Gegenschein 82

Note the Change of Address - Eric Lindsay, PO Box 640, Airlie Beach, Qld 4802 Australia
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Gegenschein usually rambles on about trips I've taken to conventions (where the attendees rarely actually talk about science fiction, so it helps if you already know the fans). It also mentions a bunch of science fiction books I've read or received for review of late. This issue is short, late, and a change of address.

The paper version is formatted using Graham Freeman's Quikscript Postscript routine that runs on my Hewlett Packard LaserJet 5MP printer, not on a computer. This means I write the entire issue on any brand or model of computer, without a word processor and without desktop publishing products. Typeface is mostly 11 point Times Roman on 1.05 line leading.

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Getting Away From It All

I'm getting away from trains, planes and automobiles. After more than ten years, I leave work at the University on 17th July 1998, so no more trains to work!

With the Australian dollar down 20% or more against the US dollar, I'm not at all sure I can afford a US trip this year. Well, to be honest, I can afford the plane, and would like the trip, but I can't afford US hotel rates, especially during Comdex week. Jean and I are looking at a possible Xmas trip over there to see her parents, and then perhaps a visit to Florida, but there probably aren't any conventions on around Xmas and January (comments and crash space welcome).

Automobiles? No big deal there for me, since I haven't owned an automobile for over a decade. However Jean is contemplating getting rid of her car. Well, sometimes she is contemplating replacing her car with a panel van. But mostly neither of us know what will happen about cars.

I'm getting away from home, so note that there is a change of address to PO Box 640, Airlie Beach, Qld 4802. Jean has sold her house at Ryde, and I'll be renting out mine until we can organise to sell it. All former addresses and phone numbers are null and void. We have bought and had renovated an apartment at Airlie Beach, in North Queensland, and won't be within 1000 kilometres of any large city! Jean is already up there enjoying the view.

I'm getting away from telephones. A Pareto look at my phone bill reveals over 90% of my phone calls are to or from Jean. Since we will be at the same place, I therefore have far less than 10% of my former need for a telephone ... so why bother? Some of you already know of my absolute reluctance to ever use a telephone for anything, so that shouldn't be a surprise. I did buy a $1 mobile phone, on the lowest monthly rate (and ruinous call fees). I hardly ever switch it on, because I only bought it so I could call an ambulance in an emergency.

I'm getting away from media SF. The nearest cinema is on a remote island, or 100 kilometers away along the coast (note that I don't have a car ... or a boat). I was recently stuck for a while waiting for a train after a hospital visit, and checked the nearby shopping complex for lunch. I was surprised to find it now included a multi screen cinema complex ... and that they had absolutely no film I would have attended, even if they had been paying me to attend rather than the other way around. Coincidently, my TV broke, and I was devastated to discover that the only TV show I even briefly thought of wanting to watch was *Hercules*. If that is the best thing on, then it isn't worth having a TV.

I'm getting away from newspapers. I've increasingly noticed the least uninteresting things in the papers are the classified advertisements. Since I'm going to be remote from population centres, and will not have a regular salary, there is no point in reading even those in future.

I'm getting away from newsgroups on the net. The signal to noise ratio in the ones I've sampled of late makes continuing to check them simply not worth the effort. It is like going to a party and finding only fuggheads are attending (well, maybe there are some interesting people there ... but it is too hard to find them).

I'm getting away from email. I seem to have ended up on vast numbers of mailing lists, many from people selling products I have absolutely no intention of buying. While I've got free access, and good control of what gets automatically deleted without me seeing it, I'm not too worried. But I've no intention of logging in at trunk line rates and downloading hundreds of junk mail items each day just to get a few genuine messages.

On July 13 (or soon after) I'll be setting the system at eric@maths.uts.edu.au to bounce all email received for me. Since the system doing the email won't be attended to after I leave (and I'm moving its functions elsewhere), it may well not stay working

all that long after I leave in any case.

I'm getting away from the Internet. I rarely find much of interest to me on it in any case. The odd program to download, but the reliability and speed of connections in rural Australia is such that I'm not interested in spending a fortune in trunk call fees ... and I don't have a phone in any case.

I'm getting away from photocopying, and thus may be getting away from doing fanzines. My cozy arrangement at work of vast quantities of photocopies at cost is not very doable when I'm no longer at work. Airlie Beach is a tourist town ... cheap photocopying facilities are not exactly a strong point there. Doubtless I'll get out some sort of issue indicating future directions eventually, but it may not be soon.

I'm getting away from Wintel computers and Microsoft products. If I'm not working at computers, then I don't need to be compatible with the messy stuff being sold as a modern personal computer. I'm looking forward to using more robust and reliable systems like my Psion organiser exclusively.

Work

The long delayed "combining and restructuring" of the technical staff of mathematics and computing was still stalled when I left on holidays in 1997, and still prevents us hiring permanent replacement staff. The staff in Computing Science tell me this has been so for the past five years. I'd thought this idiocy had been only a few years.

One large change in July 1997 was the faculty advertised for a manager for the tech staff. Wonder of wonders, they actually offered a reasonable salary range, and (after the warm and fuzzy management ideals) actually wanted a technically competent person. I was very much afraid they would do neither, based on reports of the previous like position in Computing Science. On the other hand, in a fixed budget, an expensive Chief means two fewer Indians doing the actual work. The manager they selected worked at the University previously, and I think he will prove as good a choice as was possible, given that he will be expected to somehow make the restructuring work. Unfortunately, he didn't arrive until 1998, so yet again, nothing was done for months.

Since only Martin and I looked after computers in Mathematics, we had tended to ignore the entire thing, except when someone called a meeting about it. We both tried to put forward what I thought were sensible suggestions, despite considerable scepticism. However given that we never really knew what the point of the restructuring drive was, it seemed our suggestions didn't fit in with the actual aim (I assume there was some actual aim rather than change as random noise, although some managers seem to think random change is a Good Thing). I started collecting Dilbert cartoons that seemed relevant to the events unfolding. In this I was encouraged by Dilbert's boss looking very like the then Dean.

Personally I find meetings a frustrating and almost complete and utter waste of time and resources. I realise these days meetings are all about democracy and empowerment, rather than getting things done, but I sure don't want to put up with them. Especially meetings held periodically, where the only purpose seems to be to fill a slot in some schedule that says *regular meeting now*.

In discussions with the technical staff in Computer Science, it quickly became apparent that our two approaches to providing computer services were not only totally incompatible with each other, but even diametrically opposed. This difference is driven almost entirely by the disparity in resources between the schools. In my opinion this can't be changed without fundamental changes in funding, which do not appear to have been addressed, and which have been dismissed when either Martin or I raised them as an issue.

There were relatively few areas in which the Schools could cooperate, and those could mostly be handled on an informal basis. Martin and I took to inviting the SOCS (School of Computing Science) tech staff to our infrequent lab warming parties. That seems to be about the only thing we could think of doing to increase our contact and co-operation.

Towards the end of 1996, Martin took a ten week world trip, and I covered his job, with some difficulty, and mostly by benign neglect. During that time we couldn't find a temporary replacement with ten years computing experience at the paltry sum we were offering. (Sarcasm ahead) We were of course all shocked and surprised by this totally unexpected lack of available technical staff willing to work for slightly above a pittance.

Martin left for a better paying job (an 80% raise) in late March 1997, having warned the outgoing head of School he was intending to leave "around the start of the year" many months prior to that. I'd been looking (without success) for a potential replacement since mid 1996, when Martin had decided to leave.

At Jean's suggestion, I did find a replacement computer person around Xmas of 1996, as Gordon Lingard, an old friend and ex-fan was underemployed as a mathematics and computing tutor at another University. I also very much wanted a person sympathetic to the needs of the mathematics staff, and Gordon's degree and his Master's were both in Mathematics and Computing. My recollection was it took a fair bit of pressure at work to get him a place even for a few days a week. I wanted him there full time, to learn as much as possible of the work Martin had been doing before Martin left. I also wanted time for Gordon to get into the same sort of attitude that Martin and I had to the

work.

There was never any thought in my mind that Gordon would actually *replace* Martin, given Martin's long background experience and impressive capabilities. I didn't think that was possible, especially as even Martin wasn't keeping up with the work of running our traditional Unix systems, and converting to using Windows NT.

I thought the nature of the job needed changing, with Windows NT totally replacing Unix as the main supported operating system in the School. This wasn't something I wanted to do, but given the programs our staff were using, it was the sensible way to go. And it wasn't as if we were getting a replacement Unix system administrator when Martin left. I took to announcing that Unix was dead (much to the disgust of the technical staff of the School of Computing Science, where Unix was certainly needed).

I ended up attempting to cover the Unix side. Looking over my hours at work, I found in April 1997, I was leaving at 7:08, 9:53, 6:44, 6:53, 8:58, 8:54, 7:08, 6:52, 8:20, 8;19 etc. Considering I was starting around 7:15 a.m. I wasn't all that impressed with my nominal 35 hour week. So I declared that from May I was back to 35 hours. And I've (mostly, within about 20-30%) stuck to that, so many things are not being done. I started noting times again in August, and found I was alas working much longer yet again.

I've never minded working longer hours at busy periods, in the expectation of taking it easier when the crisis is over. However I'm not willing to treat every day in my working life as a crisis. If every day is full of crisis, it means you are either attempting too much, or don't have sufficient resources to do the work. Either one means you need a structural change.

Sydney University based Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training say workplace agreements for 12 hour days have jumped from 17% in 1994-95 to 23% in 1996-97, while the percentage of employees under workplace agreements has moved from 58% in 1995 to 64% in 1996. Bureau of Statistics say one third of all full time employees work more than 49 hours a week, and the average is 45 hours. If true, this is a pretty regressive step, in a country that once led the world in social conditions for workers. But I digress.

Displacing Unix proved a lot harder than I hoped, at least partly because no-one seemed to be willing to understand that the Unix systems really weren't being properly supported. It didn't help that Windows NT wasn't even close to having all the facilities we needed. Gordon was continually having to write little programs to get around problems in running it in the heavily restricted environment of the student laboratories (it basically worked fine as a print and file server for the unrestricted staff Windows 95 PCs). Since Gordon was also learning it all on the fly, that was a lot of work for him. I tried to keep everything else away from him so he did have time to experiment and learn.

I seemed to always be on the verge of going ballistic (or is the term "going postal" now?) at work. That I thought Unix far superior in terms of security and stability, and absolutely loath using Microsoft Windows because of its slow interface and buggy nature didn't help my attitude any while changing the systems.

When Jean wanted to buy an apartment far away I was more than agreeable to doing so, although at that time (June 1997) I didn't have any definite opinion about leaving work.

Other changes I've put through (to reduce my own work) have been to outsource the computer repairs, by getting all new computers with three year "return to base" warrantees. I've moved the email system off our local Unix systems. I've got rid of lpr printing facilities in Unix, and moved that to Windows NT. I've moved IP addressing over to DHCP, so no-one else has to understand the host files. I've moved the web site and anonymous ftp site off Unix to NT. And I've almost got everything set up to have the entire network wiring replaced by new, contractor installed Category 5 cable (for ten years I've installed and repaired every computer and network line in the School). I'm getting camera systems and keypad locks fitted to the student labs, so they can have 24 hour operation without any staff around. About the only things left are to actually shut down the Unix systems (which are still running in parallel), and move the domain name server over.

I managed to talk the new faculty manager into hiring a student for three days a week, with high hopes of having another one or two students to come for other days, to do all the first level computer support. Indeed, it has been much easier to get support than I expected (function of actually having some money available to throw at problems, I expect).

On 17th July 1998, I'm out of work! I just hope I haven't overlooked outsourcing anything that they need to have done.

Heart Report

Upon returning from holidays in December 1997 (reported in *Gegenschein 81*), I put in one day at work, and promptly had a heart attack. Given that I didn't have any risk factors (except for being male and over 50), I'm increasingly coming around to the view that stress at work was a causal factor. However that was enough of a shock that I decided I was getting out of that line of work. After I got out of hospital, I had a lot of time off work, or working part time, while I went through a rehabilitation (supervised exercise) course. This didn't really change the amount of work I was doing, since everything basically didn't get done until I got back.

I was back at work full time about a month, finally starting to catch up, when I had a relapse. I was heading home from work on the Thursday prior to Easter. I'd stayed back late to switch off all the systems (the power to the entire building was going off for changes to the wiring that holiday weekend), so I was walking home at about midnight. About three blocks into the walk, I found I couldn't make it home. I was on a lonely country road. Jean had borrowed my newly obtained mobile phone, purchased for the grand sum of $1 for just such emergencies (the battery in her phone had died). I took a nitroglycerine tablet, and after it took effect, slowed way down in my walking. I soon discovered that on any day I could walk about one block uphill, and then had to slow to a shamble, or take a tablet, or both. It was pretty clean that an artery was mostly blocked.

I saw the doctor at Nepean Hospital on Wednesday, and they put me in for an angiogram a month hence. On Thursday at work they told me they had a cancellation (I didn't ask why someone would cancel - I didn't want to know!) and to come in on Friday. A tube threaded into the heart area, and X ray opaque dye injected all while you watched it on a TV monitor. 95% blockage of the anterior coronary artery at one spot, plus a smaller blockage a short distance further down the same artery, so clear even I could see it. I had a bit of a delayed nauseous reaction to something (maybe the dye, or just delayed shock) later that evening, but it went away after ten minutes without me needing to call for help.

The most nerve wracking part was that Jean had sold her house unexpectedly quickly, and the moving van was due to delivery her goods and chattels to my place on Saturday morning. I eventually got home an hour or so before the van arrived, so I was able to let them in.

I got put on the month long waiting list for an angioplast at Westmead hospital. Nepean don't do them, because they don't have a standby cardiac team available. Went to work for the month, with a new set of tablets that let me walk short distances at a cautious pace, and didn't have any trouble. I did give up walking up the twelve flights of stairs to my office, and Jean took to driving me to and from the railway station.

The angioplast was mostly a repeat of the angiogram, but considerably longer. I was a bit more nervous about that, since when they inflate the balloon at the end of the catheter to push open the artery, they really are doing the equivalent of blocking the artery and giving you a heart attack. Luckily they are also pretty quick, and I didn't even have any discomfort. There was much discussion in the operating theatre of what size spring to put in my artery. As far as I could tell, they were getting their springs from old ballpoint pens, but I guess that is what you get when hospitals have to cut costs. I ended up with a 23 millimetre long metal stent inside me. I just hope it doesn't set off airport metal detectors (the operating theatre staff said it wouldn't ... but then I bet they say soothing things no matter what sort of stupid questions they get asked).

I hadn't realised initially that they left a tube in your thigh for four hours or so after the procedure. This is in case there are problems, and they need to rush you back to the operating theatre and redo the catheters. As a result of this and drugs to keep my blood from clotting, I leaked blood over things for hours, and couldn't have anything to eat. Eventually they ripped the tube out. At that point I figured I'd have a nurse hold my femoral artery closed, but instead they clamped me to the bed with what looked like a large G clamp liberated from a carpenter's shop. I guess it eventually worked, and they decided I could lay there flat on my back and eat dinner! Sigh! Still, it was pretty good considering the alternatives.

Craig Hilton's predictions (cover of *Gegenschein 81*) of how well heart conditions can now be treated, compared to a decade ago, are certainly coming true for me.

They kept me overnight, but let me go first thing in the morning. I'd been thinking of going straight in to work from hospital, but decided I was too tired that day, although I worked the next day. The following day I walked to the train station, then walked from the station to Nepean, and walked home from Springwood with several sacks of groceries, for a total of about 9 kilometres. I have about an 85% chance of not having a relapse, and I'm feeling great. I figure I'll be climbing my 12 flights of stairs two steps at a time within a month.

On Friday I was feeling good enough to carry a fridge upstairs! This may not have been the smartest move I've ever made, but didn't seem to cause any problems (Jean wasn't around to stop me).

Home Improvements

Maybe it is the influence of all the life style shows on TV, however while clearing out my mother's estate, I also starting to clean out the interior of my home (a job itself akin to Hercules cleaning out the stables of Augeas). A year or so ago I somehow decided we needed a generous home office space. This would apply particularly if we were working from home while in the Blue Mountains, or if Jean sold her home and were in transit elsewhere. There was also the thought that it would be nice to have space for visitors to stay in, rather than piles of moldering paper.

A local estate agent estimated what I should get selling the house, renting the whole house, or renting a portion. If I sell, I still need a place to live, and I'd have to get rid of a lot more stuff that seemed possible before I could move, so that didn't seem worth rushing into. Renting the whole house doesn't give all that splendid a rate of return, relative to the value of the house, and I still need a place for myself and my junk.

There was always the possibility of renting out just an area of my home. If I were out of work, renting some room would cover much of the upkeep on the home. If I were doing something fanciful, like taking longer trips, it would leave someone looking after the house. Or I might just be needing more money as I get closer to retirement age, and as jobs get scarcer. This seemed a reasonable dual purpose design aim.

So the requirements became space for a bed sitting room, access to the downstairs shower and toilet, a kitchen nook, and an office and living room area.

The obvious (and probably only) site for most of this was the unused but packed with stuff semi garage space downstairs. An L shaped area of some 40 square metres (430 square feet), with unfinished walls and ceiling. It has a front and a back window, and aluminium lift and tilt garage doors front and back, on a concrete slab ground floor.

I decided I wanted insulation in the ceiling, if only for the sake of my living room above. Luckily I had already started that in any case, and had sufficient fibreglass spare bats to complete it in mid 1997.

I like lots of light, but don't like the source visible, so I wanted lots of recessed fluorescent ceiling lights. The lighting shops told me recessed lights were industrial stuff only, and they didn't stock them. They would get them, at ruinous expense. I started looking for alternatives. I eventually made up wooden mounts into which normal domestic fluorescent battens would clip, with the tube up between the wooden beams of the house. I used a aluminium foil covered plastic as the reflectors, normally the same stuff is used to make the sides of skylights. I still have to fit mouldings around the edges and add diffusers, so that is something for much later.

I wanted a ceiling into which to place the lights (type of ceiling to be decided). I'm not impressed with gyprock plasterboard. I had some thin ply with a white vinyl surface (bought years before for some other purpose), but the four foot by eight foot sheets were too hard for one person to attach to the ceiling. I cut them into strips the width of the rafters, and attached them with $1 plastic mouldings hiding the edges. What with interruptions for tiling and so on, it took a couple of months to get started. I have no idea how long it will take to complete, but the result so far look very like an office.

I wanted a tile floor for ease of maintenance and sturdiness, while being somewhat more upmarket than painted concrete (not that I'd gotten around to painting it all - at least, not all the same colour). Removing the concrete paving paint took an afternoon with a machine hired for $390. The operator told me the water cooled diamond cutting plate cost $1200. Considering it was petrol driven, it wasn't even all that noisy. Cleaning up the slurry of abraded paint and concrete took the rest of an afternoon, and the next morning.

Having tiled the foyer (badly), I hired a tiler to do the actual tiling. It took him nearly as long to get around to it as I would have taken. Luckily, time wasn't a consideration.

The 26 foot long west facing wall is brick with engaged piers, so I needed a feature wall to cover that, with insulation since that was exposed to excessive heat in summer. Having used left over fibreglass insulation for the ceiling, I didn't want any more exposure to that, so I found a place that sold woolen insulation. Putting up the battens to hold stuff in place has taken a couple of days spread over many months, in between all the other stuff.

At around this time I discovered I didn't have enough of any one pattern of plywood wall panels to complete the wall, so it is about 5/6th complete. Real Soon Now I'll find another two sheets of a similar panel board (I suppose it would help if I actually started looking for it).

The other brick interior walls are done with light face bricks, so being lazy I figured I could leave them as they were. Kitchen plumbing was an item I figured I'd mostly leave for a plumber, but at least the distances were short.

I still hadn't completed all this when Jean and I decided to head off for Airlie Beach. However, just having the space actually empty proved real handy for garage sales, and even more so when Jean's stuff all arrived, and when we were packing all our books for the move to Airlie Beach. I'm no longer sure I'll ever get the place converted into two living areas, but I guess if we have to move back to Sydney for work, then we will quickly decide to get it done by someone who knows what they are doing.

Book Reviews

War of the Worlds: Global Despatches edited by Kevin J Anderson

Bantam Spectra, June 1997, 339pp, US$6.50
Some of the best of today's SF authors write their own short stories about encounters with the Martians of H G Wells' *War of the Worlds*. However, each writes in the style of a another person. So we have Gregory Benford and David Brin writing in the style of Jules Verne, Barbary Hambly writing as Rudyard Kipling, Connie Willis doing Emily Dickinson, Robert Silverberg writing as Henry James, etc.. I don't think I've had so much fun with a literary joke in ages.

Centuries by A A Attanasio

New English Library, 1997, 437pp, A$14.95
A novel covering the next millennium, grand sweeping vistas, and a world changed beyond our recognition, but the humans stay very much as we are.

Ring by Stephen Baxter

HarperCollins, 1996, 437pp, A$12.95
Set in the same sequence as *Raft*, *Timelike Infinity* and *Flux*. An expedition sets out on a five million year journey into the future to discover who or what is killing off the stars, and to bring that information back to earth. However even the Xeelee, owners of the Universe, can't stop the death of stars. Wonderful concepts on an ever increasing scale make this a true Sense of Wonder hard science fiction novel. Try it.

Voyage by Stephen Baxter

HarperCollins, Nov 1997, 772pp, US$6.99
An alternate history, diverging with Kennedy surviving the assassination attempt, and remaining a background figure pushing for a manned Mars flight. This is minor however. The main action is following the politics and history of NASA, as they attempt to divert the Apollo program into a push to Mars. If this had been written as present day history, I'm sure Baxter would be sued. A wonderful accurate nuts and bolts novel, especially for anyone who has followed the US space program.

The White Abacus by Damien Broderick

Avon, March 1997, 342pp, US$12.50
In a world of sophisticated humans, and self contained mobile augmented intelligences, two such beings investigate the suspicious death of Telmah's father on an asteroid world that deliberately rejects many aspects of the more advanced societies around them. Great fun, some grand concepts lightly raised, used and discarded. If you see a passing plot resemblance to *Hamlet* you may be right. I think we are fortunate to have writers like Broderick in Australia, to show that clever and stylish books can be entertaining and fun.

Zones by Damien Broderick and Rory Barnes

MoonStone (Harper Collins), 1997, 222pp
Teenage science fiction. A bright teenager gets phone calls from the future, well, maybe one possible future. But meanwhile she has a life to live, and all manner of personal complications in that life. Seemed pretty well done to me, although I'm not the target audience. Better, and more adult, than many "adult" sf novels.

3001 - The Final Odyssey by Arthur C Clarke

Voyager (HarperCollins), 1997, 273pp, A$12.95
The body of Frank Poole (the astronaut lost in space when Hal went crazy in 2001) is recovered and revived. Tour of the wonders of 3001, and explanation for the black monoliths. Nicely done, well researched conclusion to the work.

Alien Impact by Michael Craft

St Martin's (Macmillan), Feb 1998, 322pp, A$12.95 US$6.99
UFOs, chariots of the gods, Men in Black, BigFoot, and conspiracies. A comprehensive list of anecdotes, with references. Forteans might enjoy it (although they may know all of it already)).

The Man Who Melted by Jack Dann

Harper Collins, 1998, 220pp, A$12.95
Apparently based on a 1984 hardcover from Bluejay in the USA. This edition has a Nick Stathopoulos cover that is doubtless even more stunning in the original.

The Dragon, The Earl, and the Troll by Gordon R Dickson

Ace, January 1996, 442pp, US$5.99
Another Dragon Knight adventure, with treason, the Dark Powers, trolls laying siege to the castle, and Sir James needing to take his final magic exams. Good fun.

Diaspora by Greg Egan

Millennium, 1997, 295pp, A$15.95
Well priced trade paperback release of another fine hard SF speculative novel. Egan's futures are believable extrapolations of a continued trend of scientific progress. Fleshers are true humans, Gleisner robots are human brains within machines, while supercomputing polises contain the personalities of billions of humans and new artificial personalities. This is the story of one such artificial personality in its interactions with another race, and with a threat that leads to an enormous expansion and dispersal of the polises. A fascinating work.

Star Wars, The Magic of Myth by Mary Henderson

Bantam (Transworld), February 1998, 214pp, A$45 paper A$79.95 hardcover
A wonderful range of colour photos, in this companion volume to the exhibition at the national Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institute, and compiled by the curator there. Star Wars fans will love this book, despite the expense. It also

introduces the ideas of Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, whose work heavily influenced Lucas.

River of Dust by Alexander Jablokov
AvoNova (Transworld), Sept 1997, 326pp, US$5.99 A$12.95
A family involved in revolutionary political struggles and intrigue on Mars a few centuries hence, when the planet is more than just a frontier. Well written, and very involving, for those who want adult SF.

Perseus Spur by Julian May
Voyager (Harper Collins), January 1998, 310pp, A$35
First part of the Rampart Worlds. Fast paced adventure story takes the black sheep outcast of a merchant family in a quest to rescue his sister from what may be an alien plot to take over many worlds. Easy to read, lots of action, some fun with characters and situations linked to popular 20th century culture, but what makes this sf instead of a fantasy, or a detective story? Nothing I can see, and I don't believe including a spaceship and other planets automatically makes a story sf.

Automated Alice by Jeff Noon
Corgi (Transworld), Jan 1998, 252pp, A$16.95
A worthy (and more than passing strange) sequel to the two original Lewis Carroll *Alice in Wonderland* novels, complete with termite computers. Entertaining, especially for children and adults who enjoyed (and remember) the originals.

Feet of Clay by Terry Pratchett
Corgi (Transworld), July 1997, 415pp, A$14.95
An assassination attempt is nothing new to Commander Vimes of the City Watch, but when werewolves have pre-lunar tension, and the dwarf bread museum has break ins, and golems keep getting into the act, you just never know what will happen. Another great tale of Ankh Morpork ... and I'm sure it is only coincidence that the police chief reminds me of our current police chief in this city.

Soul Music by Terry Pratchett
Corgi (Transworld), February 1998, 128pp, A$24.95
Large format (badly) illustrated screenplay of the very entertaining novel. The lines still read just as funny, whether illustrated or not. I hope someone will perform it somewhere I can attend.

Sprout Mask Replica by Robert Rankin
Corgi (Transworld), March 1998, 351pp, A$14.95
Religious fantasy (about sprouts). I don't enjoy Rankin's work.

The Mageborn Traitor by Melanie Rawn
Pan (Macmillan), May 1998, 758pp, A$15.95
Volume 2 of Exiles magic fantasy trilogy, revival of magic, hidden enemy.

The Golden Key by Melanie Rawn, Jennifer Robertson
Pan Macmillan, Sept 1997, 1074pp, A$16.95
Gigantic fantasy with magic paintings (haven't we seen these before), altered space time reality, etc.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow by Charles Sheffield
Bantam, January 1998, 422pp, A$13.95 US$5.99
Drake Merlin's wife dies of an incurable disease. He has her body frozen in the hope of a future cure. Then he follows her into the future, always failing to revive her, but resurrected time after time himself. The only way to win his love back is to continue until the very end of time. Makes Stapledon look like a short timer! Grand stuff.

In Death Ground by David Weber and Steve White
Baen, May 1997, 629pp, US$6.99 A$14.95
Not even a rewrite of *Starship Troopers* or maybe *Forever War*, rather yet another war in space series, but without the style, philosophy, character or any other redeeming feature. If you like lots of silly battle scenes, and tables of organisations, and lots of ships getting blown up, you will love it. Otherwise, avoid it. Doesn't have a conclusion, so there is obviously another equally boring sequel to come. Probably written to pay the rent.

More Than Honor, by David Weber, David Drake, S M Sterling
Baen, Jan 1998, 371pp, US$5.99 A$12.95
Three military writers each do a shorter piece in Honor Harrington's universe. All well done, for that sort of thing, with David Drake doing a military item, Sterling a political piece (set in Haven), and David Weber writing how an ancestor of Honor became the first person to meet a treecat. Good fun, if you like the parent series, but a little limited if you don't.

Letters of Comment

Sorry, but I fear these are all held over. Maybe I'll get to them if there is another issue, or I'll put them on a web site somewhere, sometime.

WAHF
Karen Herkes & Dietmar announce Tara Miriam Angeline Ott 9 Feb 1998, 3.76 kg.

Pamela Boal writes "Do be patient and give yourself time to recover ad look after yourself properly once you are recovered."

Peter Burns write "Hope you enjoy life away from the "big smoke" of Sydney.

Paul Collins says a French fan, francis.lustman@xlii.org Francis Lustman is seeking copies of some Australian SF anthologies.

Steve Green mentions "re details of your ancestors, Sprowston is now a suburb to the north of Norwich. North Walsham is a town about 15 miles nearer the coast. I can find no record of a North Walshaur, and that's an odd name for Norfolk. Could that also be Walsham?"

Teddy Harvia writes "Health is a gift you don't fully appreciate until you lose it. How does this affect your participation on the Aussiecon 3 committee? Worldcon pubs can add a lot of stress to your life."

Spike Parsons says "I've been travelling lately ... spreading the news of knowledge. This is what I do for Ernst & Young - research, share, shepherd knowledge. In the old days I was a librarian, but today I'm a knowledge stewart and my library is virtual."

David Russell writes "Choose small ones [hills to walk up] and rest halfway up 'em. The third issue of Andy Hooper's *The Jezail* has you as the editor of *Thyme* ... A small mistake but irritating to the **real** editor. Perhaps that's what caused Alan's benign cyst."

I had heaps of Xmas cards and Get Well cards, and wanted to mention the senders, and quote a few lines.
Alyson Abramowitz
Sally Beasley, Dave Luckett & Evan
Helena & Merv Binns
Lindsay & Kim Botten
Mary Copeland
Niall Doran (nice Tasmanian Tiger scene)
Jenny Edwards "travelling obviously isn't good for your health!"
jan howard finder "may the best of the past be the worst of the future"
Al Fitzpatrick
John & Diane Fox
Leanne Frahm
Futurian Society of Sydney
Mike & Susan Glicksohn "Sorry I missed you at Ditto"
Ian and Karen Pender-Gunn (who had a much worse year than me)
Michelle Hallett
Jo & Carey Handfield [picture of chicken - "Chicken soup is good for you ... it's no-one we know"]
Kathy & Reg Hardman [Get well soon .. or else we'll have to reboot you] "What a way to get a well deserved holiday"
Karen Herkes
John, Betty & Greg Hogan (our lawyers)
Marilyn Holt & Clifford Wind
Robin and Alicia Johnson [re email] "instant it isn't"
Betty & Graham Long
Adrienne Losin "successful transfer to a warmer climate"
Gary Louis (LACon 3 Exhibits head)
Lync & Clive Newall
Rev John Martin
Jeanne Mealy & John Stanley [didn't want to send a get well card ... didn't want you to get sick in the first place]
Warren & Christine Nichols
Lewis Morely and Marilyn Pride
Sarah Murray-White
Bob & Margaret Riep
David Russell
Lucy Schmiedler [Heard you were at home mending, can I send over some socks]
School of Mathematical Sciences
Gerald Smith & Womble
Tara & Ralph Smith
Dave Stirrup & Mary
Lucy Sussex & Julian Warner
Carolyn & Milton Weber
Lucy White (sent a photo of my mother)
Ben Yalow [sent a Shalom card ... first I've ever seen]

The Last Half Column

This zine was supposed to be done in January, then March, April ... but you get the idea. When it is actually being done is 2nd June, which leaves me one day to photocopy a few copies ... if the copier at work is actually working (it wasn't yesterday).

Jean and I leave for Tasmania for Thylacon (the Australian National SF Convention) on the 4th June, at about 4 a.m. I really do want to have some change of address details out by then. And I held on to vast numbers of my previous fanzines at home, all addressed and enveloped, in anticipation of adding this one and mailing largish packets of them all over the world. I now have this fear that if I don't have a zine, any zine, ready by Thylacon, then I won't get around to mailing those fanzines at all (some may say this would be a good thing). After all, it seems every time I start to catch up, I end up in hospital again, or end up doing so many things at work I don't have any energy for fanac.

I'm really looking forward to Thylacon. A great convention hotel, in a wonderful walking city (albeit a chilly area in the middle of winter). It even appears to be organised this time (not that it suffered from problems last time). It will probably also be my last chance to see many Australian fans before Aussiecon, a tribute to the tyranny of distance here.