

SNAPS

Distribution #13
May 2006



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The deadline for the next mailing is June 18, 2006

Profane Revelations

Tirade Number Ten

Fanfic Number One

By Charles E. Fuller Jr.

One of the marks of a work of fiction that truly appeals to a given individual is that one finds one's self fantasizing about where the story will go from where it last left off. When the story is really good, one puts one's self into it to a greater or lesser extent.

For myself, since I love to write, I sometimes like to simply sit down and write where I would like the story to go.

The following is an example of this sort of indulgence.

It's where I would like the last book of the Harry Potter series to end.

Harry Potter, *The End?*

Harry Potter woke up in his greenhouse.

He often napped in what the muggles called a "patio chair." The damp warmth was pleasant, relaxing.

He had been recovering for nearly three years.

That is it had been three years since Ginny had rescued him from the muggle hospital. He'd been there ever since the *Final Battle*. They called it a "persistent vegetative state" even though their machines had clearly stated that he was alive, and more, his brain was undamaged.

But Ginny Potter, then still Ginny Weasley, had *known*.

The bureaucrats at the Ministry of Magic had called off the search, even threatening to dismiss her father from his job if he persisted in helping his only daughter's quest. They in fact were a

good deal more blunt than that, telling her that she should, “Get on with her life.”

In a way Harry did not blame them, and in a way he did. The *Final Battle* had produced a blasted heath the likes of which he’d only read about, in muggle books on the atomic bomb.

But he also did blame them. Dead heroes are far more convenient than live ones. They had tried to dismiss Ginny, when she informed them that she had found him alive. Hardly well, but definitely alive.

She had been forced to enlist her family in the rescue of Harry. If her family had not been one so numerous and persistent as the Weasleys, he’d still be being fed through a tube, and dreaming when he should have been living.

It had taken almost a year to retrieve his mind from the coma, and another year to retrain and recover the strength lost lying lost in a bed for so long.

He’d married her as soon as he could walk down the aisle on his own legs.

Since then they had been living a half-muggle existence themselves.

Harry had purchased this estate with some of the formidable pile of doubloons deposited by his parents so long ago. Gold went even further in the muggle world than it did in the magical one.

The estate had belonged to a retired solicitor, a *super yuppie* in muggle parlance. His family had had no interest in the old manor house or the attached greenhouse where the solicitor had grown

rare orchids, and Harry now grew the odd magical herb, and some plain old vegetables.

Rising up from the patio chair, Harry looked into the fishpond he was sitting next to. One of the advantages of a greenhouse was that one could keep tropical fish without all the thermostats and heaters the muggles used, or without the application of magic. In fact the pond's water helped stabilize the greenhouse's temperature. What was the term Ginny's father had used? Ah yes, "heat sink." Arthur Weasley had said all sorts of muggle technology depended on the concept.

Withdrawing his gaze up from the depths, Harry suddenly saw his own reflection. It was a still a bit startling in a way, more like the reflection in an old mirror, its silver softened by time, than the usual faint image returned by the surface of water.

The image was *different*.

The scar, that babyhood mutilation that made him instantly identifiable as someone other than just another boy, the mark that had made him *Harry Potter*, was gone.

In fact the absence of the scar was one of the excuses that the Ministry had used to claim that the comatose body Ginny had located was not Harry Potter at all.

Gone without a trace, and good riddance. The best Harry had been able to guess, and he did not like to dwell on those events, was that because it was something Voldemort had inflicted, it had vanished with his enemy's death.

Which was why Harry did not like to linger on thoughts of those horrible hours, though there were those in the wizarding world that would still like to hail him as a hero.

Harry however, could never forget the cost.

An owl? Harry watched up through the wavy, watery glass of the greenhouse. He knew that owl. Had known it for years. But then a message from Ginny's mother was nothing unusual. The timing was a bit odd however. Owls, being nocturnal creatures, tended to prefer to fly at night. Seeing one at what Harry knew must be near noon meant that it was something important.

Heaving himself up out of the reclining chair, Harry headed for the house. Damp warmth or not, his joints ached fiercely. He wondered if Professor Dumbledore felt like this, those last few weeks.

There were limits to what even magical medicine could cure.

Just as he was about to open the thick oiled wooden door leading into the house, he saw another owl. This one vanished before he could get enough of a look at it, but it seemed familiar.

Passing through the large drawing room, Harry spun about and looked at the portraits on the wall.

Hanging in the place of honor, above the fireplace, were the likenesses of Professor Albus Dumbledore, and Hermione Granger.

He had passed by the portraits thousands of times, they were in the central room of his home so they would be hard to avoid. But this time there, well there was something *different*. Come to think

of it, when he'd gone out to work in the greenhouse this morning, there had been something odd then as well. Like, like they were *laughing at him*.

A memory, from not so long ago.

Harry had invited his muggle relatives over. They were his sole remaining blood kin and he thought he'd give forgiveness just one more try. He even thought it might be easier, since he was no longer dependant on grudging Dursley hospitality.

It didn't work.

His cousin Dudley openly leered lasciviously at Ginny, his childhood vices having been traded for adult ones so that he coveted openly his own cousin's wife. Ginny whispered something to him; the only word of which he caught was "Viagra." He was behaved better for the rest of the evening.

What Harry really objected to was something his Aunt said.

It was right here in this room she'd mouthed the words that not so much hurt Harry, but convinced him that the gulf between himself and his muggle kin was so vast as to be unbridgeable.

Aunt Petunia had said, "How does Ginny like it? The portrait of another woman hanging in her home?"

Harry felt like taking his wand and blasting Aunt Petunia into primordial ooze. Harry in fact had recovered sufficient of his power that he could have done so.

But instead Harry responded mildly. "Actually Aunt Petunia, it was Ginny's idea to honor Hermione beside Professor Dumbledore. You see, she loved Hermione too."

Dudley had pocketed several of what he thought were gold doubloons. Harry heard he'd managed to avoid a fraud charge, just barely.

Maybe not every time he walked thorough here, but often enough he stopped and just looked. Ginny had commissioned Hermione's portrait to be one of her decked out in the academic garb of a Hogwarts professor. It was only a slight exaggeration. Hermione would most certainly have been offered a teaching position on graduation. It was simply accepted fact that she would have been the first wizard or witch in over 100 years to be so honored.

But instead she had paid the price of ridding the world of Voldemort.

Harry did not know what it was that made him do a double take when Ginny strode into the room, but he was used to breaking down the components of his thoughts.

There was something *extra* in the way that Ginny had entered. Pride, but then she was always the proudest of the Weasleys. Harry almost dismissed it, like maybe that he had simply been standing here daydreaming for too long. But there was *something* in the way she walked. Of all things, it reminded him of, her mother?

"Couple of owls came in Harry."

"I know Ginny. Wasn't one your mother's?"

It was only now that he recalled thinking it significant, coming in at this time of day.

“I hope it’s not bad news Ginny.”

“No Harry, not bad news. Not bad news at all.”

Over and above the relief Harry cocked his head in puzzlement, the question not actually voiced.

“Well Harry, it seems we are going to be parents.”

This absolutely flabbergasted Harry. Yes, they had been married for over a year now. And it was not as if he could not support a family. But even through all of that he could not help but to wonder, “Why now?”

The best Harry Potter, Vanquisher of Voldemort, could manage was, “Well Ginny, is it going to be a boy or a girl?”

Harry figured he was on safe ground there. While she never much bragged about it, Mrs. Weasley was a seasoned witch. She could certainly determine not only that her daughter was pregnant, but also whether the baby would be a boy or a girl. That was the sort of thing squib witches could do. Molly Weasley could likely tell a baby’s sex in her sleep.

“Well Harry, both actually. In case you haven’t noticed twins tend to run in my family.”

Harry *had* noticed. Ginny’s twin brothers Fred and George had married twin girls from Beauxbatons, the French equivalent of Hogwarts. A few months ago Ginny had invited the whole lot of them over for a holiday. Even she had trouble telling her sisters-in-law apart, and their four little daughters, one set of twins per couple, were quite impossible to individually identify.

Like any two-year-olds, they had a fine instinct for taking advantage. Still, he'd invite them all back before he ever saw his own relatives in his home again, by about a thousand times.

"And the other owl?" Harry asked, the best recovery he could think of.

Pulling the envelope out from behind her back Ginny handed it to Harry. He recognized it immediately. It looked identical to the envelope that had announced his new life twenty years ago.

The envelope bore the crest and seal of Hogwarts School for Magic and Wizardry.

In seconds Ginny had changed from smirking pride to apprehensive curiosity. Maybe it was a change in the light, but did he see a gray hair in among the family trademark Weasley locks?

To Mr. Harry Potter O.W.L.

From Headmistress Minerva McGonigal

Dear Mr. Potter

The professorship for Defense against the Dark Arts is currently open.

It is the unanimous decision of the Hogwarts faculty that you, Mr. Harry Potter, are uniquely qualified for the position.

You are therefore offered the position of Hogwarts Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Please respond at your earliest convenience.

Minerva McGonigal

Headmistress, Hogwarts School

Holding the letter up to the light, as if to check the watermark, Harry noticed more. It was just a hint, but it was a hint that told him there was more than just this official communication.

Exhaling on the paper, to dampen it with his own breath, the words on the back of the letter came clear, as they would to no other.

He recognized the handwriting immediately. For all his bulk and seeming clumsiness, Hagrid had legible penmanship. He also got right to the point.

Harry

Word is you have recovered from the things Voldemort did to you in the *Final Battle*. It's time you came back to the wizarding world.

Fact is Harry, we need you. Hogwarts needs you.

There is a lot I wish I could say, but can't in a letter. I'll just say that Voldemort may have been the worst of them, but he was not the only evil one out there.

Don't worry about Ginny and the twins. Since you left, Hogwarts has built a couple of houses on the grounds for the married professors. The one I had them keep for you is right near mine.

Sincerely

Hagrid

PS I shouldn't tell you this Harry, but they plan to rename the Defense Against the Dark Arts professorship the Hermione

Granger Chair of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Don't tell anybody.

"Ginny, Hagrid knew we'd be having twins even before I did."

"That's magic Harry. But what does he want?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Harry, that's a sealed Hogwarts letter. How could I?"

"Sorry Ginny. Ginny, I've been invited to take a position on the faculty of Hogwarts, as a professor."

"A professor of *what* Harry?"

Harry gulped a bit. He would have really preferred that the invitation had arrived when Ginny was away, so he'd have more time to think about it.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"They said I was found to be "uniquely qualified." Hagrid also said they now have houses for married professors."

"Ok Harry. Means the twins will have to go abroad for their education though."

Harry thought about this for a second. Ginny, as usual, was thinking far ahead of him. If he was still a professor eleven years from now it would be an impossible situation, having a professor's children as students where he or she was teaching.

"You mean you approve?"

"About time you got off your duff and did some wizarding."

"What about the house?"

“Fred and George have been talking about needing a bigger place. Lease it to them. With how their novelty business has been doing, they can more than afford it.”

“And my greenhouse?”

“Take it to Hogwarts with us Harry. You’ll need something to do to relax, after teaching students all day.”

“Ah, Ginny, is there anything else?”

“Yes Harry. Any idea as to what we should name the twins?”

“Ahh, Ginny...” Harry stumbled. “How about Lily Molly, and James Arthur, after both of our parents?”

“Good one Harry, but not good enough. Took me a second, but I know what my kids are going to be named.”

“Ah, fine Ginny, I just thought...”

“And a good thought it was Harry Potter. My mom and dad would be flattered at even getting a middle name in there. And it’s not as if your folks didn’t earn it”

With that Ginny approached the fireplace and looked up at the portraits that hung above it.

“Harry, your suggestion is a good one, if we have more kids. But their sacrifice was just too great not to do them this honor. Our son is going to be named Albus Dumbledore Potter, and our daughter Hermione Granger Potter.”

To which all Harry could say through the tears was, “One more reason why I love you Ginny.”

The portraits *had* been smirking at him that morning.

Comments

Bat Signals Theresa

Is Vancouver BC really a part of Canada? I mean in any but the strictest legal sense? Certainly from what I have seen of the city it has more in common with Seattle or Portland than it does with Ottawa or Montreal.

On the other claw, when I was there last, nearly 20 years ago, I felt right at home in one way. Every male over the age of about fourteen had a moustache. You might say that I felt like I was able to comfortably blend in.

“Lugubrious Bach”

If I recall across a span of forty years what I learned in music class, Bach was not composed for the piano. The piano only became popular in the very last years of J.S. Bach’s life, circa 1750. His compositions were almost all composed for either organ or harpsichord.

I know that I have heard examples of Bach’s works played on both the harpsichord and the piano. The harpsichord sounds *right*. The same piece on piano may sound *good*, but it does not quite sound *right*.

Der Hollander James

Good advice! I say this because I bought another Rotring 600 on eBay a few years ago.

I’ll check out pandemonium.

Which reminds me of something I read...

One of the *cosmic catastrophe* sized fusion-bombs that were blown off out in the Pacific in the 1950s was code named “Panda.” That test is as such often referred to as the “*Panda Shot*.”

Like any large fusion device, it produced a lot of exotic isotopes.

The reason this happens is because when the reaction is happening there is a very intense neutron flux. Things like the U-238 in the bomb will absorb a lot of those neutrons and get transmuted into heavier elements.

In the ash from the *Panda Shot* there were in fact found two previously undiscovered elements.

The scientists who designed and built *Panda* wanted to name one of the new elements “Pandemonium.”

Who said that science lacks a sense of humor?

Unfortunately cooler heads prevailed and the new element got named “Einsteinium.”

Mid Life Linda

Saw a total eclipse once myself.

In February of 1979 I drove up to Kennewick Washington to observe the last total eclipse to be seen in the continental US during the 20th Century.

Two minutes and twenty seconds of totality and it was definitely worth it.

One of the details I recall was seeing assorted skydiver parachutes as the lights came back on. The local skydiving club had jumped into the eclipse.

Placeholder Joyce

The particular ink that I made is of a type called “irongall ink.”

Versions of this type of ink date back over 1000 years.

Because irongall ink is less subject to fading than carbon based inks, they displaced them during the Middle Ages.

Irongall ink leaves a colored iron compound that is utterly resistant to fading. I left a test sheet out in the California sun for over a month and the letters only darkened.

The particular formula I used was said to be an official US Government ink formula. In addition to the iron sulfate, tannic acid and gallic acid, it has a modern blue synthetic dye. The dye makes the ink immediately visible. A straight irongall formula would be invisible until the iron compounds darkened.

I once made improvised temporary ink. I used indigo carmine, the stuff I use for blue in Chaos Bottles. It worked.

India Ink from what I have read is a reversion to a carbon-based ink.

Softcore Arnie

Your tribute to the passing of a fan reminds me of something I have observed with a singular lack of enthusiasm.

I refer to the phenomenon referred to as the *graying of fandom*.

This was most particularly visible when I attended the LASFS in early May. There were very few fans there that night that were less than about forty.

This does not bode well for the future of fandom.

BAT SIGNALS #13

SNAPS
May, 2006

By Teresa Cochran
Email: vegasbat@trufen.net

A Short, Sharp Pop

When I was younger, for as far back as I can remember, there was a Friday-night tradition in my family. My earliest memories are of standing around the kitchen with my then-four siblings as my mom shook a pan on the stove. Gradually, after a few minutes, little cracklings and pops could be heard, increasing in number. After a crescendo of little bursts, the pops would go away slowly, and the delicious aroma of popcorn would fill the room. There is nothing like the smell of hot oil and freshly-popped corn. The stuff from the microwave just doesn't even come close.

Once the corn would be popped in a large roasting pan, my eldest brother or sister would carry it into the living-room, and we'd all watch TV, whatever was on on Fridays. I remember star trek, the Brady Bunch, and Dukes of hazard as the years went by. We'd fill ourselves with the stuff, accompanied by a soft drink (it was a special occasion, so we could drink them). To this day, popcorn is the only thing I must have a soft drink with, or the ritual isn't complete. When we were full, or most of us went to sleep, my mom would take the pan into the kitchen and put it in a prominent place on the counter.

I would wake up early in the morning, ostensibly to watch cartoons. But first, there was breakfast. I'd creep into the kitchen and find the pan, feel inside, and yes: oh, that wonderful leftover popcorn, which had by that time soaked through with oil and a little butter and was absolutely delicious to me.

My teenaged brother at one point tried making it with a tiny bit of bacon grease (I think we'd actually run out of cooking oil) and I thought it was delicious. There were all kinds of poppers we started to use. I was sad to see the big pan go, but there was the electric popper with the stirring flange in the bottom. Then there was the air-popper, which didn't require oil, so we had to melt butter separately.

When I moved out on my own, I learned to make popcorn the old-fashioned way, not without occasionally burning myself. I went to a second-hand store once, and there it was: an honest-to-goodness hand-cranked popper. I'd never seen one before, and it proved to be a useful gadget. Sadly, it got lost in one of my several moves around the country. Now I've seen them in stores, and I intend to get one.

Often now, on a Friday night, I take out the microwave popcorn. My mom says she likes it best. I can understand this, because she was the person in the family who popped the corn the most. But I'm such a traditionalist that I miss the risk of burning, the smell of hot corn and oil, and the furious shaking of the pan. I feel a little cheated by the passive

involvement of putting a pre-package, pre-portioned little bag in an electric box and smelling the artificial flavors.

So as soon as possible, I'm going back to popping corn the old-fashioned way. There's nothing like it.

Communication Calls

Profane revelation, Charles Fuller: I've always been interested in agriculture and gardening, but I've never had a talent in that area. It's amazing how many factors contribute to plant growth. One of my modest goals is to grow a poinsettia plant year-round. I'll have to put that off, I think, because I've heard that this plant is poisonous to cats, and I have a cat now. He's dear to me, and I wouldn't want to do him harm.

Midlife crisis, Linda Bushyager: The phone menus don't really bother me. In fact, I'm one of those strange folks who's shy on the phone, and would rather not talk to a human being. I do admit, though, that it might be easier to get some things across to a real human being. When I want to do this, I simply wait through all the menus, and the system turns me over to a person.

DFH, James Taylor: Well, give yourself the credit you deserve. I'll bet things work out one way or the other, and you'll land on your feet. Meanwhile, life has all kinds of interesting adventures in store, some better than others. Hang on and keep a-flyin'.

Vegas notion, Ross chamberlain: Here's crossing my fingers for you to be as fit as ... well, a fiddle. Speaking of which, do you play music? You seem to have quite a musical family. Oh, I just loved the Mary Poppins books. I think I'm going to re-read at least one of them again, now that you mention it. I didn't like the Disney thing very much.

Placeholder, Joyce Katz: You're making me hungry! Let's have a flan feast sometime. On the question of archery: I forgot to describe the target. It's a typical concentric-ring contraption, with balloons all over it. It also beeps. Sometimes someone would stand in front of it and let you know, very earnestly, when they were away so you could shoot. The popping balloons were a very satisfying sound.

Place Holder

By

Joyce Worley Katz

For the

13th Distribution of SNAPS

May 28, 2006

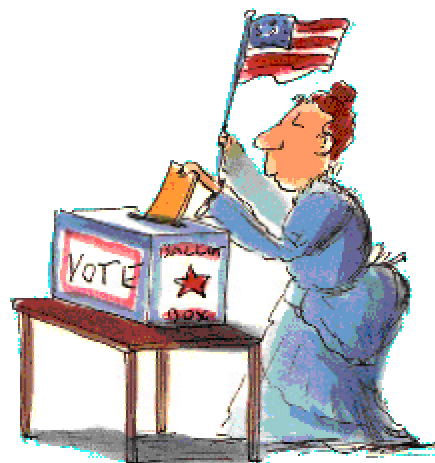
It's Time for a Change

Looking back in my files, I see that the first issue of SNAPS was dated April 2005. I've enjoyed the past year; it's been fun getting the apa started, and learning how to assemble the mailing the easiest way. I've certainly enjoyed my tenure as OE.

But I think it's time for a new Official Editor, and want to Call An Election. So, I'm opening the floor for nominations. And, that really means volunteers to stand for election. So — who will step forward?

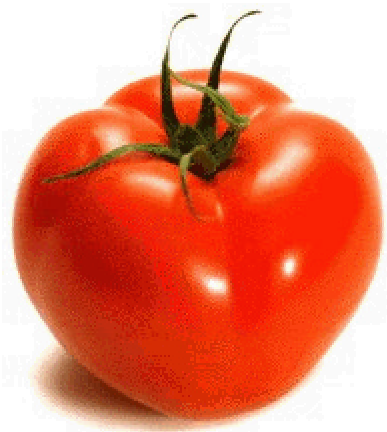
The work is quite easy; there is little to do but call for the contributions, remind people when the deadline comes, and then assemble the materials and email them out. I will certainly be glad to show the new s/u/c/k/e/r/ Official Editor exactly how to do it the easiest way, and help with any software problems.

May I have a volunteer (or two, or more) please?



Profane Revelations (Charles Fuller)

I've never had volunteer tomatoes. I didn't know that happened. I have, however, grown a lot of tomatoes, starting with plants I purchased at the nursery. In fact, my family always had a huge garden, so I was exposed to the farming virtues all my life. Never took to it much myself, but during the 19 years in New York, I sorta missed it. And, when we bought our first home out here, I was entranced by the idea of having a small garden.



The first spring after we came to Vegas, I put in quite a few vegetables, from squash to melons, to corn and lettuce. The only things that actually grew well were parsley (and it's remarkable how little parsley I actually Need) and tomatoes, so in following years, I only concentrated on cherry tomatoes. They did well for me, and a half dozen plants provided enough to keep me going all the way to late fall.

Here at this house, with our no-water landscape, I'd have to grow them in containers. Not sure the economics of it makes sense, since they do take a lot of water. Perhaps a large pot situated where the air conditioner run-off could provide the irrigation..... But not this year. However, when I do, I'll remember your recommendation for Quick Pick tomatoes. And I'm not surprised to learn they make better sauce than Roma tomatoes — I don't like the Romas because they seem too bland.

I never heard of a dog eating tomatoes. But back in Poplar Bluff, MO, we used to see Old Man Simkins walking with his dog to town every week, when he went to buy supplies. On

the way back, he always had his townsack of purchases over his shoulder. He and his dog would stop to rest just across the highway from our place, and he'd take out a small watermelon. He'd carve it up, eat the melon, and then make his dog eat the rind. I figure that was one hungry mutt... hope that isn't what made your spaniel go for the tomatoes.

Bat Signals (Teresa Cochran)

Your discussion of Glenn Gould — I suppose many things become more acceptable to us as we learn more about them. In this case, you didn't enjoy his music; then you read his biography, and developed more appreciation for him. The music, I presume, didn't change.



It may be true that everything has interest if you go into it deeply enough. But I think you have to balance this against your own tastes. Something being interesting doesn't necessarily mean you'll like it. Hitler was interesting and, we are told, likable to an entire nation of people, yet not to my taste (a rather obvious example.) As a less poisonous point, Barry Manilow is interesting, and I expect, a likable fellow. But I can't imagine going to one of his concerts, or buying an album by him. There are extremes that tolerance shouldn't engender.

While I believe in having a broad tolerance, I also think it's part of the maturing process to be able to distinguish between what you like and don't like. Not only does that help keep us from lining up behind bad prophets and insane politicians, but determines how we spend our time. Think how much better it would have been if you

could have told the national library service that you didn't like Harlequin Romances.

Coming from the Ozarks, I have never liked the term "hillbilly" because it conjures up such a bad image. Your family might be hillbillies, but as you say, that's such an ethnically mixed group that the name has little true meaning. The hill folk of Appalachia and the Ozarks were often Scot-Irish-English, but also Native American, French and Spanish, and other mixtures, too. Since the subject of your ethnicity interests you, you should question your older relatives to see if you can extend some of the branches of your family trees. It's often very gratifying to seek out those connections.



Der Fliegender Hollander (James Taylor)

I'm sorry things are getting shaky down at the Title Insurance Company. You seemed

to be describing one of the scourges of our time. In every industry, it appears we have incompetents rising above their abilities (The Peter Principle at work) and then, too often, instituting plans and procedures that are actually counter-productive. It's frightening to know that the guarantee of clear title on the next piece of property I buy may be researched so hastily that the rights may not actually be properly uncovered. Those people who face such problems are unlikely to feel comfortable about the "acceptable risk" management policies you describe.

I believe proper ink pens actually promote better penmanship. They force you to hold your hand away from the ink and paper, and slow your writing speed just enough to allow you to write more legibly. Of course, few of us write much beyond signatures and checks — the keyboard has taken over more thoroughly than the typewriter ever did!

Midlife Crisis (Linda Bushyager)

I'm with you, in frustration over those information Service phone lines that put you through endless

menus of choices before you can ever reach a human. And sometimes there's not a human at the end of the

queue. I recently ran into just this situation as I was registering a newly received credit card (Circuit City, actually.)

Since I have Vonage, I couldn't do it. When you use a regular land-based telephone, the equipment identifies your home phone number and area code, to verify you. But Vonage

works on a different system, and the phone goes through any available networks, not just one based in Nevada. According to the watchdog equipment at Circuit City, the call was coming from a town in Virginia, so obviously the card Must Not Be Mine. It ended that I had to carry the card into a local store to have it registered.

**Vegas Notions (Ross Chamberlain)**

It's a great relief, I'm sure, to have that surgery over and done with, and a relief to all of us that

you came through so smoothly, with no impact on that velvet voice. But you're mistaken if you think I didn't want you to print your experiences — I am much in favor of people providing this kind of information; it helps us all face such procedures more optimistically.



What a marvelous poster of the Cutler-Griffin Artists, and how wonderful to have such a legacy! Have you succeeded in finding some recordings of your relatives' music?

I have no such musical heritage. But I did have an uncle on my dad's side who could play the harmonica. I saw him do this at a Worley Family reunion that reunited my dad and his seven brothers for the first time in many years. After playing the harmonica, Uncle Alfred then did a backwoods dance that involved jumping over a broomstick frontways and backwards, then leaping in the air and slapping his heels with his hands as he came down. Now, that's Art!

The Perapetetic Phan (Kathryn Daugherty)

them, but have very few of them. Videogame systems, of course; MP3 player (on computer) and digital camera (though it is very old.) I've had a primitive robot for over 20 years.

But tell me, why do I need an internet-connected refrigerator? What is a computerized bartender?

I'd certainly rather live now than anytime in the past. Medical science is better.

Who among us is going to Westercon? I've heard a lot of folks talking about the Worldcon, but apparently that's the destination of choice for most of the locals. Which is a pity, in a way, since Westercon can be a lot of fun.

And it would be good if more Vegas fans showed up in San Diego to help support your bid for a Westercon. This would be a wonderful thing for Vegas. So many of our members have never been to a large convention.

AND, that's all for this time, fans! See you next month!***

Your listing of technological devices was interesting. I'm familiar with most of



Der Fliegender Hollander

no.11

for SNAPS # 13

By James Taylor
jmt53@eskimo.com

Another Fandom

We all know that other fandoms exist outside of the Big Tent of SF fandom. And I happen to belong to one that has some similarities to Core or Fanzine Fandom. It's mostly older, it has a annual meeting with a banquet and it shares it's subject matter with others but is still separate.

When pictures appear you seldom see anyone under 30 unless they are someone's children along to keep an eye on pops. Every year since 1984 they have congregated at a US or Canadian city to have their annual meeting including a banquet on the last day. While there are professionals also in this field of interest this doesn't stop these fans from doing their own research and writing up the results for publication in a quarterly zine. They communicate with those of like interests in Europe and some are members of both groups even traveling to Europe to attend gatherings there.

I think it's safe to say almost everyone with a interest is a member and with annual dues of \$35 it's not all that expensive to join. So it's 400 plus members is probably a good snap shot of this fandom's numbers. Core Fandom can not be measured so precisely since it has several gathering spots which contain exclusive members as well as those who may belong to multiple groups.

This fandom is on one hand more modern than core fandom in some ways and less advanced in others. While this fandom maintains no listservs it does make the presentations and notes from all the annual gatherings available on CD and DVD for purchase. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to get a DVD of everything written by Ted White or F.Towner Laney, for example? Setting up Depositories on line is great but only if you have Internet access. Having both would be much better.

In the end both Fandoms have problems with finding new members, keeping events affordable and dealing with the ramification's of modern age that seems not to care much about what interests them.

der comments & such

Bat Signals # 12

by Teresa Cochran

So Glenn Gould even after death could hunt you down no matter where you went? Or maybe it was Elmer looking out for his friend? However, the moral of story is a very useful reminder about making decisions or judgments based on incomplete information. Not that we can always know that the information is incomplete but that we must be willing to reconsider when more becomes available.

Vegas Notion #5

by Ross Chamberlain

I'm glad the operation went so well. The main thing to remember about hospitals is the need to get out of them as soon as possible. Elisabeth sounds like a lot of fun. And I'm guessing you favor your grandfather as well. Did she ever try reading science fiction? My father did but gave it up at some point, maybe just before WWII. He still remembered one story where the Alien Invaders cut off all the men's thumbs to render them ineffective militarily since they wouldn't be able to pull the trigger on a rifle. Not sure that really made any sense even in the 1930s or 40's.

Place Holder

by Joyce Worley Katz

Hard to believe it's been a year or more, and that we've done 400 pages plus in that time. Why not revive Western Romance as an ezine? Would that violate the rules of core fandom ? I would hope not. While I share your love of flan, it was the story of the bridge that caught my attention. A tiny tale of settling the west. It seems very sophisticated for home built, but then my father use to say that farmers could do just about anything they set their minds to and greatly admired them for it.

The Peripatetic Phan

by Kathryn Daugherty

It's interesting that you are so in love with Hawaii. A friend born there is very definitive about not wanting to go back even if she had a job that allowed it. I've never been myself, when I was growing up my suggestion of it as a place to go on the family summer vacation always was dismissed from consideration immediately. I'm wondering is Hawaii is turning into a tropical Arizona. Lots of visitors and retirees with locals mostly in support of those activities. Still I'd like to visit at least once before the resurgent Japanese economy makes it unaffordable.

As it turns out I have stayed (for one night) at the J. W. Marriott Resort in Summerlin. My employers had the company holiday party there last year. I was very impressed. Sort of surprised that they would want to host a convention the size of Westercon but between it and the adjacent Sun Coast it should be Vegas enough for a long weekend. Our room was huge and as far as I know just a standard one. The bathroom was almost as big as the bedroom. The main part of the room was big enough for a writing table and a small sitting area. It over looked a garden courtyard. It was over all very impressive. Had a verity of restaurants in and around the attached casino but I don't know if they would be able to handle 1000 fans. Guess we will find out.

MID-LIFE CRISIS #12

Mid-Life Crisis #12

May 2006—for SNAPS

The Bushyager Trip to Italy and Greece—A Series of Unfortunate Events

...the case of the missing toilet seats, cruise ship, tour company representative, ID, and....where were those five hairdryers???"

In March Ron and I took a trip to Italy and Greece. We had never been to Italy. Then I read an ad in "Astronomy Magazine" that there would be a total Eclipse of the sun in March, and a tour company, Astronomical Tours (along with "Astronomy Magazine"), was sponsoring a tour of Italy that ended with a 4 night Greek Island cruise and a view of the Solar Eclipse. The price was reasonable, so it sounded like a good idea to go. I contacted the company and found out that the tour would include some of the sights I wanted to see, such as Pompeii, Florence, Pisa, Venice, Rome etc. And the end of the trip would be capped, weather permitting, with a 3+ minute full Solar Eclipse. We'd seen one before, back in 1998 in the Caribbean, which was also while on a cruise ship. The advantage of a cruise ship is that it can maneuver in case of clouds, and hopefully get you out of them to see the short eclipse. Some years before there was a major eclipse over Hawaii, but a number of people missed the actual eclipse when some scattered clouds darted over the sun, just in time to block the eclipse.

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What we didn't realize was that the trip was going to turn into an adventure of sorts—full of great highs and lows. The major problem was that the tour was extremely fast-paced, and soon we would become exhausted, as well as disappointed that we had so little time to spend in some of the more interesting places. We've since heard that this is all-too-common for European group tours. I'll never again travel on an organized tour. Also, our cruise ran into major problems when the cruise ship was replaced at the last minute with a slightly larger vessel that had a smaller number of rooms, and the tour company double-booked a number of people into rooms. Massive confusion resulted onboard, and in the end a couple of people left early or had no room. One couple ended up in the infirmary! We got a little sick ourselves when we saw the new vessel, which looked a bit old and worn—like it hadn't been cleaned since it's first launch date, about a week after the Titanic sank. Fortunately our cruise cabin wasn't too bad, though we kept expecting a knock at the door and someone telling us we had a new cabin-mate for our extra bunk bed. The ship was hardly at all like a modern cruise ship that you might hear of run by Princess or Carnival or one of the major lines. Still, in the end we did have a fantastic view of the eclipse, saw some great sites, and were glad we went.



Now for the details.

I probably should have been more cautious before the trip when Ron began to get cold feet and complain that he dreaded going on the long flight. We'd saved money by using frequent flyer points for free airfare, but the trip was much longer than flights we'd taken to Europe in the past when we lived on the East Coast. Vegas is 5-6 hours further from Europe. On top of that, we had to fly to Gatwick Airport in London, and then transfer to another flight to get to Venice, Italy, the starting point for the tour. Signs of impending trip problems grew when the tour agency couldn't or wouldn't answer my simple question — were we going to visit the Island of Murano (famous for blown glass) in Venice on the first day of our tour or not? One of their itineraries said yes, one said no. We were arriving one day before most of the tour, so would have a day in Venice on our own, and I didn't want to duplicate what we would do on the tour. As we neared our departure date, the tour company also failed to send any tour documents, including the cruise ship tickets. We wondered what was going on and phone calls to the Tour company reached a busy signal — but at the last minute cruise documents showed up in the mail.

I said to Ron, “At least we are prepared—if we show up and there is no tour, we have enough money, charge cards, our own plane tickets, and a guidebook of Italy.” Later we were glad we had prepared well!

We'd had problems on a past trip in using ATM machines to get cash in Europe, so this time I made sure to phone the credit card companies and bank, to ensure we had working PIN numbers, and that they knew we'd be going to Europe. We also prepared for the trip with money pouches, traveler's checks, current passport, and so on. We had carry-on luggage only—no way we were going to arrive in Europe to find our bags were lost! With the aid of Woolite and clothesline, I planned to wash clothes once or more along the way.

Prepared as possible, but with some trepidation, we headed for the airport. As we squeezed into a 3-across seat on a crowded plane, I told Ron that it would get better once we transferred in Dallas. For a moment it looked like I was right when we changed planes and found ourselves with only 2 seats on our side, but then the first in the Series of Unfortunate Events hit — someone in the back of the plane got sick and sicker. We knew we were in trouble when the stewardess asked over the loud speaker: “Is there a doctor onboard?” Sure enough, we were diverted to Boston. The delay grew, and by the time we hit Gatwick, we'd missed our flight to Venice. Ron was grumbling about the long, long flight, but perked up a bit when we spied a “Whiskey Central” store in the airport that was filled with every sort of Scotch one could imagine, including the best selection of Single Malt Scotches we'd ever seen. They even gave him a sample; so suddenly he felt a lot better. He proceeded to buy a bottle at a good discount to U.S. prices. We were able to catch a later flight, and made our way to Venice about 7-8 hours later than expected.

Actually this wasn't an entirely bad thing, because we arrived so late that we were now on “local” time, and had a quick dinner before bedtime. This helped minimize jetlag effects.

Before the trip I'd wondered if I should take my super-light notebook computer with me or not. Since every hotel on the list claimed to have some sort of Internet connection, including wireless access, this seemed like a reasonable idea. If nothing else I could play some DVDs if things got boring. Unfortunately I learned that Internet-access is not yet reliable in European hotels. The Venice hotel had advertised wi-fi access. There was even a brochure in the room about it, and also a wired Internet jack. But nothing worked. When I checked at the front desk, several times, it was “see Tony”; Tony said “see Mario,” and so on. But no one knew anything, and as far as I could tell, there simply was no Internet in the hotel, just a non-working jack. As we traveled, this became a sad trend — despite their online assertions that it was there, the hotels didn't really have working Internet. The second hotel had the World's Slowest Internet Connection (5 minutes to open 1 email; 20 minutes total to get to AOL and open that 1 email and send an answer); the third had 1 terminal for the entire hotel that was always in use; the fourth had “server not found” at all times, etc! Internet cafes are around in Europe, but we never had time to find one once the overly-busy tour started. Free wi-fi spots are supposed to be around too — but I didn't have any luck finding them (except in Las Vegas's airport!).





Venice's Novotel turned out to be in the nearby suburb of Mestre. I was glad I had done my homework before arriving via searching the Internet. I'd found out that the hotel had a free once-a-day shuttle to Venice, but you had to book it as soon as you arrived. So we booked for the next morning. The shuttle was packed, and several people were turned away because they didn't have reservations. Venice is a fascinating and beautiful city. Actually the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas does a decent job of recreating a bit of it. But in Venice the gondoliers don't usually sing! We never heard one singing! Apparently this was made up by some movie somewhere, and now the only ones who sing are those paid in special "singing gondolier" tours.

We were very glad we arrived a day early to view the sites. We bought a ticket for unlimited rides on the motorized vaporettos that go up and down the Grand Canal and to the other main Islands of Venice. No one knows the exact origins of Venice. Apparently approximately 400 AD when the Huns invaded Italy, some fishermen fled from the mainland onto the marshlands just offshore to hide. They docked ships there, and grew rich as they became merchants. They put wooden pylons down and built homes. Gradually any land that was originally used for farming on the islands became used for buildings. Venice is actually made up of over 100 small islands. Some of these may only be a block or so long. The islands are mostly connected by small foot bridges, and three larger bridges cross the Grand Canal (see the Rialto bridge photo above). The city is a maze of small, winding pedestrian-sized streets and canals. The only way to enter it is to take a bus or train from the mainland, or by boat. The hotel shuttle took us to the bus terminal, where we got on the vaporetto. These boats are really city buses, but quite expensive, charging over \$6 for a one-way trip. Public gondolas are so expensive that only tourists ride them. The Grand Canal is an impressive sight, with most buildings dating from the 13th to 16th centuries. Sculptures, plaques and even paintings are everywhere on the outside of the impressive buildings. Walking through the streets is also fascinating, since they are lined with tiny shops with interesting goods and lovely cafes. The main part of the city is actually so small that you can walk from one end to the other in a few hours. Several other islands are also considered to be part of Venice but you can only reach them by boat. These include Murano, which is famous for glass. And it turns out that our tour did not include it — instead we visited a Murano glass "outlet" store near San Marco Square.



We found Venice to be clean and without any of the rumored problems of odd smells or flooding. But flooding can be a problem in the city if there is rain. Apparently things were fine for hundreds of years, but construction on the mainland (which is quite close by) changed the way the water flows. So during rainy periods the city has floods which cause areas such as San Marco Plaza to be under over 2 feet of water. Many residents of the city have moved away due to problems with flooding, old buildings, and the expensive life where everything has to be brought from the mainland. Though many apartments are empty, no one is lowering the high rents to attract new customers.

Italian food is not inexpensive, but you can save money by eating sandwiches, salads, or pasta from bars or cafes, instead of eating in sit-down restaurants. Sitting in the bar costs more than standing up, since if you sit they tack on a one or two Euro charge (a bit over \$1) for each item (some sort of way of paying for service, apparently). The weather was beautiful, so we wandered around, saw a museum, had some hot cocoa, and then ate dinner in a nice sit-down café, The Marco Polo. Our delightful Italian repast was underneath photos of Elvis, Frank Sinatra, and Elizabeth Taylor — yes, the restaurant was decorated with photos of American movie stars! The world is a small place nowadays, as we quickly noticed when we saw signs and billboards in English or with English words all over the place. We never had a problem with the language "barrier," even though Ron and I studied up on some useful Italian phrases such as "Where is the bathroom?" Actually bathrooms were quite easy to find — look for "W.C." signs. The first major store we saw was Blockbuster. Small world indeed. Ron did enjoy translating Italian and Greek when he could. He even translated some graffiti and found out the slang word for "cool."

Speaking of bathrooms, bathrooms in Europe are strange. First there are the odd ones in the hotel. We expected to find, and did find, bidets — those little toilet-like basins without a seat, where you somehow stand and get a stream of water to splash upward into your private parts to more thoroughly wash them — at least that is the theory—I'm not going to try it! But we didn't expect some of the weird bathtubs and showers. In Venice our hotel was super-modern looking inside. So was the bathtub. It was high—with a side about twice as tall as you are used to. And instead of being oblong, it was round on one end with a shower and a tub-like basin continuing along in a rectangle. I can't really describe it, but it was weird. And once you got in, you pulled the shower-curtain around you in the round part, and it had an annoying habit of clinging to you while you showered. It was so high up I was afraid to climb out of it, and Ron had to help me get out of the darn thing.

And then there are the toilets. Many toilets in Italy are self-flushing. Often the sinks are automatic, as are the hand-dryers. Very modern. But where are the toilet seats? All too often there are none! Just a rim. Or worse yet, a couple of toilets we used consisted of basins that were really low on the ground, so you couldn't possibly sit on the rim, you were forced to stand over or squat somehow to do your business. I was trained to sit down on a toilet, so I found it VERY hard to use the "squatters." Fortunately all hotels and airports had "American-style" toilet seats. And we soon discovered that almost all museums had them too. But in restaurants or public toilets, you never knew what you were going to find. Most public toilets were free, but sometimes they charged a fee—the worst one we found was about \$1 U.S. On the road, bus/car stops looked a lot like the places we are used to, with both a buffet and a small market snack area. But an attendant watched over the toilets, and you were expected to tip 20-30 Euro cents as you left. Usually the male/female toilets were separate, but occasionally they were oddly combined into one, with stalls segregated by labels for each sex. Greece seemed to have more toilet seats than Italy, thank goodness! We asked our Italian tour guide what they had in homes and how people were "toilet trained." Surprisingly, he said they were pretty much trained to use seats and had them at home. So why were the seats missing so often? Some sort of deluded notion that this is more hygienic, I suppose. (Actually studies have proven that toilet seats have very few germs. Computer keyboards are teeming with them though!) Obviously without a seat, most people are supposed to squat over them. But if there was a toilet of normal height and a rim, I'd cover the rim with toilet paper and sit. That's just the way I've been trained. I suspect a good toilet seat salesman could do a great business selling Italians on converting to American-style toilets.

It was pretty easy to use Euros, which have replaced the Lira as the currency of Italy. Now with the European Union, it is a lot easier to travel in Europe. When going from one EU country to another, you don't even go through customs in most places. We had no trouble using ATMs to get Euros. This is supposed to be about the cheapest way to convert currency. It certainly is the most convenient since ATMs are everywhere. The Italians weren't too happy about the changeover to Euros though, which apparently was done in an awkward fashion that caused unintentional inflation (of up to 30%). Store owners were allowed to change prices over to Euros for several weeks, and tended to round up prices (sometimes by quite a bit), while salaries were converted strictly by the official exchange rate. It will take Italy a few years to get over the problems.

One of the strangest sights we saw in Europe was while we were in Venice. We were at the train station, and suddenly I saw a Native American in full Indian headdress down to his feet. I did a double-take, and saw 4 or 5 more Native Americans in full dress. "What the hell!" I cried. They turned out to be a band, performing on the street! Street performers and peddlers are common in Italy. They do have some "living statues" — just like in the Venetian Casino, as well as strangely-painted semi-clowns, and so on. People hawk all sorts of stuff on the street, often from small carts. In Venice and elsewhere, we were surprised to see that weird headgear was in vogue — you could get a jester-cap, or a frog-hat, or other oddities. Venice also has all sorts of masks for sale, made famous by Carnivale. In Rome the big sellers were scarves, belts, and sunglasses. In Pisa they had various souvenirs, including odd men's shorts/or briefs that sported a photo of Michelangelo's David's private parts printed right over where a man's privates were.

As we wandered around the streets of Venice, we had to go up and down over countless footbridges. Soon my arthritic knees were in pain, especially my left one. For the next 2 weeks as we traveled, I learned that Italy and Greece have little in the way of handicapped access. There are no cutouts at the corners of streets. Few museums have elevators or escalators. Most museums require you to walk up 3 to 4 LONG staircases. Buses have no wheelchair access, and streets are extremely narrow and often paved with stones of one sort or another that are not level. People in wheelchairs and on canes were noticeably absent compared to in America. Obviously most handicapped people have to stay at home

in Europe. This is an example of how it may be nice to visit another country, but boy it does make you appreciate what we have here in the U.S.A.

Walking on cobblestone streets or in the ruins of Pompeii was very hard on my knees. In Florence we entered the Basilica (Church) and had to climb up a three-story staircase that had narrow steps about twice as high as normal. Soon my left knee was really BAD. Fortunately I'd brought along a cane. Unfortunately I needed it, as the series of Unfortunate Events continued. Tylenol and Celebrex barely made a dent in the pain. I was limping. My knee was so stiff that in Rome I couldn't even bend it. But I didn't let it stop me from limping along to see everything I could.

We toured on our own in Venice on March 17th. On the 18th of March the tour officially started. We quickly discovered that the tour guides walk FAST. They also didn't seem to care if a few of the tourists in the group were on canes and having trouble keeping up. Further, although the tour information we had been given before the tour showed lots of free time, it seemed that the reality was that we had to get up at 6 a.m., eat and be out in the bus by 7:30, and then sightsee all day, get back to the hotel by 5 p.m. if we were lucky, and then off to dinner at 7 p.m.. About half the dinners were included in the tour, and they were "typical Italian dinners," which meant that they started at 7:30 or 8 p.m. and lasted until 10 or 11. If there were a couple of extra hours in the schedule, the tour company offered an "extra tour" (for more money), such as the "singing gondolier tour" in Venice. Fortunately I was smart enough not to book these. So Ron and I were able to have a couple of extra hours to do things like unpack, pack, eat a hurried lunch or dinner (when not included), shower, wash clothes, take a nap, or just sleep. I felt sorry for the people who added on these extra tours — there wasn't really enough time to pack/unpack/etc. as it was, so they had even less time. There was hardly any time in the schedule for shopping or just wandering around on your own.

Soon we found that we were pretty much exhausted by 7 p.m. Maybe we are getting old, or maybe this tour just had too much going on. We slept like rocks each night, and took any chance we could for a nap.

A couple of people were sniffing within a few days of the start of the tour. Soon I and at least half the people on the Italian Astronomical Tour were coughing heavily. I was glad that Ron had brought extra antibiotics, in case he got a urinary infection (a complication that was possible due to his prostate problems). He was okay, but I took the antibiotics as the cold turned into a chest cold.

One of the best things about the tour was that most of the people were astronomers or astronomy buffs, and therefore very smart and interesting to talk to. They often had interesting questions to ask the tour guides, and in some cases knew more about the sites we visited than the tour guides. Ron got a kick out of talking about the rotation of the Earth (which is slowing down irregularly), and other astronomy topics with our fellow tourists.

On March 19th we toured more of Venice, and saw San Marco square — that's the famous one where tourists feed hundreds of pigeons. We saw children covered with pigeons as they fed them — it was like a scene from "The Birds."

We learned that in many cities we would have a "local" tour guide, who gave us headsets so we could hear what they were saying as we toured. These modern devices are quite useful. Unfortunately having "local" guides meant we now had to tip each one. We also had to tip our main guide Sergio (who toured with us) and the bus driver. I thought all tips were included, but now we found out they weren't. So we had double tour-guide tipping to do. In Venice we saw the Doge's Palace, a beautiful place that also contains the Bridge of Sighs. Tourists like to go under the bridge in gondolas and take photos of it, since the place is reputed to be quite romantic. But the reality is that the bridge leads to the dungeons, so the sighs were those from prisoners taking their last look out a window! We had an excellent buffet dinner at our hotel (included in the tour price). This was probably the best meal we had in the entire trip.



All our hotels had big buffet breakfasts, which were included in the price of the tour. Most had eggs and extremely soggy, large bacon that made British bacon look good. They also served croissants, pastries, toast, cereal, fruits, and more. There were sometimes fruit and crackers we took with us for snacks. The beds were quite hard, but after a couple of days I was so exhausted I didn't notice that any more and fell fast asleep each night.

The next day we headed out in 3 buses for Tuscany, which is reputed to be the most beautiful part of Italy. The golden hills and farms didn't look so good to us though, since the weather turned nasty and low-hanging grey clouds obscured the hills and turned the fields into a dark smear. We even drove through some fog. We headed to Padua, which has the oldest university in Europe where Dante Alighieri and Galileo Galilei taught. Since our tour was filled with astronomy buffs (even more astronomy buffs were on other tours and would join up with us on the Greek Island cruise to see the Solar Eclipse at the end of the tour), most people were anxious to see Galileo's house and other astronomy-related sites. But no one had planned them in the itinerary, so instead we saw a 13th century Basilica where Saint Anthony is buried. While somewhat interesting, this was a stop that could have easily been left out to give us more time in other more interesting places, such as Florence.

We also stopped in the town of Pisa to admire the Leaning Tower (no time to climb it). It would have been better to skip the stop in Padua and spend more time in Pisa. We then spent the night in Montecatini, a suburb of Florence and spa town. By now you may be getting the picture — to find 3 and 4 Star hotels that were big enough to hold all of us, they put us up in suburbs instead of in the towns we really wanted to see, like Florence and Venice. This meant we had extra driving time to get to the places we really wanted to see, and thus less time to spend in those places.

Dinner was not included so we wandered through the rain and darkened streets to try to find some food. Only a few days had passed, but my knee was already killing me, and it was already 7pm and we were pooped, so we found a bar/café with takeout sandwiches and pasta and took some back to the room. Pasta is delicious everywhere in Italy — even in take-out places. They add different ingredients than we are used to, for example this lasagna had peas in it and less tomato sauce. I don't know how they make the stuff —but it was really good.

The next day (March 21 for those of you counting) brought us to Florence, home of some of the most famous museums and art galleries in the World. Unfortunately we only had a few hours in this remarkable city. Ron and I used our free time, such as it was, to visit a sculpture museum and see some early Michelangelo works. His sculptures are actually quite varied — ranging from rough-hewn ones that still show a lot of stone, to smooth-polished pieces like his famous Pieta (which was in the U.S. at the 1960 World's Fair and now resides in St. Peter's in Rome) and David (you can see an excellent, full-sized copy inside Caesar's Palace casino!). We also saw Donatello's small David which is quite different from Michelangelo's. It is bronze, but it is black, and only a couple of feet tall. His David wears a hat and is quite effeminate. Then we joined the tour group to see the museum that contains Michelangelo's David.

The next day we headed for Rome, but stopped to see yet another unnecessary Basilica, this one in the town of Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis. Giotto frescoes decorate this church, but they are far inferior in quality to other frescoes we saw in Italy. March 23—I woke up and my knee was now so stiff I couldn't bend it at all. But I wasn't going to miss the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican, and St. Peter — no way. At many museums there are huge lines, and they have



tickets for admission, and lines to wait in even if you have tickets. Our guide Sergio got us up extra early (6 a.m. instead of 6:30 a.m.) (ugh) to "avoid the crowds," but we still had to wait in line to get in. By now we had realized that touring with the group meant a fast-paced tour and missing a lot of stuff, plus they walked so fast it was hard for me to keep up. So we went into the Vatican with the group (after all, our tour included the admission we'd paid for), but then Ron and I separated from the group. This was a very good thing, since the guide told the group that some of the most famous paintings in the Vatican by Raphael were undergoing restoration and not available, but she was wrong, and we got to see them. We also got to spend as much time as we wanted sitting in the Sistine

Chapel, examining Michelangelo's greatest work with binoculars I'd brought along. Apparently he painted almost all the figures as nudes originally, but was forced by the Pope and prissy cardinals to add clothes or loincloths to some of the figures. After his death, his assistant added other covers. When the ceiling was restored some years ago, there was a lot of controversy as to what to restore (cleaning showed vibrant colors where smoke had darkened the paintings), and whether to remove some of the clothes or not. They compromised and cleaned most of the ceiling, leaving a bit here and there to show you how it looked. And they removed most of the cloths, but not all. Looking carefully at the ceiling, it was pretty obvious to me that they should have removed more clothes. Some stuff was obviously not intentional. Also, they might as well have cleaned everything, because the brighter walls were definitely the way to go. The Vatican is huge, and a full tour can take over 9 hours, so we just hit some of the highlights. We ran into some nice nuns who were manning the Vatican bookstore. They seemed like simple souls who didn't get out much, and the really loved the shirt I was wearing which was decorated with all sorts of animals (like elephants, giraffes, etc.). They even showed us a short-cut to the bathroom. By the time we got to St. Peter's, I was dead, but at least my knee had loosened up a bit so I could limp better. St. Peter's is HUGE (though apparently only the 3rd largest church in the world), and you could spend a day or more looking at the sculpture and artwork in this monument to church wealth and power.



That night we had an included dinner at a nice restaurant (with wine) — and they even had three opera singers.

The next day we took a break from Rome to do the long drive to Pompeii. The most amazing thing was how close everyone lives to Mt. Vesuvius in Naples and its suburbs (Pompeii is basically a suburb of Naples). We could see buildings all the way up to the lower slope. Over 400,000 people apparently live in danger from this active volcano. The last eruption was around 1944 when lava flowed into the streets of one of the suburbs. In fact we



stopped in that very suburb to see a cameo factory. Many of the people have been offered money by the government to move away, but they just won't. Someday Vesuvius is going to erupt again and kill a lot of people! As for Pompeii, it is an interesting town of ruins, and larger than we expected. We only saw a few of the "bodies" of people who were entombed in ashes when the mountain blew. Ron noticed that there was an inscription on a wall in Pompeii in Oscan, an older lost language of Italy that no one was certain how to translate, which he found fascinating.



The tour was good, until the local guide told us we were going to go left, so we did, only to find the guide and the rest of the group turning right, and we almost got lost and had to scamper to catch up (and believe me, scampering is not easy when you have a cane and can barely limp along). We also drove through Naples—again this was a detour that definitely could have been left out to give us more time to see other, more interesting sights.

It was about at this point that Jackie, the semi-official representative of Astronomical Tours, told us there was good news and bad news. Now Jackie didn't really work for the tour company. Instead she was a friend who was getting a free tour for being the "representative." We had already realized that Jackie didn't know much and sometimes gave us wrong information. But still, she claimed that she had talked to the owner of the company who was back in the U.S. She told us that the bad news was that the cruise ship had "legal trouble" and would not be available. The good news was that the ship would be replaced by a newer, larger ship with larger cabins, the Ocean Monarch. The Greek shipping company (Golden Star Cruises) was a small one, and owned only two ships, and the replacement ship had been in dry-dock for a year. They got it out earlier than expected to replace the other ship. She told us that there were more suites, so some people might find themselves upgraded. Also some single people might find themselves with a room-



mate now, but in a suite. And there were more balconies, so some people who had inside cabins might find themselves outside with a balcony. It all sounded good. Unfortunately it was too good to be true.

March 25 found us back in Rome for a guided tour of the Colosseum. As usual, the tour bus left very early in the morning, and parked some distance from the actual site, so we had to walk several blocks. Somehow I thought the advantage of a bus tour was that they could bus you close to the things you wanted to see, and pick you up there. But the reality was that we had to park blocks away from most sights and walk. This extra walking wasn't good for my knees either. The best part of the Colosseum may have been several guys

dressed up as gladiators who stood at the entrance so you could pose with them. Kind of fun. Our local tour guide here wasn't too good, and in fact kept holding up a guidebook with a map to point things out to us. Unfortunately it was too small to see. One of the tour group yelled "look out for pickpockets," and it turned out a small child had run up to him and reached for his wallet. The child got a packet of Kleenex instead. This was the only incident of theft anyone ran into. Ron walked up a hill with the rest of the group to see the Circus Maximus and Roman Forum ruins, while I sat on a wall and relaxed. We had a quick lunch and then went on a walking tour of the Trevi Fountain, the Pantheon, and more. That night was our final dinner at a quaint tavern in Rome with strolling minstrels.

The next day (March 26th), the whole group flew to Athens. We arrived too late to do go to a museum or the Parthenon, but asked a taxi driver to drive us around for a view of the Parthenon, but we couldn't see much of it. We asked the taxi driver to recommend a restaurant within walking distance of our hotel. He said his friend owned one that was less expensive than most and had great fish caught fresh every day. So we said, take us there. This was an Unfortunate Event, because the restaurant was no where near the hotel. And instead of being economical, when we failed to check the price of the fish special the owner told us about (which wasn't on the menu), we ended up paying over 100 Euros for the meal (more than \$120)—the most expensive of the trip. Also we had to call a taxi to go back—and of course it was the same taxi driver. Still the food was very good.

When we arrived back at the hotel we found a lot of confusion. Now all the people from various tours had come together at last. Some people were on a Greek tour, we were on the Italy tour, some were just going to go on the cruise and see the Eclipse. Everyone was arriving and being told of their new room assignments on the cruise ship. Some people were entitled to a free dinner at the hotel. Some weren't. Some went anyway. Some were told they could eat the free meal by Jackie (remember her?), and then were told, woops, no you can't. People were confused but were assured that everything would be okay onboard the ship. That wasn't to be the case.

The next day we boarded the bus to the cruise ship. Unfortunate events were gathering around us. A new "local guide" said some people were not on the list for a free bus transfer from the cruise ship back to the airport when the ship arrived back in port. Our names were not on the list. We all protested and insisted that bus transfers were included. He took our names and told us someone would check.

We got off the bus at the dock and ran into Jackie who assured us that transfers were included. We were now starting to get worried by anything Jackie had to say.

We also ran into a huge line boarding for preboarding. It seemed like there was some new confusion over the new stateroom assignments on the new ship. Unlike most cruise ships, they didn't give us a plastic room key/boarding card in the preboard line. So when we boarded we had to go to yet another line to get this (you use it to charge any items you buy onboard, including shore excursions). I knew that this ship was going to be smaller and less luxurious than any ship from a major cruise line like Princess or Royal Caribbean cruises, but as we boarded I was surprised to find that the ship was a LOT smaller, and also obviously a LOT older. As we got to the main lounge area, I noticed that the furniture looked downright grungy — as though it had never been cleaned from its last trip.

We got into another really huge line to get our onboard charge cards and immediately started to hear horror stories from other passengers. One man told us his 2 small boys had been reassigned from having their own cabin to be put into another cabin with 2 strangers, adult males. Several people told us the rooms assigned to them were just plain wrong or didn't exist. The ship was hot, the halls were crowded with people waiting in the line, and everything was confused. I tried to go to our room and asked one of the ship's personnel which way was aft. To my surprise, with halting English it seemed she didn't know which way was aft and which fore, and actually didn't seem to know those words. It

quickly became clear that the level of English for most of the crew and cruise staff was way lower than that you'd find in most European hotels, or even if you just stopped random strangers on the street.

Eventually we got to our cabin, which had been booked as an Inside Cabin. True to Jackie's description, the room was quite large, and was now an "outside cabin." But instead of balcony, we were now on the bottom passenger deck, and our windows were covered with non-removable metal plates so you couldn't see out of them. We tried to find our room steward (they are usually around a lot) but he was nowhere to be found. Later we learned that on this ship the room stewards double as waiters!

Soon we discovered that when the cruise line lost use of the ship that Astronomical Tours had booked (they'd actually booked the entire ship), they'd offered the Ocean Monarch as a last-minute replacement. Astronomical Tours had the choice of either canceling the entire cruise or accepting the new ship. Canceling would have caused many problems, because many people were already in route to Athens through the various Italy and Greece tours. And canceling would have meant no possibility of seeing the Solar Eclipse. On the other hand, the new ship turned out to have about 50 fewer cabins than the original ship. This meant that Astronomy Tours would have to (and did) rebook people. If a family had booked 2 rooms for 6 people, they now stuffed all 6 into one room. If 4 single males paid single supplements (\$500 each) for a single room, they put them all into one room. On top of that, Astronomy Tours apparently had been given old or somewhat faulty information on what rooms were available. Some statements that they assigned people to were actually crew quarters, or didn't have a room number (so it took hours to find the "missing" room), etc. On top of that, no monies were refunded by the Greek shipping company to make up for the discrepancies, so no immediate refunds were given. And of course, Astronomical Tours did all this reshuffling of rooms without asking anyone in advance! People were not happy.



A couple of people immediately disembarked, even before we sailed, when they discovered that they either had no room assignment or their new rooms were inferior to what they booked. Other people who seemingly had no rooms stayed onboard because personnel told them that everything would be straightened out "soon." We had a early departure time, so soon we put to sea, with a number of people still without rooms or in apparently wrong rooms.

One of the owners or actual employees of Astronomical Tours, Joey, was now onboard with the group, and was supposed to be in charge as the main representative. But suddenly Joey disappeared into her room (and was not heard from again until the end of the 4-day cruise). Jackie was supposed to go off duty once the cruise started, but she found herself now fielding questions about the missing rooms from irate and confused people, and she didn't know what to do. The cruise ship personnel started saying that the room assignments were all to be handled by Astronomical Tours (after all, they had actually chartered the whole ship)—so "go talk to Astronomical Tours." Only no real Astronomical Tours representative was around. Now Astronomical Tours had given some free cruises to a couple of astronomers (including comet-discoverer David Levy) and the editor of Astronomy Magazine, who were to give lectures about astronomy during the cruise. And some Astronomy Clubs had a bunch of members onboard and some of their officers. A couple of these people tried to help, but the Astronomy Magazine people didn't seem to be doing much.

Meanwhile, it was time for the Lifeboat Drill. Only some people had no cabins, and thus, no lifejackets to put on. One woman got hysterical and started to shout "I have no room!" over and over and over. No one from the crew, or Jackie, or anyone paid her any attention and just let her get more and more hysterical. Ron and I and a couple of other people finally went over to her to calm her down and I set out to find out where her missing room was without much success. (She and her husband seemed perhaps a bit mentally handicapped, which didn't help the situation). I immediately ran into one of the men from our Italy group who said he didn't have a room and said that his 5-month pregnant wife was up by the pool crying. So the lifeboat drill went on with some people not having lifejackets, rooms, or any idea what to do in a real emergency. Later we heard that some people never did get lifejackets and that some children never received kid's jackets (which are smaller).

Well, things were really a mess, but we kept hearing that there was a list of people with room problems and that

it was gradually being sorted out. By dinner Jackie was saying “Everyone has a bed.” But we talked to two people who didn’t have beds! One single guy had been put into a suite with 3 other single guys, and there were 3 beds, so he ended up sleeping on cushions on the floor. The man with pregnant wife eventually ended up in the infirmary with curtains around them! The hysterical couple finally were given a room which had been misidentified as a crew cabin, but actually was a passenger cabin. Another man waited until 10:30 p.m. to get his room—it did exist, but had no number on it, so they couldn’t find it. We heard a single guy ended up being booked into a cabin with a pair of newlyweds! Talk about your SNAFU! We learned that almost all the crew was brand new to the ship, which had been in dry-dock for a year and quickly brought in to pinch hit for the missing ship. They had little or no familiarity with the vessel, and many seemed to be new to ship’s service.

Actually the most surprising thing was that the people who ended up double booked or without a real stateroom (and no refunds!) for the most part remained quiet calm and hardly seemed to complain. To some extent astronomy buffs are a little like fans. If fans were to suddenly find themselves without enough rooms, we’d probably be willing to bunk together (even with strangers). Still these people had paid for rooms or single rooms they didn’t get, and no refunds were being made, so you’d think they would have been more outraged. I think I would have demanded that Astro-nomical Tour agents Joey and Jackie should have been sleeping in the brig before I’d be sleeping in the infirmary!

We also learned that instead of being a newer ship, the Ocean Monarch was actually built in 1951! Various oddities went on onboard besides the missing or double-booked accommodations, possibly due to the fact that most of the crew was new. The ship was supposed to have hairdryers, for example. On day one, within an hour or so of leaving port, I heard a woman at the front desk demanding to be given a hairdryer. The crewmember told her there were only 5 hairdryers on board, and they were all checked out and hadn’t been returned. The next day I needed to wash my hair. I went to ask about the hairdryers and was told they were all checked out on the first day and never returned. And no list was kept as to where they were. On the last day, as we left I asked about the hairdryers—nope, no one had ever seen them since day one. Well, my guess the ship had left port without them, and no one had ever seen them. We also noticed a LOT of repairmen constantly around the ship. One day the lights shorted out in the main lounge and a flood of water came down through the ceiling. We figured that because the ship had unexpectedly come out of dry-dock early, many repairs had never been made. And probably the ship had never been properly cleaned either. Ron went down a set of emergency stairs and discovered that they were partially blocked with furniture. We just prayed throughout that no fire would happen. If there had been an emergency we would have been in real trouble!

Another problem arose when the ship’s daily newspaper told us that tips would automatically be added to our bill at the end of the trip unless we specifically changed that. There were two problems with that, first the service was definitely inferior to that we were used to on most cruise ships, and more importantly, I was 100% sure that the advertisements for the tour said “cruise ship gratuities are included.” We complained to Jackie and changed this option at the purser desk. On the last day Jackie made the announcement that yes, ship gratuities were included in the price of the tour. This was just one of many minor annoyances that happened onboard.

Over the next few days we found ourselves enjoying the luxury of sleeping a lot, since we were so pooped from the Italy tour that we decided to only go on one shore excursion. Food onboard was okay, but nothing like the sumptuous feasts you get on large U.S.-style cruises. Some breakfasts and dinners were buffets with only limited choices, instead of full sit-down meals. This was probably due to the fact that the crew wasn’t used to the new vessel.



Also instead of numerous lounges filled with different entertainers and big Vegas-type revues at night, entertainment was EXTREMELY limited. Basically there was one band, which played during the big show, and maybe one other time during the day (if we were lucky), and maybe a piano player doing an hour-show once during the four-day trip. The “big show” consisted of four dancers and two singers, who doubled as ship’s crew. They had to practice their show during the day in the main lounge, so you could also watch them rehearse. The “big show” generally started at midnight—a bit late for pooped people (or those who got up at 7 a.m. to go on-shore). I saw one of the shows, and while not bad, it lasted only half an hour. The casino consisted of 1 blackjack table and 1 roulette table and

MID-LIFE CRISIS #12



about 20 semi-ancient slot machines that took tokens (you had to buy the tokens). Very few people gambled, so the casino people generally stood around looking bored.

During the day there were a few astronomy lectures and a couple language lessons. But other than that and the “big show” and eating, there was nothing else going on unless you went on a port excursion.

The ship did stop at some beautiful Greek islands, including Mykonos, Crete, and Santorini. Santorini is very interesting because there was a huge vol-

canic explosion that basically blew most of it away (the volcano is now under the ocean and still active). This eruption also destroyed the Mycenaean civilization due to killing the people who lived on the island and destroying much of Crete and other islands due to a tsunami. We did take a bus tour of Santorini which ended with a cable ride down to the ship. The two photos on this page are from Santorini. The white and blue plaster houses on the Greek islands were very lovely to see and the Mediterranean Sea was a beautiful azure. We were fortunate that the weather turned very nice for all our time in the Greek Islands. I just wish that my knees had been better so that I could have gone on more shore excursions.



We also stopped at the Turkish port of Kusadasi. We were still too pooped to take a tour of the ancient ruins, but in another Unfortunate Occurrence, Ron’s belt had broken in half, so it needed to be replaced. We went into the port and had a strange, but interesting time. As we walked by the very first shop, a nice man in a suit came out and greeted us. “Can I offer you some apple tea?” he said in excellent English. “Sorry, we are looking for a belt,” replied Ron, noting that the man was from a jewelry store. “I can help you,” he replied. Surprised, but eager to find a belt, and not eager to wander around town too much due to my aching knees, he took us into his store. His brother came out and brought us tea, and the proprietor of the store asked all sorts of questions about what kind of belt Ron wanted, color, size, etc. “I’ll send my brother to get you some belts to try on,” he told us. By now Ron and I, even though confused tourists, were pretty sure there were no belts in the jewelry store, but we were drinking tea (it was delicious) and sitting down, so what the hell...we would see what the brother came up with. The brother went off, and the man proceeded to tell us that the Turkish had a concept of hospitality such that they would try to help strangers (i.e. visitors like us) and get us what we needed, even if they weren’t the ones selling us stuff themselves. If the port were very busy, obviously he couldn’t attend to the needs of every tourist, but since most people were out visiting ruins on a port tour, he was glad to help out and show us real Turkish hospitality. It turned out that the proprietor had lived in the U.S. for awhile, and spoke English perfectly.

After about 10 minutes the brother came back with a selection of belts, and the price seemed quite reasonable for genuine leather, but the belt Ron liked was a bit too long. The brother was ready to head back to the other store, but we decided it would be easier for us to just walk to it. So after thank-



ing the proprietor, the brother led us out and through the small town to the leather store, where we purchased the belt. As we left, proprietors from every store were out in the street, inviting us in for apple tea and “turkish delight” candy (free), and offering to get us anything we needed, whether they sold it or not. It was very strange, but in a good way.

On the way back to the ship we found a Duty-Free shop in the port, and were able to buy another bottle of Single

Malt Scotch at a good price.





justice, because they generally focus in on the sun and not the whole sky. Also they tend to be black and white and don't really show the colors of the darkened blue sky with a fiery yellow-gold corona surrounding the blackened disc of the sun.

Here's a poem I wrote when I saw my first solar eclipse, and it also fits this one.

Eclipse By Linda Bushyager

*As the wraith moon devoured the sun, its shadow arms spun dusky cobwebs over the earth.
Unease shivered down our backs at the touch of the moon's cool breath.*

*Darkening into violet and gray, the sky came alive with change.
Twilight colors turned earthward and encircled the sea.*

*Framed by golden fans of light and girdled by jeweled planets, a ring of fire crowned the heavens.
Like some all-seeing eye, it glared and beckoned us to look too long at its terrible beauty.*

*Then, too quickly, nature's spectacle vanished into remembrance, and our hearts ached at the loss.
Yet as mother sun's full face returned to smile at us, bright rays caressed our faces like kisses, and our souls
cried out with relief.*

Crete was the first island on the last day before we returned to Athens, and the first island after the eclipse. I noticed some people getting off the ship with luggage. In the afternoon we got to Santorini. As we were waiting to go ashore I spoke to a couple who sat with luggage and learned that Astronomical Tours had apparently booked some people on flights from Athens to the U.S. at about 8 a.m. the next morning. Other people booked their own flights, but were told by Astronomical Tours that they could easily catch 8 a.m. tours. The only thing was, the ship wouldn't get into port until 7 a.m. and it was at least 40 minutes to get to the airport. So some people had realized this and were getting off at Crete and Santorini to try to catch flights or boats back to Athens a day early. The couple we met probably never did get to Athens in time, because we learned that Santorini was a small island with only one flight to Athens a day.



I also talked to a woman traveling with two small children, a 94 year-old-father, and an aged mom. She told me that Astronomical Tours had booked her and her family on nonexistent flights home from Athens. Tour Agent Joey (now in hiding onboard) was supposed to provide valid tickets, but couldn't be reached. When we arrived in Athens I ran into the woman again, who had finally caught up with Joey. Joey didn't have the tickets, so the woman and her fam-

ily were headed to the Athens airport with invalid tickets.

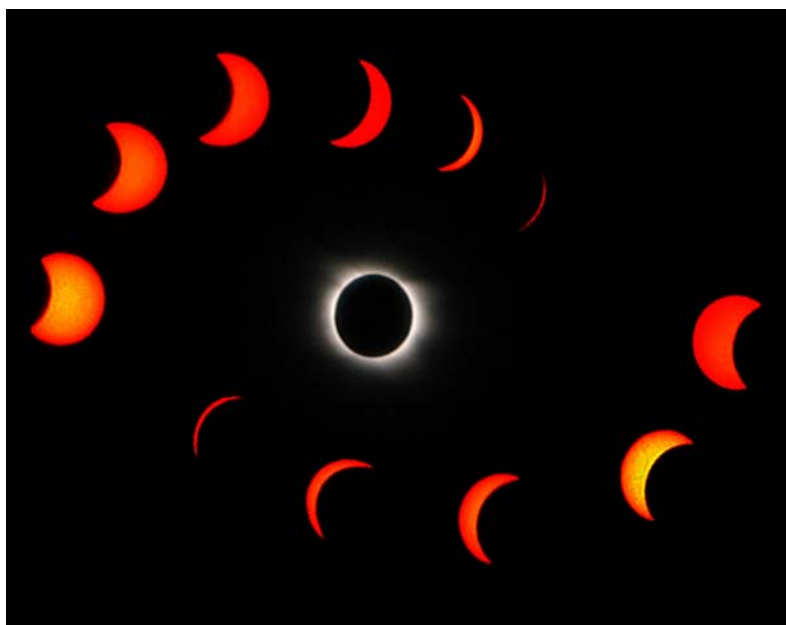
We disembarked in Athens and fortunately we were able to get on the free bus back to the airport. We talked to some of the other Italy tour group passengers and found out that some of them had also relied on incorrect information from Astronomical Tours and had arrived in Athens too late for their flights. We were told that some people might have to pay as much as \$6000 for return flights to the U.S. if they missed their flights.

Soon after we returned we got a letter from Astronomical Tours which attempted to explain the snafu and screw-ups with regards to the overbooked cruise. Apparently a number of people were asking for refunds, and if they gave them out the company would be bankrupt. They were laying all the blame on the Greek cruise company, Golden Star Cruises, and wanted everyone to join a class action suit against them. As for the people who missed their flights home due to Astronomical Tours misinformation or missed a day of the cruise to catch their flights, I'm sure some of these are now suing. A Fortunate Occurrence for us was that our cruise cabin was no worse than we had expected, and we'd booked our own airfare, so we had no reason to sue. Certainly all the confusion onboard the ship and the distress of other passengers had made our trip less enjoyable, but not nearly enough to sue someone.

I'm still wondering about that woman and her family with invalid tickets. Did they ever make it home? Did they have to pay thousands of dollars for new tickets? The way they treated her was truly horrible.

Fortunately I am a savvy traveler and avoided some of the problems I saw other people have. For one thing, I made sure we had brought along plenty of money and credit cards in case of problems. One lady had her one and only credit card eaten and swallowed by an ATM so she had to borrow money from a friend. Another man had only brought a limited amount of money along—just enough (he figured) for any extra food that wasn't included in the paid-for tour. He'd forgotten money for souvenirs and extras. We avoided the flight problems by checking the internet to learn what time the Golden Star Cruise would arrive in Athens (7 a.m.) and added extra time to make sure we could make it to the airport and through customs before taking a plane home. In fact, we ended up flying through Zurich Switzerland for an extra night. Then we flew direct to L.A., which turned out to be a really, really long flight (about 13 hours) due to headwinds, and then to Vegas. We also traveled with various pills in case we needed medications (I was very glad to have antibiotics along), Woolite for washing clothes (handy even if you are packing more heavily than we did), guidebooks to the major cities and maps of them, and so on. Some people hadn't bothered to read up on the places they were going to visit—in fact they hardly seemed to know where they were going to go! They relied entirely on the tour to provide information and guidance at every point. Even on the best of tours this probably isn't a good idea, and when the tour goes a bit sour, as this one did, you could be in big trouble!

When we got home we found the jetlag to be much worse than on any other trip because our bodies were now over 12 hours different from the actual time. Exhaustion from the trip and the cold also played a part, so it took several weeks for us to get "back to normal." Ron also discovered that somehow his Driver's License had "gone missing." He'd had his passport, credit cards, and traveler's checks in his money belt for safety, but had neglected to put the license in there. He'd probably lost it at McCarran Airport on the first day, for all we knew. At least he did better than the time



we had traveled to the U.K. for a Worldcon and tour, when I'd left my entire purse, complete with money, traveler's checks, license, and passport behind in Portmerion (site of filming of "The Prisoner."). Fortunately they'd found it and sent it on to us, enroute, and nothing was missing—but what a horrible worry that was! Losing the License was no big deal though, since it could be easily replaced. At least it was the last of our Unfortunate Occurrences.

We were glad to have gone on the interesting, if exhausting and confusing trip. And afterwards we really needed a vacation! Thank goodness we are retired and could lie around at home for a couple of weeks.

Really, traveling outside the U.S. does make you thankful that you live here. You can't imagine the horrible traffic in some of the cities. It made Vegas traffic look good. They simply have a lot fewer traffic lights on corners than we have, and it seemed, almost no stop signs. Further, small motorbikes/Vespas dart in and out of traffic in a dangerous way. Gas prices are over twice as high as they are here. The streets date from ancient times and are extremely narrow—hardly fit for the automobile traffic that goes on them.

Then there is the lack of handicapped access—a major problem for many people. Smoking is still extremely popular in Europe, making for a lot of second-hand smoke everywhere. The lack of toilet seats alone made me thankful I'm an American!

We learned from our guide, Sergio, that Italy has many many political parties, and this makes it difficult to have a stable government. Apparently the 2-party system, flawed though it might be, does have its advantages. With multiple parties, it is difficult to have a majority, so often the country is ruled by a coalition. Elections happen extremely frequently when the coalitions fail. If a project is started, such as a public works project, it can get cancelled or delayed with each election. The instability of the party system in Italy basically hinders the modernization of the country.

So travel, while broadening, really can make you glad to be an American. Ron and I are fortunate that we have been able to do some traveling around the globe. Over the years we often used the opportunity to go to an out-of-the-country Worldcon to do some traveling. In this case, a Solar Eclipse was a good excuse for a trip. If you budget and save money as you work, and look for economical trips, most people of modest means can afford some foreign travel during their lifetime.

While I would love to see some of the museums that we didn't have time for during this trip, it is doubtful that Ron and I will ever go back to Italy. There is just too much left of the world to see. I still hope to go to Australia and New Zealand some day. Maybe we'll go outside the U.S. for a World SF Convention in some future year. Japan is holding a Worldcon in a few years, but I don't think we'll make that one. And of course we will do more traveling in the U.S. Going to conventions is also a way to see America. In August this year we will go to Los Angeles.

Visiting Italy and Greece was interesting and worthwhile, even with the unfortunate occurrences that plagued us throughout the trip. Still there is no place like home.



Softcore Fantasy Adventures

SNAPS Disty 13

Softcore Fantasy Adventures #13, SNAPS Distribution #13, May 2006, is the confirmed product of the fevered brain (and aching back) of Arnie Katz (909 Eugene Cernan St., Las Vegas, NV 89145) who is proud to be a charter member and regular contributor to this group.

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When (My) Worlds Collide

A Trufen post by Todd Mason, which I'd have missed if Joyce hadn't called it to my attention, proved to be contained a blockbuster in the form of this brief TV news story:

Sci Fi to Launch Wrestling Series in Summer
WWE's Extreme Challenge Wrestling on Tap

By Jon Lafayette
<<mailto:jlafayette@crain.com>>

Sci Fi Channel is launching a new summer wrestling series with World Wrestling Entertainment.

The new series will feature the Extreme Championship Wrestling brand acquired in 2003 by WWE, which produces "Monday Night Raw" for USA Network. USA and Sci Fi are part of the NBC Universal cable net-





work portfolio.

Since returning to USA Network last year, "Raw" has pumped up ratings.

"Research tells us that there's a healthy appetite for wrestling among Sci Fi viewers," said Bonnie Hammer, president of USA and Sci Fi Channel. "With ECW, we're able to deliver to those fans unique action with a twist that's perfect for Sci Fi."

The new series is set to premiere June 13, USA said Thursday in a statement.

Wrestling on the Sci Fi Channel? Suddenly,

two disparate worlds collide! It a strange and unexpected phenomenon to someone like me who discovered science fiction about the same time he saw his first pro wrestling match.

The first science fiction I remember was an episode of *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* which the New York ABC affiliate broadcast between halves of a dinnertime movie. I was flipping the channel selector, probably hunting for a kiddie show, when I saw Tom Corbett and his buddies. They were marooned on an asteroid and, as they clustered around their small space shuttle, they bemoaned their fate and argued with each other about the best way to escape this dire fate.

I was already hooked on astronomy, which I made my poor mother read about to me before I could do so for myself. Once I saw that science fiction show, I embraced the fictionalized expression of the same longing to explore our mysterious universe.

TV was in a strange position in the early-to-mid 1950's. Milton Berle, Ed Wynn, Bob Hope, Phil Silvers and Lucille Ball/Desi Arnaz had made a television set a must have" for affluent entertainment seeking families. Unfortunately, revenues lagged behind popularity and, with daily program schedules lengthening, television needed a lot of cheap programming. Live-action, low-tech series like *Tom Corbett* were as cheap to produce as soap operas and had the same effect on children that *Guiding Light* and *Young Doctor Malone* had on their stay-at-home moms.

So television bought up a lot of old B movies and serials to fill air-time. *Hopalong Cassidy* and *The Three Stooges* ate up programming hours during the day and on weekends, while movies from the 1930's fulfilled the same function as *The Late Show*, *The Late, Late Show* and even, on Friay and Saturday nights, *The Late, Late, Late Show*.

Another staple of that era of television was professional wrestling. Besides local shows in almost every market, syndicated packages such as



Wrestling from Chicago enabled stations to fill up time slots with something that people would watch.

The first time I saw the “grunt and groaners” as they were often called, world champion Lou Thesz fought junior heavyweight champion Verne Gagne on the filmed *Wrestling from Chicago*.

The program would be almost unrecognizable to the thousands who generate today’s solid ratings, fat pay per view buy-rates and million-dollar arena gates. Thesz, champion off and on for over a decade by that time, and Verne Gagne, a former collegiate titlist, epitomized the pseudo sport approach that dominated pro wrestling for the first half-century after its modern inception.

Thesz and Gagne were “boots-and-trunks” guys who came to the ring without flash or flourish and wrestled scientifically. The matches were predetermined, like today, but the slow-paced ac-

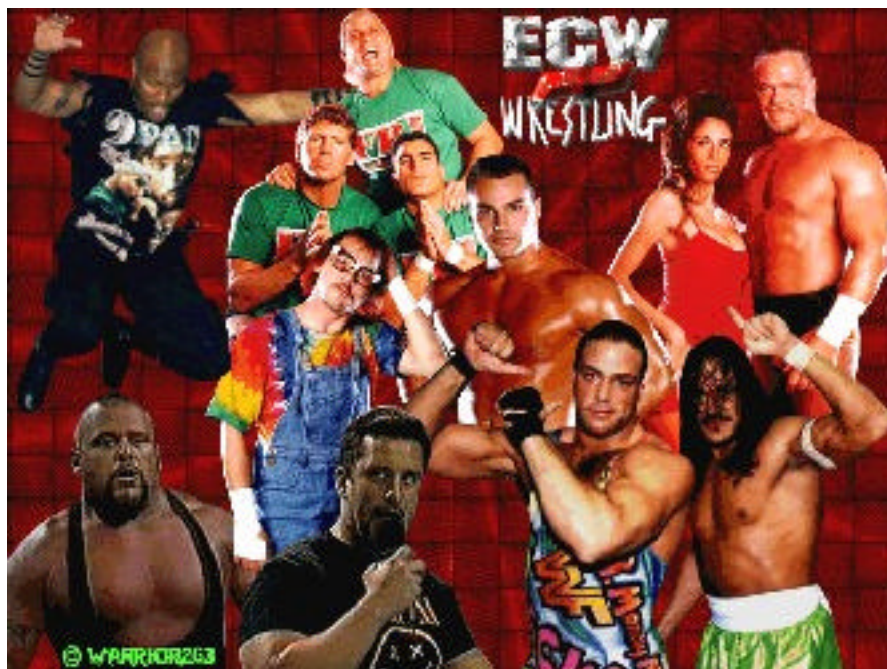
tion centered on static maneuvers like arm bars and stepover toeholds that lacked visual impact. *Wrestling from Chicago* presented Thesz and Gagne as professional athletes, semi-articulate physical marvels who let their ring work do the talking. They were no more colorful than the average football lineman.

While I found the sweaty heavings of Gagne and Thesz mildly interesting, my serious sports interest focused on the Brooklyn Dodgers. Even my mom watched the Boys of Summer on New York’s WOR nearly every day.

So I didn’t actually become an immediate convert to pro wrestling. The fact that it was not “on the level” didn’t really bother me, because my poor vision and youthful gullibility kept me ignorant of that reality until I was eight or nine years old.

I watched wrestling when there was nothing else, but I would’ve drifted away from it if not for a wholly new, more colorful brand of wrestling that came into being because of television.

Gagne and Thesz didn’t fire my imagination, but then I saw Gorgeous George. Bewigged and wearing a fur robe, George Wagner was anything but a boots-and-trunks guy. Gorgeous George’s theatrical entrance, shapely valet and nefarious ring tactics ushered in a new age of wrestling. Lurid characters from unrepentant Nazis to hearty lumberjacks followed in the wake of Gorgeous George’s wake.





Sabu, the suicidal, homicidal, genocidal warrior, leaps through the air, intent on leveling his opponent, Rob Van Dam.

And I became a fan. Oh, the boots and trunks grapplers were still plentiful – Bruno Sammartino rules Northeast US rings in the 1960's – but pro wrestling had begun its inexorable march toward the sports entertainment attraction it is now.

The juxtaposition of science fiction and wrestling is like a dream come true. Or maybe pro wrestling on Sci Fi Channel is more like a nightmare; I'm not sure. From the way fans on the listservs reacted, you'd have thought that the Sci Fi Channel was threatening to show repetitive "big bug" movies and pseudo-scientific documentaries about embarrassing claptrap.

Oh wait, the Sci Fi Channel already does both of those things. Viewed in that light, giving ECW an hour isn't so bad. At least it prevents Sci Fi Channel from filling that hour with another dreadful culling from its seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of shlock.

Not that ECW and the Sci Fi Channel are a comfortable fit. Unless they rename it the Sci Fi & Wrestling Channel, putting ECW on the network is ludicrous.

The original ECW – this is a revival – incorporated no sfinal elements of any kind. The promotion was noted primarily for its aura of ersatz realism, over-the-top stunts in the ring and adult plotlines.

Putting ECW on SFC is part of NBC's strategic commitment to World Wrestling Entertainment, owner of the revived Extreme Championship Wrestling. NBC likes the performance of

WWE's RAW on USA Network and, to a lesser extent, with *Saturday Night's Main Event* on NBC. When WWE decided to launch ECW as a new brand, NBC wanted to keep rolling the dice with a hot shooter. It's the same reasoning that virtually guarantees that the creators of a successful show will get a chance to do another one.

So NVC decided to buy this new weekly one-hour series. It won't generate enough ratings for NBC and USA already has the two-hour RAW. Sci Fi Channel has favorable demographics, plenty of holes in its schedules and low ratings that ECW might actually help. NBC has little to lose. If the show works and generates some ratings for the Sci Fi Channel, that's good. If the show proves very strong, they can always move it to one of their more popular networks. Meanwhile, it'll give them one hour of new programming more than they had ready for this summer.



Mick Foley, the hardcore legend, is now also a best-selling author with several hit titles to his credit.

ECW, which originally stood for “Eastern Championship Wrestling” was pop culture phenomenon. It offers a grittier, edgier show than its bigger rivals. They promoted shows in south Philadelphia bingo hall and eventually had pay per views, a video game and a cable TV show.

Yet ECW managed to keep that “small arena” ambience and its reputation as the choice of the most sophisticated fans. The cards in Philadelphia, PA, and in Queens, NY, were massive happenings as fans chanted incredible comments, passed weapons to the wrestlers and generally plunged into the show like it was a mosh pit.

Although ECW was only modestly successful and eventually fell victim to competition from its two much larger rivals, it profoundly influenced the whole pro wrestling business.

When ECW came on the scene, pro wrestling had changed from being a pseudo sport with racial stereotype characters to glitzy sports entertainment with characters more reminiscent of super heroes and pop stars. Along the way, wrestling gave up the pretense that it was an athletic competition and admitted that it is a show, scripted and choreographed down to the last detail.

ECW characters were more contemporary, if sometimes fairly bizarre. When you see a gigantic African-American guy join his part-



Kimona Wannalaya and ECW wrestler Raven.

ner in the ring as a tag team called the Full Blooded Italians, complete with imitation Dean Martin crooning and salutes to the Chairman of the Board, you know you’re not watching mainstream pro wrestling.

ECW was also a lot sexier than the competition. The girls were blatant and fans had little doubt that some of them augmented their income in porn or hooking. Spanking, lesbianism, trios... ECW was not afraid of sex. And what wrestling fan will forget the night Kimona Wannalaya, trying to divert fans during a power failure at ECW Arena by mounting a platform and doing a strip tease.

If this was the old ECW, that would be the end of it. ECW would do its show in the allotted hunk of air-time and, probably have wrestlers crack jokes about sci fi geeks. WWE is likely to be more approachable about inserting little changes calculated to make ECW more acceptable to Sci Fi Channel’s regular viewers.

Wrestlers will enter through “Star Gate” and the announcer will recite his introduction s by acquiring the information psychically. Those are givens, admittedly, but WWE can (and will) do more.

The referee is an under-utilized character in pro wrestling. So let’s take the man in the striped shirt and make him accessible to the science fiction audience. We could make them look like various Giant Bugs and Reptiles from Sci-Fi Channel movies. Or maybe they could all look like Grays out of Whitley Strieber’s *Communion*.

Ironically, the mainstream promotions have done a lot more with science fiction and fantasy characters than ECW has done or will do in the future. There have been Wolf Men, Frankensteins, Mummies and even a guy who claimed to be an alien from the planet Lazertron! One



Tommy Dreamer is shown with his valet Beulah McGillicutty

of WWE's longest-running stars is Undertaker, familiarly called "the Deadman," who is often said to be "from the Dark side" and invested with supernatural powers.

Just last week, on WWE's *Smackdown*, Fit Finlay wielded the ultimate Foreign Object. Finlay, whose persona is that he is an Irish tough who "loves to fight" reached under the ring and pulled out a Leprechaun -- yes, a Leprechaun -- who proceeded to pummel Finlay's already beaten foe.

If ECW succeeds on Sci Fi Channel, the network will surely promote its other programs through tie-ins. The "voice of ECW" Joey Styles will turn to Harlan Ellison for color commentary and switch to the backstage area for Bill Mills' interview with Sabu, "the suicidal, homicidal, genocidal warrior."

And don't be surprised if the Tardis materializes at ringside so the Doctor can rip the metal stop sign out of the villain's hands before he can crash it down on the hero's head.

The influences will inevitably travel the other way, too. Look for the "loser-leave-the-series" cage match on *Stargate Atlantis*. The Psychic Detective will make contact with Lou Thesz beyond the grave and interview him about his epic clashes with Verne Gagne in the 1950's.

Eventually, there'll be complete crossover integration on the Sci Fi Channel. Everything will be a little bit wrestling, a little bit stfnal (and moronic fake science). I can't wait to see "The Innovator of Violence" Tommy Dreamer, with Profession Theodore E. White in his corner square off against The Scufflin' Trufans (Ken Forman and Andy Hooper, part of Maniac Moshe Feder's Minyan of Mayhem).