned a lot in the past 6 months), but he does detail brilliantly, and his willingness to work seems to have inspired a lot of other people to do the same.

Of course I shouldn't give Kevin all of the credit for the successes of the convention. As I have said earlier, a lot of people worked very hard to make the con happen. In addition, as was mentioned to me last week, Worldcons that have a major bust up prior to the convention often turn out well. This is understandable. To start with, having your (inevitable) feud explode early means that it doesn't simmer on and finally reach boiling point at the con itself. In addition, a Worldcon committee that has had a public bust up will know that all of fandom is expecting it to fail spectacularly, and will work hard to prove them wrong. Not that I recommend this method as a means of ensuring a successful convention, but it does help explain why a committee that was in complete chaos 6 months out did not fail spectacularly as it was expected to do.

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## **Back to management**

But of course it could have been better. Kevin tried very hard in many areas. So

did other people. But rather too many people in management positions simply didn't get it. For example, if you are asked for a detailed budget, you do not respond with "tech - \$40,000". Equally, if your senior management asks you not to do something, you don't just carry on doing it, especially if you have been warned that you are making things difficult for other parts of the committee, or that what you are doing is illegal and could get the convention into deep trouble. Getting annoying detail still seemed to be hard for some people. We only got an insurance contract a few days before the con was due to start, despite the fact that such insurance was a condition of our facilities contract and the con might have had to be cancelled had we failed to get the cover. I didn't see any more of committee meetings, but I did spend a lot of time listening to Kevin vent his various frustrations. I don't think it was an accident that the divisions that had most problems at the convention were those whose managers screamed "micromanagement" most loudly when Kevin tried to talk to them about their jobs.

And that, in a nutshell, is the root of most of our problems at the con. Too many people in management positions simply didn't know how to be managers. They often knew how to do the jobs of the people they were managing. In some cases they insisted in doing some of those jobs themselves anyway. But they had little vision, little understanding of how to run a business, they tended to fight their own corners obsessively to the detriment of the convention as a whole, and they had trouble playing nicely with others. The detailed work of running a Worldcon is something that often gets done very well, in part because the same people do it year

in, year out. But managing a Worldcon is difficult, and putting in a new and inexperienced management team each year is a recipe for disaster. That such disasters do not eventuate more often is, as Kevin says, a miracle.

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### Where to now?

With the con largely over (except all of the financial tidying up and posting of things that will keep Kevin busy for months to come) the question now is what will happen to Bay Area fandom? I think it will take a long time for the scars to heal. At ConJosé I heard mention of plans to throw Michael Siladi off the SFSFC Board and to have the corporation launch a rival to his 2005 Westercon bid. Hopefully none of that will happen, and Kevin tells me that he's opposed to all such measures, but I am not convinced we'll be that lucky. Personally I think that if anyone should be thrown off the SFSFC Board it should be Whitmore. I understand that it was necessary to paper over any disputes and unpleasantness while we still had a convention to run. But from now on, as long as Whitmore remains on the SFSFC Board it is a clear signal to the rest of fandom that the corporation believes that threatening lawsuits is an acceptable way to carry on fannish politics. It is a good thing for the Bay Area to have a non-profit organization that can act as corporate parent and legal shield for conventions. But as long as the SFSFC Board continues to give the impression that it puts petty inter-personal politics above the good of the conventions it is supposed to be backing I can't see any sensible conrunner wanting to be involved with them.

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## Flying Solo

I met up with Kelley Eskridge at Potlatch early this year and she was fairly buzzing. Her debut novel had just been upgraded by her publishers from a paperback to a hardback release. That is a sure vote of confidence in a new author, and suggests that the publishers felt that the book was something special. Guess what, they were right.

The novel, *Solitaire*, begins with a fairly standard near-future corporate set-up. Our heroine, Ren 'Jackal' Segura, works for the rather obviously named multinational company, Ko. As the carefully nurtured child of two top executives, she is being groomed for stardom. But in addition she is an actual, genuine Hope, one of the small group of children born at the same time as the establishment of Earth's first planetary government and therefore guaranteed a diplomatic post in the capital, Al Iskandariyah, when she reaches adulthood. Or at least, that's what she thinks.

Sadly poor Jackal has reckoned without the machinations of Ko, the ruthless ambition and selfishness of her mother, and the devious plans of the international terrorist organization, Steel Breeze. Consequently the silver spoon she found in her mouth at birth quickly develops a bad case of the Uri Gellers.

To say more at this point would distract mightily from the emotional punch of the story, and I certainly don't want to do this, because emotional punch is what this book is all about. As the title suggests, the story is about loneliness, social isolation, and coping with life when you have no one to rely on but yourself. Eventually, of

course, Jackal finds her way back into the world, and it is no real spoiler to tell you that her lesbian relationship with childhood friend, Snow, comes through in the end. Along the way, however, Eskridge puts her heroine through the sort of pain that many authors would be afraid to imagine, let alone write about.

Aside from the sheer emotional power of the book, I was also impressed by the fact that it wasn't simply a piece of corporation-bashing. Sure some greedy people within Ko behave badly, and sure the company itself has the usual aims of market domination and fat profits. But Eskridge recognizes that real companies are a lot more than that. They are staffed by ordinary people, not all of whom are megalomaniacs bent on oppressing the poor.

In particular I loved the character of Gavin Neill, Ko's management guru. Some of the company's staff (and of course some readers) see him as a ruthless manipulator who specializes in tricking people into doing the company's bidding. Others see him as a genius at the difficult art of project management, which as heart consists of persuading a group of people with vastly different personalities and motivations to work together as a team. Having worked for a management consultancy myself, and having just watched Kevin struggling with a major cat-herding job on ConJosé, I can assure you that, whatever you might think of him, Neill (and therefore presumably Eskridge) is very good at the job.

All in all it is a very impressive debut. There's not a lot of actual SF in there, but the book uses some standard SF tropes nicely to help construct the story. I have a few reservations about parts of the plot. In particular there is one major coincidence,

which was probably set up by Neill but eventuates as a coincidence nonetheless. However, none of that was sufficient to stop me from tearing through the book at a great pace and loving it. Highly recommended.

*Solitaire* - Kelley Eskridge - Eos - hardcover

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## Secrets of Time and Space

Maxine McArthur won the 1999 George Turner Prize (for original SF first published in Australia) for *Time Future* and consequently got herself a US publishing deal. Her follow-up novel is now available, and marks a slow but steady improvement. There isn't anything particularly imaginative about McArthur's future world: her space station filled with alien races and at the center of a political storm is highly reminiscent of *Babylon 5*; her habit of stereotyping alien races (the warrior race, the trader race, the bureaucrat race) is pure Niven; Veatch, the quintessential Melot bureaucrat, sounds like he's on leave from *Yes Minister*; and the struggles of mankind to be treated on an equal footing with the elder races of the galaxy reflect Julian May's Galactic Milieu series. But hey, if you are going to steal, steal from the best, and in any case it is what the writer does with the ideas that counts.

The central mystery of McArthur's series in the hyperspace drive. The mysterious and aloof Invidi invented it, and are keen to restrict access to the technology. Commander Halley, boss of the Jocasta space station, is equally determined to obtain the secret of hyperspace gates for mankind. The plot of the new novel, *Time*



*Past*, sees Halley testing a spaceship equipped with a surreptitiously acquired hyperspace drive, and accidentally marooning herself in Earth's past, mere weeks before the Invidi arrive to welcome the increasingly desperate humans into galactic society and save them from wrecking their planet.

Much of this is intended to allow McArthur to roll out some well-intentioned but somewhat naive politics. It is touching if a little sad to find someone who seems to genuinely believe that if only we had some benevolent aliens to show us the way we could create an ideal Socialist society in which wise government planners arrange things for the benefit of all. On the other hand, McArthur does have some genuine outrage against the treatment of the Third World (not to mention the treatment of Asian refugees in Australia) to vent and that is certainly worth doing. She also manages an excellent piece of shock therapy for the reader, and wisely refrains from trying to make things right later.

Inevitably, however, Halley finds her way back to her own time and gets down to the serious business of working out what is going on, and of saving her space station from yet another diplomatic crisis. And that, of course, is the main point of the book: does the plot zip along, do we care about the characters, and is the story sufficiently intriguing to keep us reading? The answer to all of those questions is "yes". McArthur has produced an entertaining SF thriller with interesting characters with a satisfying conclusion and plenty of mystery still left in it for later books. I don't see her winning any other awards just yet, but I'll certainly keep reading her work.

*Time Past* - Maxine McArthur - Aspect - softcover

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## The Visitors

The current winner of the George Turner prize is Michelle Marquardt's *Blue Silence*. This is a fascinating and original novel that dares to make central characters of politicians. I found it a breath of fresh air.

The set-up is somewhat reminiscent of Adam Roberts' *Salt*, but is much better done. Marquardt postulates the existence of two space station colonies, each with a distinctive and fairly extreme political slant. One (that's the name of the colony) is populated by technocrats, heavily into nanotech, genetic engineering and promoting human mutation, but with little regard for human comfort: the idea is to adapt humans for space, not to pine for what we had on Earth. Indeed, the inhabitants of One have an almost paranoid fear of anything organic that isn't human or food. Two, on the other hand, is peopled by environmentalists who like to grow things and have space. They show the usual green movement suspicion of technology and have embargoes against all of the dangerous technologies that One's scientists invent, though they seem happy enough with sufficient science to make their world habitable. The one big problem that Two has is that they don't have an asteroid mining industry, and consequently they have to buy all of their water from One (buying it from Earth would, of course, be prohibitively expensive because of the cost of getting it out of the gravity well). This

puts them, and their technology embargoes, in a very difficult position.

And then the visitors arrive. A space ship, looking suspiciously like the exploration vessel, *Orion*, that was sent out from Earth many years ago, but substantially larger, docks on Two. The scientists of One are desperate to get their hands on whatever technology the craft may have on board – desperate enough to agree to a new, long-term water supply contract. But first there is the small matter of the spaceship's crew to deal with. Are they human or alien, and should they be treated kindly or with suspicion?

Enter Senator Maya Russini, one of the few independent politicians on Two's ruling council. She is chosen to head up the delegation that is sent to treat with the ship's crew. That is no easy task, but Maya also has to cope with her supposed friend and ally, Etienne Artois, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Seeing himself as a patriot with a long-term view, he wants to wreck the water treaty and force Two to cease its economic dependence on One. The obvious way to do that is to create a diplomatic incident during the negotiations with the *Orion*. And then, when Maya's delegation finally gets on board, one of the *Orion's* crew brutally murders the head of One's delegation.

Having politicians as your lead characters is a risky business. They are, after all, not exactly likeable people. We get to watch as Russini and Artois execute devious stratagems, blackmail and coerce each other and the rest of the cast, and generally behave in a way that would be thoroughly disreputable were it not for the fact that Marquardt manages to show that both have morals and both believe that they are doing the best they can for Two. Politics is just a dirty game, that's all.

Many readers will end up hating both of them, and fix instead on the intelligent and brave chief of security, Marcus Christen, who is the closest thing that the book has to an actual hero. However, I really appreciated the fact that Marquardt had chosen to examine two eminently dislikeable characters and make them central to her story. It is, as I said earlier, a breath of fresh air compared to so much SF that simply treats politicians as amoral and thoroughly unsympathetic villains.

In the end, of course, things do manage to work out; though possibly a lot of good fortune is involved. Certainly neither Russini nor Artois is smart enough to come up with a Cunning Plan that actually works as it was intended. And so a resolution of sorts is achieved. But at no point in the book does Marquardt explain where the *Orion* came from, how its crew are, and how they came to be as they are. Indeed, as the book goes on the whole thing becomes more and more mysterious. There are two types of beings amongst the *Orion* crew; neither of them looks very human, but on DNA analysis they prove to be much closer to us than chimps. And it gets weirder from there. Hopefully this means that there will be a sequel. I'm looking forward to it. In the meantime, US and UK editors should get hold of this book and think seriously about signing Marquardt up. I think she'll do better in the UK than in the States, but she's a promising acquisition in either case.

*Blue Silence* - Michelle Marquardt - Bantam - softcover

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## Elemental Magic

I've said it before and I'll say it again. Sean Williams is the best SF writer in Australia who doesn't have an overseas publishing contract. See my reviews of *Metal Fatigue* (#12) and *The Resurrected Man* (#48) for details. And being stuck in the Australian market, Williams is currently producing what the local publishers want, a fantasy trilogy.

Of course, being Sean, he has done something original, unconventional and imaginative. *The Stone Mage & The Sea* is no pseudo-medieval romance with a few dragons and wizards thrown in for color. It is a far future fantasy of Australia that Jonathan Strahan described being "poised between *Earthsea* and *Mad Max*". Different? You bet.

One of the things that fantasy writers often get wrong is to start their hero off completely naive. It is hard to swallow when you are asked to believe that a young adult knows nothing at all about the world to start with, but in 600 pages or so is suddenly leading the Forces of Good against the Evil Army of the Dark Overlord. Williams uses the standard fantasy theme of a young hero possessed of great power and destiny, but Sal is only twelve years old. He's genuinely young and naïve. It will be interesting to see how he grows, but so far so good.

So what is the set-up? Pleasingly it makes excellent use of the geography. Williams' world works on elemental magic, and Australia is therefore neatly divided in two. The Interior is ruled by the Stone Mages, who work in stone and fire, while the Strand (i.e. the shore) is ruled by the Sky Wardens who work in water and air. There is a deep seated rivalry between the two groups, fuelled in part because the

people of the Interior are much darker skinned than those of the Strand, but neither can prevail over the other because they lose their power source too far from home.

The story centers on young Sal who, with his father, is on the run. Sal doesn't know what they are running from, except vaguely that the sea and the Sky Wardens are not to be trusted. His father doesn't like to talk about it. Nevertheless, man and boy spend their life moving from town to town in a battered old beach buggy, doing odd jobs along the way to earn money for food and shelter, and never staying long enough to settle and become well known.

We, of course, join their story at a moment of change. Uncharacteristically, Sal's father has headed for a town right on the seashore. Fundelry is a little fishing town in the heart of the Strand. The two travelers stick out like a sore thumb, and soon fall foul of local small town politics. But there is, of course, a reason for Sal to be there. He is approaching puberty, and his magical powers will soon manifest. Soon he will no longer be able to hide by physical means alone. He needs a teacher, and Sal's father has taken a huge risk to go in search of the only man he trusts to do the job.

The rest you will have to read for yourselves, assuming you can get hold of a copy of the book. Suffice it to say that it was only by great effort of will that, having raced my way through the book, I moved on to a different author rather than diving straight into the sequel, *The Sky Warden and the Sun*, which I also brought back from Australia with me. Like I said, Sean Williams is good.

Oh, and even if you don't like the sound of the story, buy the book for that wonderful Shaun Tan cover.

*The Stone Mage and the Sea* - Sean Williams - Harper Collins - softcover

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## Sound of the Sea

My final Australian novel this issue is also by an author called Williams. Tess of that name lives in Fremantle in Western Australia, while Sean lives in Adelaide. As far as I know, they are not related. In addition their styles are very different. According to the blurb inside *Sea as Mirror*, Tess is currently doing a PhD in evolutionary science and science fiction. Sean, in contrast, likes to DJ and cook curry. That should tell you a lot.

The basic plot of *Sea as Mirror* goes like this: Elizabeth Freman works on a marine research station off the coast of Florida. She specializes in marine mammals. One day a big orca swims up to the station and willingly enters their tank. It seems to be trying to communicate something.

I found the book very hard to get into. In part this is because its politics are very simplistic. Elizabeth and the orca are good, almost everybody else, especially politicians, bureaucrats and men, is irredeemably wicked. In addition, parts of the book are a little over-ambitious. I applaud Williams' intentions in trying to invent thought modes, a language and even a religion for her orca, but it was very difficult and dull to read.

What saves the book are a few very good ideas. In particular, Williams comes up with a brilliant method for an orca to prove to humans that it is intelligent, self-aware and trying to communicate. That's not easy. For example, parrots can talk

very well, but they are not necessarily communicating. See if you can figure it out. You can have two clues: first, think about how orcas (and other marine mammals) communicate amongst themselves, and second, the book is written by a feminist.

The book also has some good philosophical points amongst the environmentalist message. In particular it gets the theological argument exactly right. It is quite prescient too, having been written in 2000 but already talking about the US being threatened by a rogue international Islamic terrorist organization and suffering from anthrax attacks. In the end, however, it betrays the fundamental inhumanity of the extremist environmentalist cause. Sure there are some pretty bad things about our world, but I fail to understand how it can be better to swap it for one in which communities have to drown excess babies because they have no contraception and can't support the extra mouths. Just because many animal species have massive infant mortality it doesn't make it morally right.

*Sea as Mirror* - Tess Williams - Harper Collins - softcover

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## Once Upon a Time

So tell me, who was the first person to write science fiction: Wells? Verne? Mary Shelley? Of course it all depends on how you define the genre, but Matthew Richardson makes a plausible case for Plato. Why? Because if you read his dialogues carefully it appears quite likely that his tale of Atlantis is not a

formulation of a myth, but rather a Utopian novel. Plato is writing about an idealized society as part of a political argument, but he does a fine job of making it sound like a real place. Thomas Moore's *Utopia* is, of course, one of the other books cited as an early piece of SF, so why not Plato?

And that is just for starters, because Richardson's book, *The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*, is a fascinating tour of works from centuries ago that might be fairly claimed for our genre. Here, for example, is Lucian, a Syrian living in the Roman Empire, poking fun at people who take Homer and Virgil literally with a fanciful tale that includes a war between the inhabitants of the moon and the sun, and is very clearly an inspiration for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Here too is an ancient Japanese folk tale that tells how a princess of the moon people is adopted by a humble bamboo cutter. That even comes with an illustration: as Richardson says, flying saucers have developed quite a bit since the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. And of course there is *The Ebony Horse*, Scheherazade's enchanting story of a robot mount.

There are several other stories too. Occasionally Richardson stretches things a little. For example, Lucian describes some characters as wearing armor of flexible glass, which Richardson translates as "plastic". Overall, however, he doesn't seem to have taken too many liberties, and it is great to have all of these old stories gathered into one place. What a wonderful idea for a book.

*The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction* -  
Matthew Richardson - Halstead Classics -  
softcover

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## Short Stuff

So another year passes with my not even having read most of the nominees for the short fiction Hugos. This is not good enough, right? But after reading 5 or 6 novels a month I don't have a lot of time for short fiction. So what do I do? Well, clearly you are not going to see reviews of the current month's *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Interzone*, *Sci-Fiction*, *Strange Horizons* and so on here. (Unless someone wants to volunteer to do it for me.) But what I will try to do is feature two or three top quality pieces of short fiction each month. I'll be relying on you guys for suggestions for what material I should be reading. OK? Thanks for the help.

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### A Perihelion Night's Dream

British publisher, Telos, has launched a series of Dr. Who novellas. The books have very high production values, and unlike most tie-in series, some of the stories are written by top authors. The first book in the series was written by Kim Newman, and I'll be reviewing that in this section soon. Right now, however, we are looking at Tom Arden's contribution.

The story of *Nightdreamers* is a little familiar. The Doctor and Jo Grant arrive on the mysterious moon called Verd. Although smaller than Earth's moon, it has Earth-like gravity, an atmosphere and vegetation. There are people too: what appears to be a medieval court, but with some space-age technology. It being Perihelion Night, romance is in the air. The Princess Ria is to be married the next day, and a group of inept servants have decided to perform a play to entertain the

wedding guests. Meanwhile, a mischievous sprite has his own ideas for entertainment.

OK, so stealing from the Bard has a long and noble tradition in SF. The point is not whether you steal, but whether you do it well. Arden does it superbly. The Dream's story is ideally suited to his humorous style of writing (though sadly the need to have the book approved by the BBC means that the trademark Arden camp is missing). Also it fits very well with the tongue-in-cheek style of the Jon Pertwee era of the TV series.

Most importantly, Arden adds significantly to the plot to turn it into a classic Dr. Who story. Alongside the Dream plot we have inter-planetary war and lots of Who-style pseudo-science: gravity rocks, the mighty vorgon ray, a trans-dimensional space worm and of course the ubiquitous sonic screwdriver. In addition we get enough dramatic and unlikely chase scenes to keep any BBC producer happy. I guess the book will offend a bunch of po-faced fans that think that Dr. Who is a serious action series, but for me it fitted right in with what I remember of the TV series.

*Nightdreamers* - Tom Arden - Telos - hardcover

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## Heaven and Hell

One of the best-received pieces of short fiction from 2001 is Ted Chiang's Best Novelette winning "Hell is the Absence of God". Long before it won the Hugo, Patrick Nielsen Hayden chose it to lead off the latest volume of his highly acclaimed anthology series, *Starlight 3*. What better story to choose for my inaugural short fiction column?

In many ways, Chiang's story is typical of what short fiction is all about. Firstly it takes a great idea and treats it very well, with an economy of words but an intensity of emotion. In addition, however, there is a danger that if the reader is not captivated by the idea then she is liable to finish the story saying, "yeah, so what?" Personally I was fascinated by Chiang's story, but I can quite imagine many people being left cold by it.

The idea around which the story is based is that there is a world in which God very obviously exists. You can see dying people ascend to Heaven or be cast into Hell. Angels make visitations to Earth, causing miracles in their wake. But the sheer power of an angel's presence also causes massive destruction, and not a few deaths and injuries. And God, of course, is inscrutable.

Neil Fisk, the central character of the story, is a cripple. He was born that way. No angel has ever come to cure him. God, it seems, doesn't care, and consequently Neil doesn't care much about God. After all, he's seen Hell and from what he can see it looks just like Earth, except with no contact with God. When Neil's beloved wife, Sarah, is killed during a visitation, ripped to shreds by a plate glass window exploded by the shock wave of the angel's arrival in the world, Neil's opinion of God plummets. But there is a complication: Sarah was devout, and she went to Heaven. Neil could see her again, if only he could learn to love God enough to become devout himself.

What follows is a fascinating exploration of theological ideas. It is brilliantly done, especially the ending that manages to confirm both the prejudices of the devout and the unbelievers without obviously

siding with either. I think you'll see a lot more of Mr. Chiang in this column.

*Starlight 3* – Patrick Neilsen Hayden (ed.) – Tor – softcover

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## Miscellany

### The Agony Column

One of the good things about Worldcons is that I always find something new and interesting at them. This year's big find was Rick Kleffel's web site, *The Agony Column*. Rick has excellent taste in books. If you like *Emerald City*, you'll like this too. You can find the site at: <http://www.trashotron.com/agony/index.htm>.

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### Farewell to the Ackermansion

On a somewhat sadder note, Forry Ackerman, the grand old man of SF fandom, is having to sell off most of his collection and move to a smaller house. This is partly due to him being very sick, and partly a result of an ill-judged lawsuit that he won but left him seriously in debt to his lawyers. Forry is selling off his collection piecemeal, which is unfortunate in one way as it was very impressive and would have made a wonderful museum collection. On the other hand I guess that it means that a lot of individual fans get to buy a piece of SF history.

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## Gibson Collection

On a similar note, Canadian SF collector, William Robert 'Bob' Gibson (not to be confused with the other W. Gibson) has willed his collection of over 30,000 books to the University of Calgary. While the university is delighted to obtain such an excellent resource, it estimates that it needs around \$500,000 (hopefully CA\$) to clean and preserve the collection. It is therefore perhaps good news that the next Worldcon will be in Canada and that Calgary is bidding for a Westercon. I look forward to seeing some fannish efforts to help with this. For more details see <http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/unicomm/news/gibson/>.

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## Footnote

Oh my, that was big, wasn't it. Back to normal next issue, I promise. There will be a con report from Silicon, but it will be much shorter. And there will, as always, be some excellent books to cover. My "to read" pile includes M. John Harrison, Adam Roberts, Neal Asher, Jan Siegel, and Jonathan Carroll. See you next month,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl