

Weber Woman's Wrevenge

February 1999

Volume 9, Number 2 (Whole number 53)



**Eric and Jean enjoying our first Christmas in Airlie Beach,
by pigging out at a tropical buffet**

Weberwoman's Wrevenge 53

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COA

Please note my change of postal address! If you haven't yet changed you mailing list, do it now. Right now. Not later. Now. (Or waste your postage money sending stuff that the Post Office will send back, or throw away.)

Also note my change of email address. Yes, I have my own Web domain now, and a new address. If you have my CompuServe address in your email address list, please change it now to the new one.

Aussiecon Three

The 57th World Science Fiction Convention

Thursday 2 September thru Monday 6 September 1999
Melbourne, Australia

Aussiecon Three, GPO Box 1212K, Melbourne, 3001, Australia
PO Box 266, Prospect Heights, IL 60070-0266, USA

Guests of Honour

Gregory Benford

George Turner (in memoriam)

Bruce Gillespie

**This fanzine supports the Toronto in 2003
WorldCon bid!
(Eric Lindsay and I are Australian agents)**

Diary Notes

by Jean Weber

I mentioned last time that I had moved twice: first to Eric's place in Faulconbridge, then to Airlie Beach. That was the short version. Here's the long version.

Moving to Airlie Beach

I caught a head cold from Eric soon after I moved to his place. The cold hung around getting better, then worse, and we were trying to decide whether I should make the second move as soon as the apartment renovations were finished, or wait until later. But we had a lot of other things planned, so "later" sounded a bit dubious, and besides we wanted to check on the renovations before we made the final payment to the builder.

So... we booked the removalists and my flight on rather short notice, and I went. I was concerned about flying with clogged-up ears, but fortunately they did manage to pop when required on takeoff and landing, so although I couldn't hear worth a damn, I was otherwise okay.

The trip took a bit longer than expected. Going from Sydney to Proserpine, the airport nearest to Airlie Beach, I have to change planes in Brisbane. On arriving in Brisbane, I noticed that the connecting flight was delayed over an hour and was listed as "Rockhampton and Proserpine" instead of the usual direct flight. I was both puzzled and annoyed, but I had a book to read, so I settled down to wait.

I found out what had happened when everyone got on the plane, which was totally full, and the woman sitting next to me said, "Is this your first or second try?"

"What?" I asked, feeling like I'd missed the plot.

"Oh," she laughed, "you must be going to Proserpine. Most of the rest of us took off for Rockhampton several hours ago, but the plane had

problems and we had to come back. Now we're trying it again."

She and the others seemed fairly cheerful about it. Apparently many of them were heading for some academic conference at the University of Central Queensland in Rockhampton. They were all going to be late, but they'd been networking in the airport during the wait (probably in the bar, judging from the level of cheerfulness), so all was not lost.

So we flew to Rockhampton (giving me two more pressure changes that my ears could have done without), left most everyone there (I almost wrote "dropped them off") and went on. To compensate for the delay, the airline served free drinks to those still on the plane.

After we got to Proserpine (pronounced "pross-er-pine" with "pine" pronounced like the tree and the accent on "pross" which rhymes with "dross"), we boarded a bus for the final 30 km to Airlie Beach. Most of the people who take this bus are here for a vacation, so the driver has a running patter for much of the trip, pointing out the local sites, such as they are, and playing an advertising video. When both he and the video finally ran down, he put a (particularly obnoxious) regional radio station on the speakers. I loathe patter, videos, and commercial radio, and I wasn't feeling well to start with, so I was in a thoroughly grumpy mood by the time we got to my stop.

Eventually I got to the apartment, checked it over, and met the removalists when they showed up at 7 AM the next day. Hours later, when they left, I started unpacking – just enough to get by for a few days. The builder dropped in to finish off a few last-minute things and I pointed out a few things I'd noticed that needed to be done, but overall I was very pleased with the renovations. The place looks great!

Adventures in plumbing

A few days later (a Sunday), I decided to do some laundry. My washing machine and dryer had been installed in the area provided, so I loaded the washer and got it started. A bit later, I wandered back into that part of the apartment and noticed that the floor was covered with water. Panic!! There were over a hundred boxes of paperback books stacked up just meters away, getting wet. A mad scramble ensued: turn off taps, open door, sweep water out door (where it ran off the landing in the same way that rainwater does), move boxes, sweep more water, find some towels (mostly not yet unpacked) to mop up water, move more boxes -- ! Not fun, especially when I was still ill with the cold.

After I'd rescued the boxes, I collapsed to rest, rehearsing what I'd say to the builder when I caught up with him, as it appeared quite clear that the drain for the washing machine was blocked.

The reality turned out to be strange, almost surreal... the drain went down two floors and ended in a concrete plug – it had never been connected to the waste water outlet!

Picture this: the resident manager, the builder and I, all standing in the parking lot under the building, staring intently at a spot on the underside of the concrete slab of the apartment below mine, saying: "but the taps for the inlet water were installed and working, and the drain was in the floor – why on earth wouldn't it have been connected?" (The builder doing my renovations was not the one who originally built the block of apartments. He had tested the drain by throwing a couple buckets of water down it; they went down fine, so he thought it was okay – but all he'd done was fill up a two-story-high pipe.)

The next question, of course, was: whose responsibility (and ex-

pense) was it to get this fixed? It's not in my unit, it's on common property, so it should be a body corporate matter. But I could just imagine waiting for a committee to deliberate the matter, so I phoned the relevant person and said "Do I need permission? May I have permission? If necessary I will pay for it," and everyone fell all over themselves to be helpful. I paid, and the body corporate reimbursed me with no fuss or delay.

Out of curiosity I wandered down the hill, looking at the undersides of the other 5 buildings in this complex. Four of them have pipes in the relevant spot, and 3 of the 4 are obviously afterthoughts. Apparently none of the laundry drains was connected when the buildings were constructed. (The plumber who connected my drain said he'd done several in this complex in recent years, but he hadn't been in the area when the place was built, so he didn't know any more than I did.)

The problem had never been discovered because the unit had been rented furnished (mainly to transients with few things of their own - this town is run by travellers who stay 3-6 months and then move on, often back home, wherever home might be) and no one ever installed a washing machine before.

Fortunately only a couple of books suffered minor damage, and my back didn't seize up following the excessive lifting and shifting.

Trip to Hobart

After only 10 days at Airlie Beach, I flew back to Sydney for a few days, then on to Hobart, Tasmania for the Australian NatCon, then back to Sydney for a few days, and back to Airlie Beach.

As you might guess, the Hobart trip had been planned for some time (about a year), so although I wasn't well through all of this, I didn't want to miss it. A writer friend, Leanne Frahm, who lives in Mackay (now a mere 150 km away from where I live) was Guest of Honour. George RR Martin and Parris would be there, as well as Neil Gaiman, all of them having been guests at the New Zealand NatCon the weekend before. And, of course, various friends who live in Tasmania and whom I rarely get a chance to see.

So we went, and enjoyed ourselves, although I slept a lot and partied even less than I usually do, which isn't much. My ears never did clear up until a couple weeks after I got back from that trip. We didn't attempt to do any sightseeing, though we did take advantage of some pleasant weather to do a bit of walking around downtown Hobart.

Below: Here I am, on the balcony of our apartment, with the bay in the background. ▼

Eric moves to Airlie

At the end of July, Eric left his job, rented his house, piled a lot of leftover stuff into my car (which I had left behind in Sydney) and started driving north. He's written about his trip in some detail in his own fanzine (which he will eventually publish, at least on the Web).

I flew to Brisbane, where he met me at the airport, and we continued driving north. As it was last afternoon when I arrived, we didn't drive very far, stopping the first night to visit some friends of his who were staying at Noosa, a pleasant (if rather too upmarket for my taste) resort on Queensland's Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane. The next day we wandered around Noosa in the morning, then drove a few hundred kilometres to Bundaberg, the home of the distillery of our favourite rum.

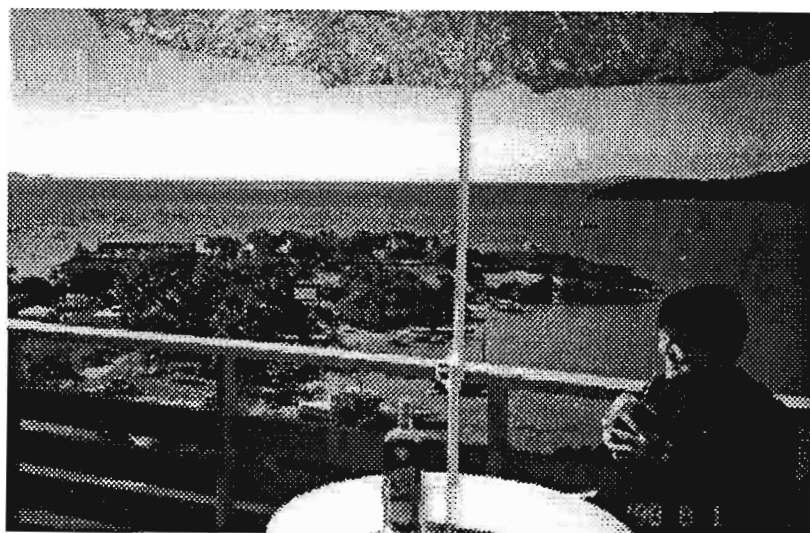
On Saturday we toured the rum distillery, had a chance for a bit of rum-tasting (yum, yum), bought a lot of silly souvenirs, ate lunch, and headed off again. A few kilometres from the main road, I hit the broken edge of the road and blew out two tires. Fortunately we were close enough to the nearest town for our mobile phones to work, so we soon were rescued by the local auto club person, hauled to town, and got the car fitted with new tires. We drove on to our next stop, Rockhampton, without further sightseeing.

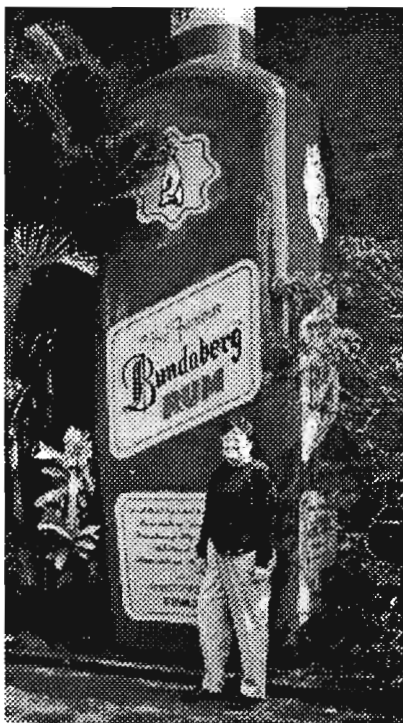
The next day (Sunday), our enthusiasm for touring considerably lessened, we drove all the rest of the way home to Airlie Beach, unloaded the car, and collapsed.

Then Eric got to work unpacking, and I got back to other work.

Trip to Sydney

In October I made a 10-day trip to Sydney, to attend a 2-day course and a 2-day conference (at which I gave a talk on editing web sites), run some errands and see a bunch of friends. I had a great time, and much enjoyed showing everyone the photos of my "office" and its view.





▲ At the Bundaberg rum distillery.

Trip to USA

In late November, Eric and I went to the USA to visit my parents, for an early celebration of my father's 80th birthday. His birthday is actually on Christmas Day, but neither my sister nor I can get there then, so we celebrated at Thanksgiving.

The trip over did not leave us nearly as exhausted as we'd expected, despite it being much longer than any previous trip. We left Airlie Beach on Sunday, November 22, driving to Mackay where we had dinner with Leanne and Kerry Frahm and spent the night at their place. Leaving the car with them for the month we'd be away, we got up at 5:30 AM and were driven by early-bird Leanne to the airport to catch a 6:45 AM flight to Brisbane on Monday the 23rd. Hung around Brisbane for awhile, then flew to Sydney. These flights were on Ansett, because they are the partner airline for United, our overseas carrier, so we had the chance to examine a terminal in Brisbane that we don't normally see.

At the Sydney domestic terminal, I saw signs to "Internat-

ional transfer lounge" and insisted that Eric come with me to find it. He was reluctant, because the Ansett person in Mackay had explained to us that there wasn't any shuttle bus provided by the airline, and we'd have to go out and catch the public bus. Turns out they were wrong (years ago there was an airline shuttle, then for many years there wasn't, and now it's on again, so I'm not surprised that the far-flung parts of the Ansett empire haven't quite caught up).

The whole terminal is under construction (major expansion to handle the Olympics crowds next year), so we wandered about following the signs and eventually discovered the transfer lounge, where we didn't have to wait very long before the shuttle bus arrived to take us to the international terminal.

The ride was interesting, because it went along behind the terminal buildings and past the cargo terminal inside the airport fence, thus giving us a view of several parts of the airport that one normally never sees.

Arriving at the international terminal, we were sent up some steps and along a corridor, whereupon we discovered that we were behind the outgoing immigration barriers! However, as we had not checked in and got our boarding passes for the overseas flight, we had to detour through the normal departure hall. We quickly went through the Business Class checkin and back into the immigration hall. Then to United's Red Carpet Club lounge, where we lunched on free snack foods until our flight was called.

I'd heard about United's new Business Class seats, both from their advertising and from someone who'd come over in October from the USA. Well, they certainly lived up to their advance publicity! They had so many adjustable gadgets that they came with a user's guide! We spent about an hour after getting settled, saying "oh, look what this does!" Meanwhile taking full advantage of the free drinks and

chatting enthusiastically with the flight attendants.

So we left Sydney around 2 or 3 PM and flew to San Francisco, arriving around 7:30 AM the same day, Monday November 23. Thanks to the wonderful seats, we both got quite a bit of rest and even some sleep, so we weren't in too bad a shape. The flight was early and the usual arrival-hall crowds non-existent, so we got through in plenty of time for a long leisurely stroll to catch the next plane, to Seattle.

I had a business class seat on this flight, too, but Eric didn't. There was only 1 upgrade seat available when we booked our flights, so our travel agent assigned it to me. Eric was in the row behind me, and wanted me to pass him free drinks, but I didn't.

Three of the other 7 seats in business class were occupied by people from the Sydney flight that we'd been on; the men in the row in front of me spent quite a bit of the flight comparing notes on their business travels and the best places to stay in various cities. As we neared Seattle, one man pointed out his house (almost, but not quite, waterfront property) to the other, who riposted with "you can't see mine from here; it's on the other side of the plane."

Finally, in Seattle, we again didn't have to wait too long for our minibus for the last hour of the journey down to Lacey. I commandeered the back row and lay down to sleep. It seemed mere minutes later that we arrived in my parents' driveway around 3 PM.

The visit itself was enjoyable, but nothing to write much about. My sister Barb and her husband Ted did manage to get there, though they had to leave early because Ted had just started a new consulting job and had to be in Los Angeles to give a major presentation the day they'd planned to go home. We had a great time, cooking Thanksgiving dinner and drinking Barb's deadly Mai Tai's (made with rather more rum than even Eric would use). Things got a bit ribald at times.

After they left, we had a few more quiet days with my parents before going back to Seattle to spend a few days with Cliff Wind and Marilyn Holt, attending a Vanguard meeting, having lunch with Janice Murray and Alan Rosenthal, and other activities.

And so to Las Vegas, where we stayed in the Sahara Hotel, the cost of which was included in our airfare package. This time we didn't go for Comdex. We saw some friends (fannish and otherwise) and did a lot more sightseeing.

One highlight was the Hilton's The Star Trek Experience. Of considerable interest to me was the "timeline" – a long display showing where each of the films and major video episodes fits into the future history sequence, accompanied by photos, videos, and displays of artifacts used in the show. The "ride" part of the experience was great fun (though more exciting for anyone who has never ridden a simulator before). I would really like to do that again with a group of Trek fans who could get into character. Our small group consisted mainly of middle-aged smart-alecks who tried to derail the script by interjecting comments and questions to the actors. The actors mostly handled it well, and it was all fairly entertaining, but the ambience was rather different than I'd expect if the tour group "got into the act" as well.

The trip home from the USA wasn't nearly as long as the trip over, because we only went from Vegas to LA to Sydney, then spent a week in Sydney before continuing to Mackay.

Arriving in Mackay was a shock. We stepped out of the plane into a wall of hot, humid air. Yow!! Leanne said it had been like that for several days. We didn't stay, but immediately loaded up the car and drove in air-conditioned comfort back to Airlie, where we left the air conditioner on in the apartment for a couple of days until the humidity outside blew away in a late afternoon storm on Tuesday. The rest of the week was very pleasant.



Eric with some of the flock of rainbow lorikeets that have adopted us.

Work stuff

Since the move, life has been both more hectic and less hectic. I've had the usual periods of too much work, punctuated by periods of too little work. The latter have been very welcome, giving me some time to pretend to catch up on other things, like reading what I want to read and working on my web site.

Airlie Beach is billed as a party town, and it certainly uses any excuse to live up to that reputation. From my balcony we get a great view of the fireworks displays that seem to be put on at least once a month, to mark the end of various events (often, but not always, involving sailboats). We also get a great view of the sailboat races.

My computer stopped working in early October, and when it stopped it scrambled the file index (yes, I know that's not the technical term) on the hard disk. This happened one Sunday afternoon, just before I did my weekly backup. Gone was an entire book that I'd almost finished editing, and the latest version of a conference talk I was preparing.

Eric was able to rescue the text of the book (fortunately unformatted) and my talk (short enough that reformatting it wasn't a problem). and, of course, living in a multi-computer household meant that getting back to work didn't take too

long. We had also recently put all our hard disks (for the desktop machines) into removable drive carriers, making it much easier for me to just shove a drive into Eric's machine and carry on.

Further research determined that the hard disk controller (built into the motherboard of my desktop computer) had died (this is its 3rd motherboard in only 16 months); the hard drive itself appears to still be good, once we reformatted it. But some stuff is gone forever, mainly things I'm not in the habit of backing up, like my email files.

Condo tales

Eric and I have attended several meetings (formal and informal) of the other owners, and we've learned a lot about the history of this buildings in this complex. The complex was built as a resort (in the early '80s) and owned in total by one company for some years. The basic structure of the buildings are solid, but the finishings (inside and out) were cheaply done and the original owners did minimal maintenance. Presumably anything optional (like working drains in unused laundry areas) wasn't done.

In the late '80s the buildings were changed to individual titles and the units were sold off, mostly to absentee owners. However, the new owners soon discovered that a lot of work was needed to keep the place in good enough shape to attract the intended customers, and ended up spending quite a lot of money to replace roofs, rotting steps and retaining walls. Recently many of the units have been renovated internally.

One of the birds takes a closer look at me.



Health matters

In Sydney after the US trip, Eric saw the heart specialist for his annual checkup and was pronounced in fine shape. We both saw the eye surgeon. Eric's eyes are nearly perfect. My corneas are now the way they should be (therefore that isn't the cause of my continuing double vision in the right eye), but the surgeon says I'm beginning to get cataracts in both eyes. Oh joy. Not that this is exactly a surprise to me – my mother and her father had cataracts. The surgeon said it could be 2 to 10 years before the cataracts are enough of a problem to require surgery.

A tropical Christmas

We had a very nice Christmas buffet lunch at one of the other resorts in town. The buffet featured cold ham, cold turkey, cold cooked prawns, lots of salads, as well as some hot meat, vegetables, dressing, gravy, and plum pudding. The temperature was around 30, but a stiff cooling breeze was blowing, and the champagne was flowing like water. We had a fine time, but passed up an opportunity to swim in the hotel's pool afterwards. The cover photo on this zine shows us with the sea and some other guests in the background.

The next week I got very busy for quite awhile, doing fill-in editing work while other people were taking their annual leave.

The weather's been alternating between days of gusty rain and days that are beautiful and not too hot or humid. On one of the beautiful days, because we needed to test-drive the car on a long distance run, we drove to a shopping mall – in Townsville, 300 km away. A pleasant drive, visiting towns along the way and confirming that the nearest traffic light north of here is 280 km away. I bought two swimsuits and an ice cream and we drove back. Not something I'd want to do every weekend!

The only low point of that trip was having the car alarm go off

while I was trying to start the car. Honking horn, flashing lights – the whole catastrophe. Very embarrassing! Especially since I didn't even realise the car *had* an alarm – I knew it had an immobilisation system, but not an alarm. Hmmm... maybe I should read the user's guide after all.

Meanwhile we've been swimming every day in the resort pool – it's not really long enough for serious swimming, but it's a lot better than nothing. Walking quickly, especially over any distance, isn't something I do well (and I can't keep up with Eric), but swimming I can handle.

New car

I bought a new car (Laser 5-door hatch). This was done in my usual style: think about it for a year, then go into the car dealer's, look at the one car that met my specs and was in the clearance sale, drive it around the block, notice that it costs more than I wanted to pay but the dealer's trade-in is than I'd expected (obviously he wants to sell this car), bringing the cost to me down to what I intended to pay, and say "can I put it on my credit card?" No problem. (I needed a couple of weeks to get the money out of my

investment account.) Eric was in mild shock even though he should be used to the way I buy things.

Home on the Web

Not long after moving to Airlie Beach, I finally got around to registering a business name. For years I've been unable to decide whether to register "WeberWoman's Wrevenge," thinking that prospective clients might find this a bit too silly, weird, or otherwise offputting. Now I've decided that if they have a problem with that, I probably don't want their business anyway. So I sent in my registration form (and fee), and received the approval within a few weeks. As I expected, there was no similar name already registered.

Immediately after getting the business name approved, I applied for a Web domain name – having already selected the website hosting company I intended to use (webcentral.com.au). All of this came through within two days, so I was set. I promptly transferred all my professional pages off CompuServe; while waiting for approvals, I'd also been busily converting Wrevenge files into HTML.

Since then I've put up quite a bit more stuff. See the back page of this zine for the URLs.

View of our apartment complex. ▼



Book notes

by Jean Weber

Some of these were intended for *Wrevenge 51* but were never published in the hardcopy version.

The Fleet of Stars, by Poul Anderson, Tor, 1997

This book is the latest (the cover says "final") in the series begun with *Harvest the Stars* and including the *Stars are Also Fire*, and *Harvest the Fire*.

We meet again with the down-load of Anson Guthrie, who started it all, some hundreds of years later. The humans of Earth, the Moon and Mars are dependent on technology, have their lives shaped by machine intelligence, and believe they are far better off than their ancestors because they have no more wars or poverty. The few people who want something more, who have a burning desire to do something different, to go to the stars simply because the stars are there, are treated as unfortunate cases who need help to overcome their problem.

Then there are the Lunarians, genetically altered humans, with a different culture and attitude, who see a conspiracy to deny them their freedom. "Out there" are the descendants of Lunarians and humans who left Earth long ago. Also "out there" is a mystery, and a few people on Earth and Mars believe that the Cybercosm is suppressing information about what's happening away from the inner solar system. Can Anson be the catalyst to solve the mystery? What is the Cybercosm up to? And why?

I much enjoyed this book, after being slightly disappointed in *Harvest the Fire*, which seemed a bit too much fantasy after the (to me) reality of the first two books.

Cosm, by Gregory Benford, Avon, 1999

A scientific who (or what) dunnit by a working physicist,

featuring a sharp look at the way research is done and funded and the power plays involved, in addition to the scientific mystery. Will the research unleash something dangerous? Can the accidental discoverer of the Cosm finish her research in time? Benford has managed to create some quite believable characters with believable interactions, then mix in a lot of theoretical physics without (in most cases) detracting from the story. After all, real physicists really do explain things to each other while scribbling on whiteboards or scraps of paper!

I found this book, its characters and the action much more interesting and believable than some of Benford's other recent works (in the Galactic Center series), which were a bit "far out" for my taste, despite his writing skill.

David Brin, Brightness Reef, Bantam, 1995

The first book in a new Uplift trilogy, this one focuses on a planet where the refugees of six intelligent races have settled and have (mostly) come to terms with each other after a series of wars among them. Then a strange starship arrives and throws their delicate balance into turmoil.

Brin does a good job depicting non-humanoid aliens and their thought processes, and his characterisations of humans has improved over his earlier books.

Emma Bull, Falcon, Ace, 1989, reprinted July 1996

Okay, so sometimes it takes me awhile to catch up with the writings of an author when I discover her well progressed into her career. Niki Falcon is a "gestalt pilot," able to pilot starships. He has an altered metabolism and an addiction to a drug that keeps him alive. Unfortunately, this combination will cause him to die young, as have all the

other gestalt pilots. Meanwhile he is trying to save a planet from destruction. Can he also find a way to save himself?

Finity's End, by C.J. Cherryh, 1997

Set in the universe of *Cyteen* and *Downbelow Station*, this book follows a young man, Fletcher, who was born on Pell station (during the Company Wars) to a crew member of the ship *Finity's End*. Fletcher grew up hating his family for what had happened to his mother, and was trying to build a life on Pell despite the restrictions of the rules imposed on him by station society. Now his family is back to claim him for the ship, and he doesn't want to go. After lashing out in a typically rebellious teenage fashion, Fletcher is forced aboard *Finity's End*, where he must adapt to life with a very different set of rules amidst a collection of cousins who are his age but whose apparent age is much younger.

The serious politics go on at much higher levels, as the Captain tries to defuse a renewal of the war and bring the independent merchants into agreements that can save all of their lives. Meanwhile, Fletcher is learning about himself and about loyalty, love and family ties. A powerful book, as I expect from Cherryh.

C.J. Cherryh, Inheritor, Daw, 1996

Third in the series begun with *Foreigner* and *Invader*. A young human male is the ambassador from one group of humans to the alien atevi. The humans have been trying not to transfer their technology to the atevi before they think the aliens are ready to receive it (also they need something to bargain with). Then another group of humans shows up from space, and the atevi are needed to build up their

technology level to enable the humans to build spacecraft to save themselves. The atevi, reasonably enough, want to make the best deal for themselves, so the politics gets complicated.

Cherryh manages to make many good points (about the dangers of making assumptions about other cultures, for example) without interfering with the story. Although this series has a lot of psychological musings in it, there's enough drama to keep the story moving along.

Did You Say Chicks?! edited by Esther Friesner, Baen, 1998

Following the success of *Chicks in Chainmail*, this collection of short stories romps all over the usual clichés of women warriors. This book features some of my favorite writers, including Elizabeth Moon, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Barbara Hambly and Margaret Ball, all of whom can turn out a truly hilarious story with a (pardon the pun) cutting edge of reality to it. (The other writers have done a great job, too.)

Mother of Winter, Barbara Hambly, Del Rey, 1996

Return to the world of Darwath (featured in the trilogy *The Time of the Dark*, *The Walls of Air*, and *The Armies of Daylight*), where Californians Gil Patterson (now a Guard) and Rudy Solis (now a wizard) are still fighting the Dark alongside the locals, who mostly don't appreciate them.

This is not a book to read with meals, unless you're trying to lose weight. The detailed descriptions of vile creatures, the creeping "slunch" (a porridge-like plant?), disease, death and destruction should really put you off your food. I can't remember if the earlier books were quite this disgusting, or if the characters were more interesting (and therefore I overlooked the disgusting bits) or what. I can't say I enjoyed this book, though I will say it is certainly well-written, with believable (and sometimes likeable)

characters (even if, for me, the circumstances weren't those I could relate to). I was, however, most interested to learn the secret of the Dark: what it was and why it was doing what it was doing; so I'm glad I read the book.

Nancy Kress, Oaths and Miracles, Roc, 1996

Not marketed as sf, this mystery "thriller" has a strong sf background (biotechnology). Her excellent writing, as you'd expect from the author of *Beggars in Spain*, *Beggars and Choosers*, etc., carried me through far more deaths than I like in a book.

A Game of Thrones, by George R.R. Martin, 1996

I probably wouldn't have read this book, except that Martin was at Thylacon and he's an interesting person to talk to; I know he writes exceptionally well, but he's one of many writers whom I admire but whose books (especially if fantasy) I'm not particularly interested in.

But I did read it, I enjoyed it thoroughly, and I've got the second volume. Most of the women are strong (though not always likeable); some of the girls are foolish (appropriate given their lack of experience); most of the men are arrogant and unpleasant (the exceptions are far more interesting). Although that summation sounds fairly typical of fantasy (especially of the pseudo-medieval "who'll inherit the crown" and "take back my birthright" variety), Martin does an exceptionally good job with his material. His characters are very believable, whether likeable or not.

Once a Hero, by Elizabeth Moon, Baen, 1997

Esmay Suiza was a young (and reluctant) hero in *Winning Colors*, who participated in a mutiny against traitorous superior officers and thereby won a major battle and saved a considerable number of lives. Unfortunately, since it was a mutiny, she has to answer to a

military court, which is necessarily hard on her. Having survived that, she is pressured to take further command-officer training, but she resists, telling herself that she doesn't have what it takes (though clearly she does).

It turns out that her past is haunting her, and she doesn't want to submit to psychological counseling to deal with it. Eventually we discover that much of what she's hiding is hidden even from her, because the childhood experience was so traumatic. Slowly the reality of those experiences is revealed to her (and to us) and she begins to work through the memories and take control of her life.

All of this is interwoven with a fast-paced, quite exciting story of space battles and life in *The Fleet*. Moon knows her military stuff as well as writing believable, well-rounded characters and detailed settings.

Elizabeth Moon, Remnant Population, Baen, 1996

I enjoy anything by Moon, and I particularly liked the idea of an elderly woman, who'd been pushed around by her family for some years (and by society for much longer than that), simply refusing to do what she was told. Then, after a period of Ofelia's happily being all by herself, this bunch of alien youngsters shows up and gets underfoot. Finally some older, wiser aliens turn up, and the humans come back, and guess who ends up being the go-between? As a "revenge" story with a difference, this one's great.

Nadya, by Pat Murphy, Tor, 1996

Nadya is a werewolf like her mother and father. In the 1830s, soon after reaching puberty, she is forced to flee the Missouri wilderness when her family's Christian neighbors kill her parents. (The fact that Nadya is a better shot with a rifle than most of the men in town, and she's a beautiful young woman who lusts after the young men, doesn't help. "Good" young

women of that day didn't let their sexual nature show, and being better at a "male" sport only made the men resentful.)

After her parents are killed, Nadya flees westward, wearing men's clothing. Somewhere on the great plains, she meets Elizabeth, who's been left behind by a wagon train when her father died. The two women continue their journey together, although Elizabeth believes Nadya is a young man named Nat. Elizabeth has no idea how to survive by herself, or even that it's possible for a woman to do so. They catch up with the wagon train, which has been attacked and burned; they find one survivor, a girl Jenny. Nat begins teaching them survival skills.

Before long, Nadya realizes that she is attracted to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth learns that Nat is female. Eventually they become lovers. The story of their trek across the plains, the Nevada desert and the infamous Donner Pass is also the story of the development of Elizabeth and Jenny as strong, capable people. However, as soon as they reach California and "civilization," Elizabeth reverts to being a "proper" churchgoing Christian woman. (Jenny, being younger and less indoctrinated, presumably changes less. A throwaway line in this book suggests the possibility of another book about Jenny's life.) Nadya, meanwhile, is distinctly unimpressed with Elizabeth's relatives (and most of the other people she meets), whose views on "Injuns" and women (and just about everything else) is rather at odds with Nadya's view of reality. She continues on towards Oregon, seeking someplace where she can be herself, not what others expect her to be.

The book is a good study of life in the mid-1800s, when women had mainly two roles (from men's point of view), Native Americans were "dirty Injuns," and just about everybody was considered inferior by white males. Murphy could probably have written at least as good a novel about those issues without having Nadya be a werewolf. I've read some criticism of

Murphy for doing so (along the lines of "what was the point?"), but I enjoyed that aspect of the book. For me, the werewolf connection, which I thought was quite well done, gave the added value of creating sympathy for the wolves; I think that would have been hard to do otherwise.

Ciara's Song, by Andre Norton and Lyn McConchie, Warner, 1998

The second Witch World novel by Lyn McConchie. Lyn is a fine storyteller and she's done a good job here. Ciara is a young girl when the witchhunters come to destroy her family, who carry the blood of the Old Race. She escapes by hiding in a cave and is rescued by a sympathetic neighbouring lord, who adopts her as his own daughter. Court intrigues and politics don't touch them as much where they live, but they cannot escape being caught up in the wars between those who would be the Duke of Kars. Years later Ciara marries her rescuer's son and produces some quite awful children who sneer at their parents and run off to be involved in a more interesting life in the city. This should sound familiar to anyone of the baby-boomer generation.

Two of the grandchildren, however, are quite okay (one isn't; he's even worse than his parents). Aisling and Keenan love their grandmother Ciara and the life away from the city, far from petty squabbles and bullying. Aisling has Ciara's gift of magic and is thus in danger from the witchhunters during any of their occasional periods of power and purges. Aisling is eventually called to perform a heroic deed to escape from her oldest brother, Kirion, whose ambition is not stopped by kinship bonds. This book makes a lot of good points about intra-family dynamics, both positive and negative.

One minor quibble: this otherwise fine story could be improved by some judicious copy-editing to correct Lyn's punctuation oddities.

The Last Continent, by Terry Pratchett, Doubleday, 1998

This is the first Terry Pratchett book that I've read all the way through. I've started reading several others and given up in the face of a type of humor that I just can't get into. I know he does a great job, but it isn't a style I enjoy. However, I kept going through this one because of the Australian connection and managed to enjoy it thoroughly despite the overwhelming insanity.

I certainly did a lot of laughing out loud while reading it. I'm not whether non-Australians will pick up enough of the references, but Australians ought to be rolling in the aisles with laughter. He's managed to parody a vast range of Australian cultural icons. Some silly things seemed so Australian: the town names of Didjabringabeeralong and Buggarup, for example. If they're not real town names, they ought to be! They even sound Australian.

The plot? Uh, there was a plot? Oh yeah, I suppose there was, but does it matter? When you're on a laugh-a-minute roll, who needs a plot? You'll either love it or hate it, depending on your taste - or possibly, as in my case, in spite of your taste in humor.

Splashdance Silver, Tansy Rayner Roberts, Bantam, 1998

This book won the inaugural George Turner prize for science fiction and fantasy. Roberts is a twenty-year-old from Tasmania. She is studying Classics and English at the University of Tasmania. The press release says she was "raised on a steady diet of Dr Who and British comedies" and it shows.

Roberts has written an amusing comic fantasy about pirates and politics, treasure and traitors. The tone of the book reminds one of Terry Pratchett's work, and she's done a very good job of it. She has a good turn of phrase, some clever ideas, and an interesting cast of characters to toss into what would otherwise be a fairly standard plot.

Kassa Dagersharp's pirate father is dead and she is heir to a vast silver treasure-trove, but she doesn't actually know where the treasure is, and she has to contend with a lot of other people trying to get their hands on it too. Will Kassa embrace her pirate side, or her witchy side, or succeed in becoming something else entirely?

Unfortunately, for me the novelty wore off (and the whole story started sounding repetitious) around page 100. Though possibly if I'd read it in smaller doses, it would have held up better. (I have a low tolerance for ludicrous situations, and I've found that some books are good for 15-minute bites on the bus; this is one of them. Other books suffer badly from being read in small doses.) Still, well-done humor sells, and this is certainly well done. I wish the writer well and look forward to reading her next book.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 1996

Sequel to *Red Mars* and *Green Mars*. I have been totally enthralled by the whole Mars series by Robinson, even though I could quibble with some of the long rambling passages, particularly in this book. The vision just sweeps me away, and I can so easily picture being there myself, in the groups he describes, doing the things they are doing.

Mage Heart and Fire Angels, by Jane Routley, Avon, 1996, 1998

Jane Routley is an Australian-born writer who divides her time between Australia and Denmark. Her first published novel is *Mage Heart*, a fine piece of feminist writing in the fantasy-verging-on-horror style. The first few pages, an excellent example of the narrative hook, almost had me giving up on the book because I don't enjoy reading stories about females tempted by demons. ("If that's what this book is about, I have better things to do with my time," I snarled in irritation.) Fortunately I was determined to read more, since

I've met Jane and various people such as Lucy Sussex say good things about her writing. I say "fortunately" because within another dozen pages the story became something I do very much enjoy reading. Dion is a girl with magical abilities generally considered beyond what females are able to do. Her (male) protector and teacher has died, and the college of mages isn't quite sure what to do with her.

Dion is hired to protect Kitten Avignon, the beautiful mistress of the Duke of Gallia against a necromancer who is stalking her. Dion is outraged, having been raised on a steady diet of prejudices about people and her own status ("What will people think if ...?" "My reputation will be ruined if..." "A proper woman wouldn't" And so on). At the same time, she must face society's view of what women can do and should do, most of which she has accepted despite her own exceptional abilities. As demonstrations of the sort of thinking that inhibits many capable women and causes sexual discrimination in our own society, these are fine books.

Once she is part of the court, Dion slowly unbends a bit, particularly when pursued by Andre, a dashing man who won't take "no" for an answer. She's simultaneously attracted to him and suspicious of his motives (though never dreaming the awful truth); her body wants him but her brain knows she shouldn't let him have his way (lest she be "ruined"). This is a familiar problem for teenaged females in a male-dominated society, and reminiscent of the '50s in the USA (possibly later in Australia?). I wouldn't have thought Jane was old enough to have lived through this sort of discrimination and personal angst, but the book rings very true to me.

You'll have to read the book to find out if the necromancer and his demon slave manage to get to Kitten, or if Andre manages to seduce Dion. The book ends with a dramatic magical battle that would go really well on screen – in fact, I

think the whole book would make a good TV series.

Obviously the hero, Dion, survives, because she's back in *Fire Angels*. She's left the court and is living in a small town near the border of Moria, her original home. Moria had been taken over some years before by a collection of fundamentalist religious fanatics who burn "witches" (Dion was in Gallia to escape them). Her boyfriend doesn't know she's the most powerful mage in the land, so he's quite condescending to her. One day two of her long-lost brothers show up, asking her to return to their home (despite the considerable danger) to save her sister, who has apparently been taken over by a demon. She goes with them (the boyfriend goes too) and ends up in the middle of a major political crisis. The Duke of Gallia wants to marry the heir to Moria and unite the lands, with himself as king.

Enter the Wanderers, a tribe of displaced people who seem to combine elements of gypsies and Australian Aboriginals. They are seen by most people as nothing but worthless, drunken layabouts, but actually have a rich culture and are the original inhabitants of a small area (now surrounded by Moria) that was – centuries before – destroyed by a freed demon and is now taken over by another necromancer and his enslaved demons. They want the Morian heir, the Lady Julia, to be crowned as Queen, as they know she will respect their rights and the claims to their homeland; the Duke is playing typical male power games and would happily sacrifice the Wanderers to his ambition.

Again we read a lot about the abilities and the appropriate role of women as Dion and Lady Julia work to conquer the real enemy, the necromancer and his demons. Despite the subject matter, I found this book (like the first) totally engrossing, and stayed up late to finish it.

Gibbon's Decline and Fall, by Sheri S. Tepper, Bantam, 1996

It is the year 2000 and fundamentalist religions (not all of them Christian) have made considerable gains in restricting the rights of women, fomenting race hatred, and increasing other restrictive practices that tend to concentrate power in the hands of a few. Those few appear to not be content to have power, but them seem to thrive on all the negativism.

One could be forgiven for thinking that it's a conspiracy... but of whom? Men? A small subset of men? One man and his (possibly unknowing) followers? Is someone (or a small group) behind all the nasty things that are happening? If so, who? And why? Can anyone stop it? Carolyn Crespin and six women friends from college days (one presumed dead) have some clues, but putting the clues together and finding a solution is quite a challenge.

This intriguing book combines elements of fantasy (but in a science-fictional way), conspiracy theory, mystery solving, science, and horror as it tackles feminism, fundamentalism, wider political and religious issues. As a feminist, I thoroughly appreciate books where the women win (preferably without tossing the whole male sex on the scrapheap while doing so), and I consider any book well written when it causes me to both gnash my teeth in rage at injustice, and cheer when someone does something I approve of in attempting to overcome that injustice.

Tepper appears to have a rather bleak view of life as we know it (witness many of her recent books), yet she always holds out hope, too... we can do something about our problems, insurmountable as they may seem. The solutions aren't easy or obvious, but they can be found... if we have the will to do so, rather than thinking that it's someone else's job. I'm interested in books that look at the common American habit of finding someone else to blame, rather than taking responsi-

bility for one's own actions (the most conspicuous example being a tendency to sue people over anything and everything negative that happens to you). Tepper's books frequently take a serious look at this situation, so I greatly appreciate them. This book is no exception. It's a good one.

The Family Tree, by Sheri S. Tepper, Avon, 1997

Another apocalyptic novel from Tepper. This time it's the trees taking over our world, springing up in yards and roadways, making space for those who treat them well and are polite to them, but less benign to others. Third and greater children in families simply disappear. Other weird stuff happens, scientific researchers are being killed, and someone is trying to derail any investigations.

In alternate chapters, we follow some people on a quest through a land that sounds oddly as if it's out of the Arabian Nights or some such. Strange things are happening in this world too, and it's apparent that there is some connection between the two worlds.

Eventually some people from both worlds meet, and I must admit that Tepper caught me completely off guard as to the true nature of one group. I hadn't caught any of her clues! Together the two groups work to solve the mystery and save the situation, though not easily. I really enjoyed and appreciated this book.

Promised Land, by Connie Willis and Cynthia Felice, Ace, 1997

Fast-paced, wacky and amusing, as I've come to expect from these accomplished authors. Delanna was sent off-planet to school by her mother after her father's death. Her mother hated the planet where she lived (Keramos) but (for reasons that slowly become clear as Delanna learns about the property and inheritance laws of Keramos) she apparently was unable to leave. Now Delanna's mother is dead and she has come to claim her inheritance,

sell the land, and go back to "civilization."

Delanna is outraged to discover that in order to sell her property, she must live on it for a year, and – far worse – that upon her mother's death she automatically became married to the heir to the adjoining farm.

Delanna is typical of many people with limited experience and a prejudice handed down from a parent: she sneers at the people living on Keramos, who don't have many of the comforts and gadgets that she takes for granted. She thinks they are ignorant hicks who are crazy to actually enjoy their barbaric lives. Worse, they gossip about everything on the shortwave, and they tease her constantly about mistakes she makes out of ignorance of local conditions. As for the inheritance laws – they are beyond belief.

Unwilling to give up her inheritance, she arranges for an appeal to be heard by the circuit court at its next visit (in about 6 weeks) and sets off for her property. On the long journey and after arrival, as she comes to grips with the harsh land and its people, and strives to keep her (illegally imported) pet scarab from being destroyed by the "rules are rules" quarantine veterinarian, many things happen that at first outrage her and then slowly cause her to see that there is a lot more to the people than is apparent at first glance. Most of them are good, likeable, hard-working, loyal, considerate and intelligent folks who happen to have some habits that she's not used to.

This is a fine example of one of the styles of writing that I most admire: a book that can be read as a humorous, fast-paced adventure, or as a thoughtful examination of human prejudices and friendships. It's the sort of book that I have to read at least twice: first for the adventure, and again to savour the human aspects.

Letters

Rena Yount
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August 1998

I found Paula Johanson's central point in "Immune System" to be oddly purist in terms of the past while willing to risk lives in the present. At least as well as I can understand her. The writing style of this excerpt is lively, and draws one in, but I did not find its ideas very clearly expressed.

She's saying that some people don't want to be immunized or have their children immunized against German measles because the vaccine was developed in Germany using cells from a fetus that may or may not have been deliberately aborted.

Possibly the fetal cells came from a miscarriage. But for people who consider abortion abhorrent, to use a vaccine developed in this ethically questionable way presents an agonizing dilemma. Johanson seems to be saying that this is a much more compelling issue in medical ethics than whether people may be subjected to compulsory AIDS testing at work.

I don't want to argue about whether deliberate abortion is in fact unethical. Assume that it at least may be. A couple of points still need to be made.

First: If medicine is being produced in an unethical way in the present, I agree that there is a serious question whether to use that medicine and thus become complicit in and financially reward the unethical behavior.

But vaccine against German measles has been around for decades, hasn't it? And there's no suggestion here of evidence that any fetus was aborted in order to develop a vaccine. The worst Johanson can say is that an abortion may have been performed decades ago – an action which, even if we agree it's unethical, cannot now be corrected. Because of that, we should allow people to become sick and some-

times die, and infants to be born deaf or blind, rather than use the "tainted" knowledge? Even if fetal cells are not now used to make the vaccine at all?

This strikes me as a bizarre ethical stance. Refusing the vaccine benefits no one and would have no impact on changing any unethical practice. It risks harm, not only to the person who refuses the vaccine, but to other unprotected persons who may be infected by the refuser. Where's the morality in that?

People who argue against using fetal cells for medical experiments generally warn that such use would tend to normalize and legitimize abortion, and even create an incentive for hospitals to encourage abortion. If there were no danger of such a general effect, then – even if abortion is wrong – there would be no more ethical argument against using fetal cells to make medicine than against doing an organ transplant from a person who was murdered or killed by a drunk driver. In each case, even if the death is wrongful, doctors rightfully proceed to save any other lives they can. Even if they also go out and lobby against abortion, or for stricter drunk-driving laws.

By no stretch of the imagination is being immunized against German measles going to encourage abortions. This is a total disconnect. Does not compute.

Second: It's not clear what Johanson, or her narrative character, is saying about AIDS testing at work. She seems to be saying that the whole field of medical ethics is such a complete mess that we can't even get close to trying to figure out AIDS testing. I disagree. This is a current issue that can cause harm to actual people now alive – loss of job, resulting loss of insurance (with drastic results), etc. Therefore, it's a valid and immediate ethical concern.

As far as I'm concerned, AIDS testing at work is not valid unless

(a) people may actually be in danger of being exposed to AIDS by an infected worker; and (b) that danger will not be adequately dealt with by the precautions that should be in place for ALL workers, given that some of them, sometime, are going to be carrying the HIV virus and not yet testing positive.

In other words, if there's a possibility that a dentist carrying AIDS may infect his/her clients, then ALL dentists need to be taking appropriate precautions. This will provide much better protection than relying on testing, which always has a percentage of false negatives.

Given these standards, I cannot think of any example of a job situation in which required testing would be valid.

Ron Salomon
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27 July 1998

Regarding peanuts and allergies, now when I was a youngen, we ain't never heard no such thing. But today is big business. Yesterday I took my (and Lori's) two boys to a local MacDonald's, where the cup containing the Big Guy's (10 yr. Old David) frozen yogurt gave almost as much notice ("Caution: May Contain Peanuts!") as their hot coffee cups proclaim all over "Hot Hot Please Don't Sue Us Again We Told You Already Hot."

{{I hope you're not suggesting that warning people about peanuts, or the possibility of traces of peanut, in food is inappropriate or unnecessary. The peanut warnings certainly might arise from companies' fears of being sued, but I would hope they'd also be a public health service. Quite often one can't predict whether processed foods contain nuts. That's not in quite the same league as warning people that coffee is hot. – JHW}}

Yvonne Rousseau
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5 July 1998

John (Foyster) resigned on 9 July (from his job). He already has a registered business name: "Foyster Fact and Fiction" – he intends to get a home modem, but since he's off to Malaysia on 11 July for another 7-week work-visit, I'm afraid it will be awhile ...

I also heard from

Lots of people. If you sent an electronic LoC, it's gone forever (unless you have a copy and want to send it to me again). If you sent a paper LoC, it's probably here somewhere and will turn up sometime in the next millennium. But I did read them as they came in, and enjoyed them, and encourage you to send more.

More about peanuts

Late in 1998 I saw several articles in newspapers about banning peanuts on airplanes, and I overheard some people joking about it. But as a person who has suffered considerably on airplanes when surrounded by peanut fumes, I'm glad that this problem is being taken seriously at last.

WeberWoman's Wrevenge is now on the Web!

Catch it at

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/wrevenge/>

You might also be interested in some of the other things on the site:

- Cybersnax: bite-sized, "humorous in hindsight" clippings about women, feminist and suffragist issues from the last 19th and early 20th century:

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/cybrsnax/>

- My Australia page:

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/oztralia/>

- Australian writers of science fiction and fantasy:

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/ozwriter/>

- Science fiction & fantasy book reviews; checklists of women writers of sf/f:

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/bookshop/>

- My professional pages and "The Technical Editors' Eyrie":

<http://www.wrevenge.com.au/>
