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Rain on Cherry-Blossoms #1

There was one she loved indeed, Rose Bell, a seven years' child, so pretty and clever, who read syllables when Marian was at letters; she would laugh at nothing - hold your finger up, she laughed, then shook her curls down on her eyes and mouth to bide her make-mirth from the schoolmaster. And Rose's pelting glee, as frank as rain on cherry-blossoms, brightened Marian too, to see another merry whom she loved.

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Book Four

Hello, and welcome to the first issue of '**Rain on Cherry-Blossoms**', my new personal fanzine, or 'perzine'. **RoCB** will be published on an irregular schedule. I'm currently aiming for several issues a year — we'll see how realistic that estimate turns out to be after the everyday vicissitudes of life take a swing at it.

My name is Eloise Beltz-Decker; I'm a curly-haired filker, SCAdian, musician, voracious reader, sometime foodie, and science fiction fan from Chicago, the scion of two moderately-complicated family trees. Some of you have praised my writing in the past, and even urged me to do something with it. This publication will, in the large part, be a vehicle for me to get various short pieces of my work out and printed before an audience likely to appreciate them.

Some of you may know me from science fiction conventions or online interaction (I write an online journal, roleplay on text-based games, and post semiregularly to several Usenet newsgroups). Some of you are relatives, or friends of the family, with whom I have far too little day-to-day (or even month-by-month, sadly) interaction. I hit up my grandmothers (Pat Beltz, Dr. Almeda Ann Decker, Heloise Husch, and Sheila Mierzwa — yes, I have four, it's a long story!) for addresses.

I'm one of those people who's truly horrible at remembering to write letters or call people — the basic 'keep in touch' skills — hence, this attempt at striking up closer ties with those of you I don't see nearly often enough. Some of my pieces in this ongoing newsletter will be about current events, household news, and other such 'what's happening in my life?' material.

What else will I write about? 'What *won't* I write about' might be a better question! You see, I have opinions. Wait, let's capitalize that: I have Opinions, on lots of subjects. The range of things that I like to read about and do has been known to startle horses. Currently, I'm planning on having regular book and movie reviews, a cookery feature, and a series of columns I'm calling

'Personal History', detailing ways in which life in the US has changed in my lifetime, and why my experience of it is probably vastly different from that of people born ten to twenty years before or after me. One-off pieces on a wide variety of subjects will fill out the issues.

Lately, I've been reading a lot of pieces by David Sedaris (an essayist and contributor to NPR's 'This American Life') and Sarah Bunting (whose humorous essays can be found at www.tomatonation.com). Both are masters of the 'short, quirky, opinionated' style of writing. My own style tends to ape whatever I've been reading recently, so consider this fair warning — and just be glad I'm not finishing up this ish during my week of reading nothing but Sherlock Holmes pastiche novels and The Wind Done Gone!

I would love to receive mail from any and all of you, especially in the format known to the fanzine crowd as 'Letters of Comment' — feedback on a particular issue or article. I may wish to publish issue-related critiques in a future letters-to-the-editor column. General "Here's what I've been doing since the last time we crossed paths" letters (snail or e-) are also highly welcome.

If you know someone who might enjoy reading **RoCB**, please feel free to pass on or copy your paper issue, or have them write to me. I'll trade issues with others who publish similar periodicals, and am also open to bribery. I hope to have an online archive up eventually (when there's more than one issue to be in it, perhaps?).

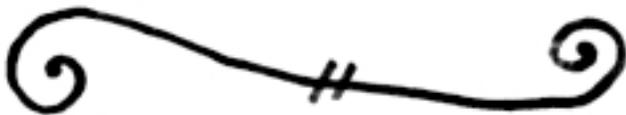
Removal from the mailing list is automatic upon request; also, if you get three or four issues and I don't hear from you, I may assume the address isn't working and remove it. [Yes, this is probably just a ploy to get you to write to me, you spotted my Fiendish Plan!]

But enough justifications and defensive introductions! If you really want to know what **RoCB** is about, turn the page and see for yourself.

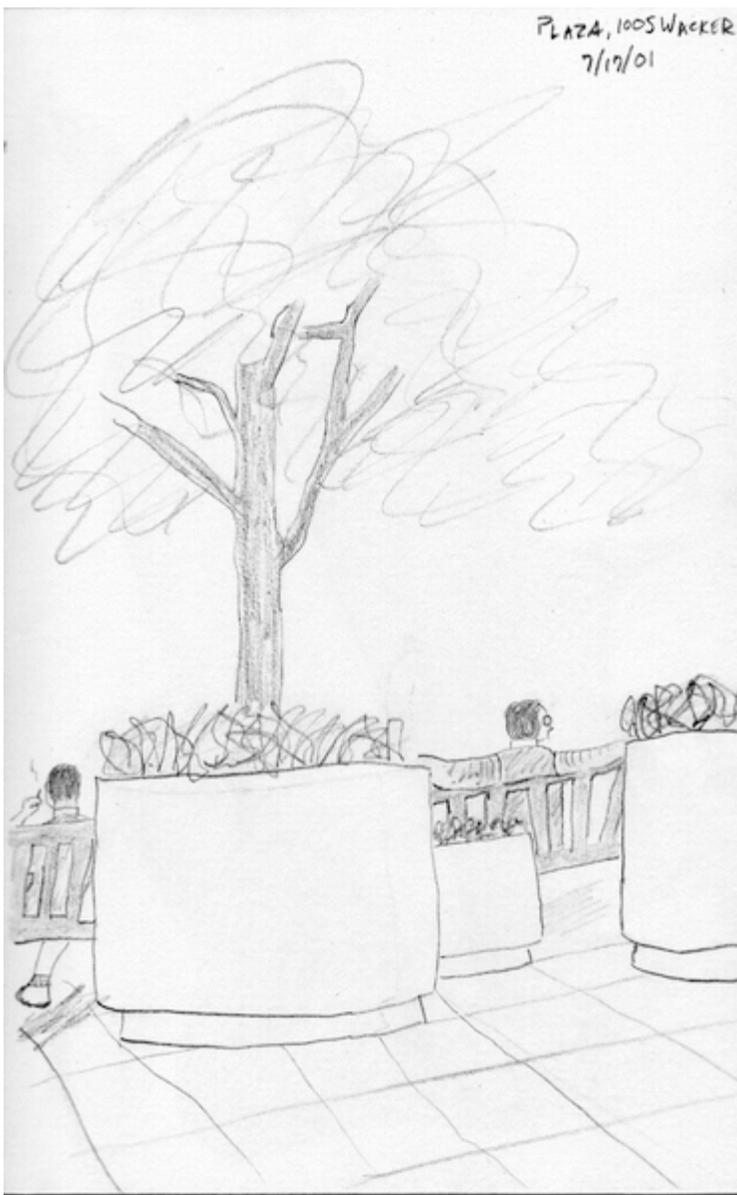
Caution — may be habit-forming.

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From the Sketchbook:



Well, I was aiming for an October postmark, and didn't quite make it. An unexpected operating-system reinstall on my primary machine meant that suddenly I had no PageMaker, and of course my install CD chose that very week to go suddenly missing. Isn't that always the way? Through snow, sleet, dark of night, and the grace of eBay, though, I got my issue out, and here it is, if somewhat late.

Issue #1 is 5 sheets long because, through exhaustive and highly technical testing procedures involving a digital scale, we've discovered that 5 pages of the paper I wish to use, plus staples, label, and stamp, works out to just shy of one ounce. I'm not complicating my postage calculations until after I get this first ish pubbed! I figure once this hits your hands I've got a couple of months to decide how I'm paying to have the next one mailed; there's gotta be a better way than first-class stamps. Or at least, a way that'll let me fill more pages! We shall see.

Rain on Cherry-Blossoms Volume 1, Number 1

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If you plagiarize me, I will beat you to death with a shovel - a vague disclaimer is nobody's friend.
[This disclaimer's wording is swiped wholesale from dialogue on tv's 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer', and (more recently) www.xeney.com. It's called irony.]

On the other hand, if you should wish to reprint, quote, or otherwise use any of this content, drop me a line and we'll talk. I don't bite - uninvited.

Email:

eloise@ripco.com

Website:

<http://www.ripco.com/~eloise/>

Snailmail Address:

Eloise Beltz-Decker
1519 W. Taylor St., #2
Chicago, IL 60607-4015

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Issues available in trade, for a tasty bribe, or in exchange for a letter of comment. Recipients who go three issues or more without so much as dropping their kind editrix a quick 'hello' note may be removed from the mailing list at her discretion. Back issues available for \$1.

The Story of My Life (abridged)

I'm a bicentennial baby, born a Pisces in 1976. I've lived in Chicago all my life, although technically I was born in Evanston (a close-by suburb; they have a great obstetrics hospital up there). My parents, not (alas) being all that compatible, divorced when I was about three. I went to a Catholic grade school, and spent two weekends a month and three contiguous weeks in the summer with Dad. Chunks of each summer were spent with relatives from either side of the family. In Kansas, with my dad's Uncle Joe, I learned to milk cows and smell rain coming; on the Jersey shore with my mom's cousin Patty and her family, I learned to bodysurf in the Atlantic Ocean and was frightened by far too many horseshoe crabs.

I attended St. Ignatius College Prep for high school, and was suddenly just one more bright kid in a whole school of them. That was a shock to this precocious gal, let me tell you. I had to actually work for my grades for the first time in my life, and met some great teachers (I still want to grow up to be Mr. Reliford and Mr. Nekrosius, though I despair of that particular dream's feasibility). In high school I learned that it was important to find friends, even if it hurts, and that not everyone cares about all the details of your life, especially if you make yourself a self-righteous, self-interested little prig about it.

It was always assumed I was going to go to college. It wasn't a question of 'if,' but rather 'which one?' When it came right down to it, though, some recidivist grades in senior year and a moderately-dodgy financial situation meant I went to my safety school, the University of Illinois at Chicago. I joked that I'd chosen to go there because I already knew how to find my way: it's only a few blocks from St. Ignatius, and I rode the same bus in my daily commute that I'd been taking for four years already. UIC was an eye-opener of a different type. I was back to being one of the brightest folks in my classes, but suddenly the scale was all different.

When a lecture hall holds two hundred people, not only do the profs not necessarily care if you come or not; they also can't adjust the lecture to fit the individual, intellectual needs of all their students. I spent an awful lot of time bored in required classes, and then started skipping, only to discover when I showed up for the midterm that after the first four chapters of the book (which was all material I'd done high school) we hit all kinds of things I not only didn't know how to do, but couldn't learn in ten minutes well enough to pass the test. So I got a lot of bad grades.

Lather, rinse, repeat. Lesson learned: being smart isn't nearly as important in college as being thorough, and you have to sit through the boring crap to be able to pass the quiz. I ended up not graduating; I still haven't really internalized that lesson, I suppose.

But while I was at college, a whole new vista of possibilities opened up to me - relationships. Specifically, boys. In the course of a few weeks hanging out in the Honors College computer lab, I met two nifty guys, John and Scott. Each were playing a computer game when I first met them; I asked if I could watch over their shoulder while waiting for a machine to open up. Boy, did I have no clue whatsoever how to go about relationships. Luckily, Scott did, and after a couple of outings to movies and the like, he swept me up into my First Kiss - woo, fireworks! He was even pointing out constellations to me just beforehand (we were on the roof of my grandparents' condo building, how corny-romantic is that?). However, though he was a good friend and fairly fun to be with, incompatible schedules and not enough interests in common meant we eventually parted amicably.

I'd started hanging out with John inseparably since before I was even Going Out with Scott. We were joined at the hip, best friends, taking adjacent computers in the lab to check our email, eating pizza in the Atrium and talking avidly all afternoon until suddenly I realized it was 6PM and I'd best be calling my mom to let her know where I was before she sent out the Marines. It was because of John, ultimately, that I realized I was unhappy with Scott - because I was so very happy with John. And so, a good-natured "I don't think this is working..." call to Scott later, John and I hooked up (take it from someone who's been there: the Thursday before finals is NOT an ideal time to start a relationship!).

I've never seriously looked back. We're still together - 7 years last May. We keep boggling, now and then, at various landmarks on the road to becoming grownups. First apartment, first (junker) car, first nice newish car, first Major Appliance Purchase. We look at our roommate Mike (the rent's a lot better split three ways) and realize how much we've grown, and changed, in the course of living our lives together these years.

This is the good stuff. These are the good old days. I remind myself now and then to quit getting all tangled up in the small stuff, and remember to just savor the moment, now and then.

The Glories of Fandom, or, some of you are smiling, and the rest need a footnote

I was inspired to start writing this because of a tradition in science fiction fandom called ‘the fanzine’. Originally short for ‘fan-produced magazine’ or some such, it has become its own separate genre of publication. Back in the dawning days, when Worldcon attendance numbered in the hundreds (rather than thousands), lots of ordinary people would write up a little booklet of witty, erudite, and sometimes thoughtful pieces and mail it off to all their friends (who would, of course, reciprocate). I’m only beginning to dabble my toes in the realm of the fanzine, but I love the concept. Imagine - interesting mail in your mailbox at semi-regular intervals, from someone who’d actually like to hear back from you!

But perhaps I should backtrack. Some of you may have no idea what I mean by ‘fandom’ at all, so let us begin at the beginning.

I’ve always enjoyed reading science fiction and fantasy. I may have first run across it on my dad’s bookshelves, or perhaps in my grandma’s collection of old *Analog* magazines. I know I read her copy of the omnibus Science Fiction Book Club edition of The Dragonriders of Pern. However I came to it, though, once I had it I knew I wanted more! I read sf voraciously and enjoyed the heck out of myself, happily discussing it with my mom and a geeky grade-school classmate named Raul Silva.

When I got to college, I started hearing about these things called ‘science fiction conventions’. Apparently, there were lots of us weirdo book-lovers out there, and these conventions were a way of getting together and talking about the things we liked that no one else did. My mom and dad used to go to them a lot, I now was given to understand, back before I came along. Apropos of nothing, I still haven’t managed to drag Mom back to one. Now, of course, she lives in California, half a country away, and I’ve lost any leverage I once had.

My first convention wasn’t, properly, a science-fiction convention. It was GenCon (1), that massive conclave of gamers and games put on in Milwaukee every year. I ended up spending the whole weekend playing a Star Trek: Deep Space Nine live-action roleplaying game and enjoying the hell out of myself.

(1) Short, I only recently discovered, for Lake Geneva Convention. This makes particularly amusing the recent hue-and-cry about the upcoming change-of-venue from the familiar, and traditional-in-recent-memory Milwaukee site to Indianapolis. I wonder if the fans of the day protested the move to Milwaukee with the same vituperative arguments?

With the initial intimidating step out of the way, I looked into local cons, and through a friend of my stepmom found DucKon (the Du Page County, IL con). I realize now that DucKon is one of the largest cons we regularly have here in Chicago, but after GenCon’s tens of thousands it felt comfortingly intimate. The hotel was quite professional in its dealings with both scantily-clad dancing girls and costumed warriors with swords; the programming was incredibly fun. There were panels on books. There were rooms that showed movies ALL NIGHT! There was a gaming room, if I felt like playing something. And above all, there were hundreds of other people who liked a **lot** of the same things I did, weird as those were (2).

I was quite hooked, needless to say. My dad bought me a membership to WisCon 19, later that year, and I went up to Madison with him and my stepmom. WisCon was a more book-related con, which was heaven (not that I don’t like other forms of speculative fiction, mind you - it’s just that in the everyday world it’s easier to find purple chickens than people who want to talk to you, in depth, about books. You can always dye chickens). I met Nicola Griffith and read her new book, Ammonite. She was passing out author’s copies in the hopes of getting some attention, since her publisher had made some Seriously Stupid Marketing Decisions. From then on, I’ve been a regular at our three annual Chicago conventions (DucKon, WindyCon, and CapriCon), missing only a few. I had found, if not my tribe, then at least a bunch of people I really liked hanging out with of a weekend.

It was at my second or third DucKon that I discovered something that was to loom large in my later life -- filk music. I was volunteering in the internet lounge (a wonderful way to get one’s membership reimbursed, which is important to a broke college student), and got to talking with someone else working there. His name was Daniel Glasser, and he had a guitar with him. My mom played guitar occasionally throughout my childhood; she had a little notebook full of folksongs and chords. I expressed interest, and he pulled out his instrument to

(2) I suppose that’s still fandom’s main attraction for me. You can walk into most consuites and end up in the middle of a conversation about books, TV shows, movies, biology, engineering, geopolitics, fictional geopolitics, out-of-print children’s books, cats, or food. Or several of the above. For someone with the wide variety of really odd bits of knowledge that I have, it’s fascinating. I can always find something to talk about, and someone willing to talk about it with me.

play for me. He played some wonderful, silly stuff that I'd never heard before. I had been raised on Tom Lehrer, Steve Goodman, Gilbert & Sullivan, and Spike Jones, so I had a great appreciation for songs with Weird and Funny Words. When I asked him what kinds of songs these were, he told me they were 'filk' music, and that there would be more that night. More? I was so there.

In hindsight, it was the perfect con for me to have come into that filkroom as a neo, or newbie. There were several 'big name filkers' in attendance as guests, and lots of original stuff written just for that con. The room was full of the best filk had to offer, all night. I didn't, as it turned out, sleep. I was still there at 6AM Sunday when the consuite opened again, and we all trooped up in search of caffeine, sugar, and carbs. I haven't missed a filk since, and in fact am insane enough to have agreed to organize the filk department for next year's CapriCon (3). Chalk it up to compulsive volunteerism; personally, I blame my mom. If she hadn't brought me up in a series of not-for-profit organizations, I wouldn't have learned to stuff envelopes, sort bulk mail by zip codes, and run an electric stapler by the time I was 8. Plus, I probably wouldn't have this derved inconvenient "But it's *always* more fun if you're helping to run the show!" attitude (I mean ... well, it IS, but still!).

You meet interesting people, running conventions. I held a minor position in the publications department in the 2000 Worldcon, Chicon 2000. This gave me a neat perspective, almost a spectator's ringside view, of some of the things that go into organizing fandom's largest three-ring circuses - setup, takedown, the on-site newsletter. Fandom runs on volunteers, and donated time and skills. Without people to do the scutwork, cons wouldn't happen, and we all wouldn't have nearly as much fun - and such a variety of fun! There are entire genres of fanac (short for 'fannish activity') that I'm only now learning about. I'd heard the word 'fanzine' in passing a few times in my first couple years, but often derisively, or in a way that implied if you didn't already know the Twenty-Fifth Degree Secret Greeting Handshake you wouldn't be welcome. I didn't actually read one until just before Chicon 2000 (couldn't

(3) February 7-10, 2002 - *it'll be fun, I promise! We have Dr. Demento! Phil and Kaja Foglio! James Ernest (of Cheapass Games)! You should all come! Ahem. This has been a Shameless Plug from the CapriCon Filk Mommy. See <http://www.capricon.org/> for more details. We now return you to your regularly scheduled article, already in progress.*

find any, for one thing). But this odd name, 'Plokta,' kept coming up, so I did a websearch and found their online archives. I was utterly hooked. I've been sending in my Letters of Comment fairly faithfully ever since, and it always brightens my month. Plokta was kind of awe-inspiringly good, though, in a "You can't learn to do this without years of apprenticeship, and besides, you don't write that well, nyah!" sort of way. It wasn't until a friend of mine, Erika Lacey, sent me a copy of one of her fanzines that I realized this was indeed a genre I could take a stab at - and that it would be fun to try!

I'm also fascinated, lately, by the history of fandom. It's been around surprisingly long. The first Worldcon took place in New York in 1939. Forrest J. Ackerman inaugurated the custom of wearing 'hall costumes' there, decked out in quite stylish 'clothing of the future', including a natty cape and jodphurs. An at-con expedition (another burgeoning tradition) was made to nearby Coney Island, and a picture was taken to commemorate the event.



Nycon 1 fen at Coney Island, 1939. Photo by Robert Madle.

These, too, are science fiction fans. I've read some of the stories they loved, seen some of the movies. Fandom has changed a lot since then, of course; life in general has changed a lot since the thirties. People no longer generally show up at conventions in suits, ties, and formal dresses, for example. Still, though, I like to think the important things haven't changed. We still cherish wonder, and discovery. We still get together to converse on a range of topics that would confuse the heck out of most people. We still read lots and lots of books. Life is good.

Photograph courtesy of <http://www.fanac.org/> - the Fanac Fan History Project. All copyright to this image remains with the original holder(s).

What I'm Reading: Booksnobbery, and an introduction

This will be a regular column of book reviews here in ROCB, I hope. One of the great joys of my life is recommending books to friends. I have a seriously large collection, myself, and see little point in going to all that trouble to get lots of Good Stuff in one place and then hoarding it for myself. I lend books. I borrow books. And I talk about books. A lot. However, before entering into a recommender/recommended relationship with you, kind reader, I think it best to begin with a statement of my biases. After all, you needn't agree with me on all the points of my preferences in books - in fact, I'd be shocked and surprised if you did! But if I lay out my biases to begin with, we should all be on the same page.

I was recently perusing the discussion boards at www.ChickLit.com (a lovely site, by the way), and I ran across their book clubs. Wow, I thought, a place to talk about books! Then, however, I read through their selections. Admittedly, one was *A Christmas Carol*, but I

don't feel like talking about that. Another was *The Madman and the Professor* (about the Oxford English Dictionary and one of its compilers), and although I've meant to read that for a while, I don't have a copy. Almost all the rest of the selections listed were things I've either tried to read and gotten horribly bored with, or never even tried (based on reading book jackets, leafing through it, etc). I realized that I have the same problem with almost every book-reading club I've run across. Their choices just don't interest me. It's not like I'm some aliterate philistine, honest. I've gone through at least two books a week since I learned to read, a bit over twenty years ago. I read a lot, and I'm opinionated about what I read. Most of what bookstores shelve in 'Fiction' (no adjective, just 'fiction,' as if Romance, SF, Mystery and Horror aren't fictional) bores the crap out of me. I was trying to think of why, today, and came up with some commonalities. Be warned - Opinions Ahoy, with specific examples.

Eloise's Literary Kisses of Death

What, I wondered, makes me dislike a book? After all, as that Russian novelist said, "All good books are alike. Each bad book is bad in its own way." He was talking about marriages, but you see what I mean. I decided to further explore the depths of my dislike for certain classes of book, and to lay them out for all to see. Perhaps you'll see one you hate too, in this list. Perhaps you have your own. If so, I'd love to hear about them!

No Plot. Or very little; or not enough. I like to have things happen in my books. Actually, this is a beef I have with Laurell Hamilton's latest, *Kiss of Shadows*. I bought it, sight-unseen, first-printing hardback, on the strength of my attachment to previous works of hers (mainly the Anita Blake series, but also *Nightseer*). If I'd known there was going to be far more sex than plot, I would have waited for the paperback. Granted, it was GOOD sex (in the sense of Incredibly Hot and fairly well written, not in the sense of Sweet and Nice. Warning, dark and bloody). I even enjoyed it. But she could have crammed in about twice the plot if she took out half the sex scenes. Heck, the sex even advanced the plot. But the story didn't GO anywhere by the time the book ended. The setup in the last chapter is so clearly a jumping-off point for a continuing series, and I almost felt cheated that we hadn't gotten any of that in this book. No Plot is related to:

Masturbatory Writing. No, not a whack-off book (I often like those, or at least appreciate their, ah, thrust, even if the writing is lacking in skill or subtlety). What I mean here is paradiddles and loops and swirls and exposition and metaphors present not because they serve the plot, the characters, or any kind of purpose, but because they Look Good. Purple Prose can qualify for this, as can long involved passages about the familial interrelationships of English country squires that have no further relation on the plot and introduce fifty new characters who aren't ever mentioned again (yes, Miss. Austen, that's you I'm talking about. Sit down and be quiet, Mr. Tolkien. You too, Misses Bronte ...).

Coy References. When you miss over half the meat or jokes of a book because you haven't spent twenty years studying the subject matter, that's a Coy Reference problem. When a book draws so strongly on its genre (Arthurian fiction is particularly bad at this) that someone who's *not* familiar with the reference works misses most of the point, it gets excessive, and I find I dislike being patronized in this way. Actually, this is a problem I unexpectedly noticed myself having with Neil Gaiman's latest, *American Gods*, though he did provide enough background for those of us who didn't know who he was talking about at all times to at least be enjoying the rest of the book. He was, however, skating on the edge of my

comfort zone in this regard, which is probably why I won't be rereading it anytime soon.

Angst from Nowhere. Margaret Atwood is a great example of this particular peeve of mine. As far as I'm concerned, anytime you have to go through a chapter and a half of a character's dark, moody musings on a river, a bridge, and a forest, and then find out she's about to kill herself, but doesn't - all before any kind of hook or draw to get you to care - is excessive. I was rooting for the chick to throw herself in so I could put down the book without guilt and move on to something else. I'm all for deep internal character development - I love it, in fact. But you can't start with that. You have to start with something that makes me want to keep reading, that makes me care about the book, the plot, or the character. First. Because (unlike, apparently, some More Literary readers) if I'm not hooked in the first chapter or so, I'm putting it down to go read some book that doesn't toy with me.

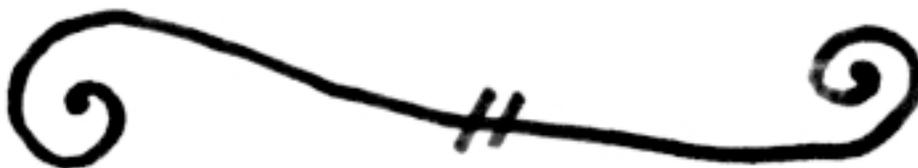
Generic Tropes. Oh, gee, let's see. A girl from a matrilineal culture, with roman-style technology, falls in love with a blonde soldier from a patriarchal culture, and subverts him to her pacifistic ways with sex and magic. Ordinary Joe Smith becomes a superman, and only uses his powers for good, after wrestling with ethical issues and winning *The Girl*. Yawn. Likewise, about half the fantasy novels on the shelves right now. I have a horribly low tolerance for stuff I've read five times before, from different authors under different titles. Admittedly, I may be mellowing, as I've even managed to get into the 'Wheel of Time' series in the last few years, to a point. But I'm not reading another Arthurian mythos novel, or another Tolkien ripoff, ever again, unless they have some nice twist on it (or a best friend begs me. And even then, maybe not). Even a novel magic system, or an interesting culture, or a priesthood that's particularly well done in a nonobvious way, can salvage a book for me. But I do want *something* original. This peeve and No Plot are my main problems with a lot of unadjectived Fiction. Oh, boy, so it's a woman in our present day who has a bad marriage and drinks, and all the things that happen to her in this six-month span. Excuse me while I yawn and grab a genre book, since they actually bother to do proper worldbuilding sometimes.

Mention of the Wheel of Time brings me to:

Way Too Darn Long. This isn't a problem I have with Literature, per se ... usually. Ok, with Dickens. Sometimes. He DID get paid by the word. But generally this is a peeve I find in fantasy/sf. Only very rarely will I undertake to get involved in a series that I already know runs more than four books. Sometimes I start one and never finish it (the *Magic Kingdom For Sale - Sold!* series, or *Dune*, to give two quick examples). Some authors have no idea whatsoever of (a) when they should quit, or (b) how to inject new ideas into a series without screwing it up. This isn't to say I read no long series - heaven forbid. It's just that I'm skeptical about starting one with an unproven pedigree. This is the main reason I've read very, very little of Terry Brooks' writing; 'Sword of Shannara' has been a multibook series since pretty much I discovered the SF section of used bookstores.

Soberly Serious. Books that take themselves too seriously often make me laugh for reasons completely unanticipated by their authors. Lois McMaster Bujold is a really good counterexample, on this score. Even when her characters are deadly serious, sometimes you can tell the author isn't. When they're going down on a standard combat drop, just like one you've seen in other military books, some offhand phrase here or there lets you know that the author knows this is a standard scene, and is noting something offhand that consciously makes this not a Generic Tropes problem. Or her main character is having a Big Depressive Moment, but his inner smartass pops up and says something. That's happened to me, in real life ... It doesn't even have to break the mood, I just ask the author to show that they're not taking themselves too seriously to be having fun.

Honestly, Soberly Serious is a problem I have with Tolkien, along with Way Too Darn Long and Masturbatory Writing (all the characters we have to remember for two books because they'll be important later, honest! Not to mention the endless 'traveling over the land' chapters). Plus, and I know this is completely backwards, he often squicks my Generic Tropes meter - and I know it's because everyone else is copying *him*, honest I do. Just knowing that, unfortunately, doesn't mean I find it any easier to read.



Personal History - Challenger

I think a lot sometimes about how different the world my sisters are growing up in (the elder of the two, Elizabeth, turned 13 this October) will be from the one I had. They've never known a world without compact discs (though they do know what records are, because my dad's a vinylhead), without Playstation, without Pentium-class computers. And just as some boomers get 'oh my god I'm old' moments when they realize I don't have a memory of where I was when Kennedy was shot (being that I was, oh, -13 at the time), I realized recently that my sisters will only know of the space shuttle Challenger as an entry in their history books, and as something that older people go on and on about.

I was a space-head as a kid. I subscribed to all the magazines. I wanted to go to Space Camp and learn to be an astronaut, like Sally Ride. I didn't get a telescope - for some reason that wasn't my particular geekery. I wanted to grow up to be a scientist on expeditions to other planets. Mars Colony, that was me. I followed every mission. I couldn't afford to buy all the patches, but I devoured the trade mags (I'll bet you didn't know there were no less than four separate space-enthusiast magazines in the eighties, not counting astronomy-specific rags and the ones just for kids) and followed what they were going to be doing, what they'd be learning. I oohed and ahhed as science fiction became real with each new spin-off technology (wow, you mean you can make phone calls from your CAR now, and warm up food in less than a minute? How cool!).

When NASA decided to start sending civilians into space, my heart soared. I knew I'd never make it into the military (I mouth off far too much, for one thing), but here was a hopeful sign that someday I could be an astronaut anyway. I bugged my teacher until she set up a pen-pal exchange between us and Christa McAuliffe's class. I don't know where those letters went; they'd probably be worth a fortune now. On the Appointed Day, my whole class got to take some time in the middle of the morning to watch the shuttle launch (like we always did) on that weird TV channel that comes out of the little plug in the walls of Catholic grade schools.

Up it went, into the blue sky, with the teacher we all felt we knew on it. We were at one with her class (in our heads, anyway) - who of course were also be watching this historic moment. We were all on that shuttle, in our heads, even the kids who didn't particularly care about space. And then it blew up. I don't think I'll ever forget the shape of that smoke cloud. My teacher was so shocked

it took her nearly five minutes to even get up and go turn off the TV, tears streaming down her face. The class was hysterical. It couldn't be true. It couldn't. But we saw it. And on the news that night, every channel, we saw it over and over and over. Christa was dead. I was dead, because I was Christa ... It was almost an anticlimax to find out that they died because NASA went to the lowest bidder, left the launch vehicle out on the pad in icy weather, and then launched ANYWAY so that it could have a positive effect on the presidential campaign. I was already dead. Space was already dead.

Carelessness, politics, and money killed space. I only realized recently that that day was when the idea of going to space stopped being real to me. I let my subscriptions lapse, though I do still read novels about such scenarios. But now, it seems only make-believe. It'd be nice, but it was never going to happen, not really for true. I was ten, and wonder had died with Challenger. Before that day, I'd been actively making plans and studying, making sure I'd know things that would be useful so that when we had a working moon colony I'd be a shoo-in. Looking back, that year was when I started getting aimless, studying stuff that interested me and then wandering to something else. It's funny, sometimes, how you don't notice you've been shot until years later.

My sisters, and all the kids growing up now, will never know the true pain of Challenger. They only remember a space program crippled by budget, choked down into only a few missions a year, both routine and unremarkable. Only now is NASA finally daring to dream again, reaching for Mars - but they're doing it in a far-future way, because we can't really get there in my lifetime ... of course not! Space is impractical and far away, not a living, vital future; an adventure to inspire the soul.

On September 11th, when suddenly the world was shocked by another cloud of bilious smoke, another explosion, another senseless loss of life, I saw in my mind that slim vehicle attached to its big orange thruster, heading up into the sky. I only hope to God that history doesn't repeat itself again in quite the same particulars, that the new generation is more resilient than I was, and that we don't all overreact in catastrophic ways ... again. The astronauts lost in our space program's failures (and there have been very few of them, really) wouldn't want us to let them be an image used to kill progress, to keep others from the dream they died to realize. I don't think the victims of the tragedy at the World Trade Center would want us to cripple ourselves, either.

Taylor Tales - anecdotes from the home front

I live on the second floor of a three-floor building on Taylor Street with my longtime partner, John, and our roommate Mike. It's a fairly spacious three-bedroom, in a neighborhood where the market's relatively tight. There's a restaurant on the first floor, and another apartment above us. Our landlord's a nice guy, if inattentive sometimes. Taylor Street used to be a bustling, vital area. It was once Little Italy, one of the many ethnic neighborhoods Chicago harbors. Then the Eisenhower Expressway was built on a good long strip of it, cutting it off from Greektown and some of Little Italy's northern outliers; later, the state of Illinois condemned further swathes of it to provide land for the University of Illinois at Chicago's Circle Campus to be built. Now, all that's left of the old Taylor Street is a single stretch a little less than a mile long.

It's not really a community anymore, proper (though I'm sure all the owners of the remaining restaurants know each other). Most of the folks who live here don't know their neighbors' names, though we might recognize each other's cars or faces as familiar.

Some of the apartments are inhabited by students from UIC, sharing the rent at least as many ways as there are bedrooms; housing's expensive here. Most of the new construction (some of it on land a block south of us, vacant since the Watts riots) is focussed towards expensive condos, not affordable rentals. I might deplore this trend (as a consumer of affordable rentals, and as someone who knows how darn hard it is to find a place around here to live on a college student's budget), but I suppose I can't really fault the developers. They're trying to get the most bang for their buck.

So, of course, are the restaurateurs, though their means are often highly inconvenient to those of us who live here. About half of the side of the block I live on, for example, is zoned as a 'no parking - 15 minutes standing only' area from 9AM to 10PM, for the benefit of the restaurant on that end of the block. Add in the no-parking valet stand across the way, and the fact that one side is no parking whatsoever on Monday mornings and the other on Tuesdays (street cleaning) and you begin to get an idea of the nightmare that is our parking situation.

The restaurant that got the standing zone put in, Pompei (yes, I know that's not how it's spelled, but it's how they spell it), has been making a decided nuisance of themselves in general since building their Big New Location about a year ago. First was the fact that they convinced someone in the city bureaucracy to both give



them a liquor license (they're just across the alley from a school, and usually that's cause for an automatic smackdown from the licensing gods) and waive the requirement for a parking lot. I'm still not sure how they managed that latter waiver, given how many tables they knew they were going to have, plus the party room up top.

They had an older location down the street, not much more than a counter and four tables. The new place is much classier, with big outdoorish garden seating along the front edge and strange stucco pillars across the facade. Lots of people with expensive cars park up our alley and the cul-de-sac of the dead end street behind our block to go there, and the cops don't ticket them. We're still not quite sure why. Signs reminding people that parking in alleys is illegal have been put up and taken down at least four separate times in the last month or three. The alley was recently repaved, and the city workers redid Pompei's back concrete while they were at it (where the delivery truck, manager's car, etc, are parked). Much illegality occurs, and nobody official ever seems to do anything about it.

Now you know why John spends so much of his time stressed, of course. There's more to our neighborhood and household than annoyances, but sometimes it's hard to remember that, especially when the regular mailman goes on vacation and we start getting mail for our upstairs neighbor, or the guy who moved out five years ago, or the restaurant, despite the clearly displayed apartment number and the note on the mailbox that says we will return all mail not addressed to people other than the three names listed.

Rain on Cherry-Blossoms
Eloise Beltz-Decker
1519 W. Taylor St., #2
Chicago, IL 60607-4015



If you're standing at the mailbox, reading this and looking confused, open it up and read the first page for a more basic explanation. If you're in the mood for some silly fun, or are a fanzine veteran, here for your perusal are ... **the checkboxes of doom!** I always loved the checkboxes on other people's zines, so you get to put up with them here.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> You're a #filkhaven junkie. | <input type="checkbox"/> Is this still your address? |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> You sent me your fanzine! Thank you! | <input type="checkbox"/> You went to high school with me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You're a friend of the family. | <input type="checkbox"/> You are Dave Weingart, and I claim my £5! |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You have the coolest business card known to man. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You haven't been feeling well lately, and need cheering up. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You and I both go to quite a lot of science-fiction conventions. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You are a very silly blonde, and it's not even your fault this time. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You sent me pretty Minoan art and squiddy magnets, so fair's fair. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You're one of the wide-ranging musical tribe known as 'filkers', and so am I. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You read one of the Usenet groups I post in, and decided I sounded interesting. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You recently moved to the west coast and can't possibly be getting nearly enough mail yet! | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You encouraged me to learn PageMaker, you foul temptress! See? See what you made me do?!? | |