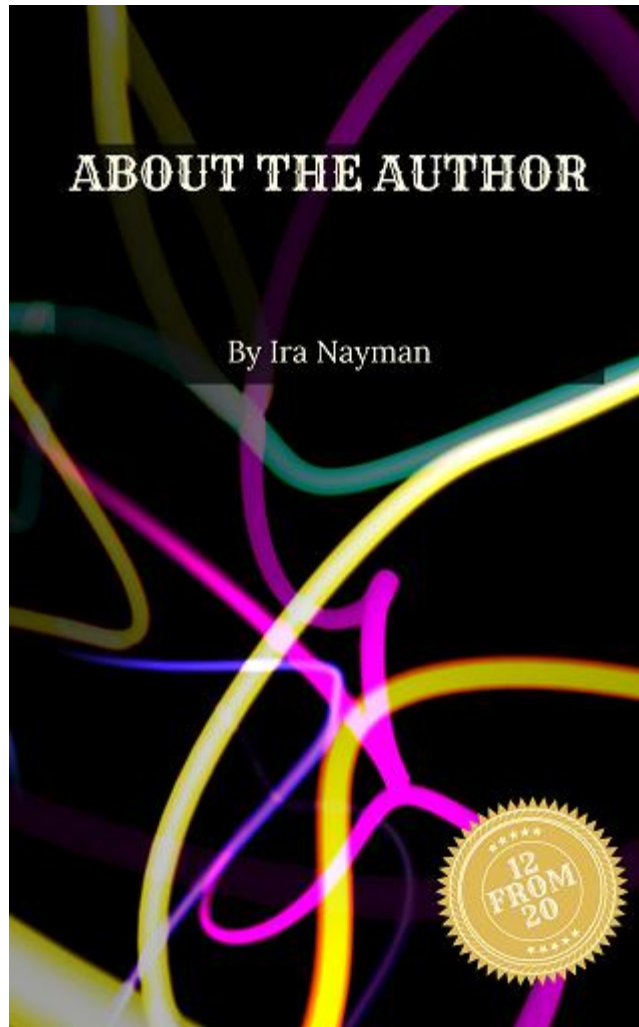




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Introduction

In the first week of September 2022, Les Pages aux Folles will turn 20. To celebrate this achievement, I will be publishing 12 ebook collections of articles from the two decades of the web site over the course of the year; this project is known as “12 from 20.” (For a brief overview of Les Pages aux Folles, see “The Back Story” at the end of this volume.) Each book will focus on a different feature of the web site. This month: I write about...the author.

I’m not a big fan of humour columns that delve into the minutiae of everyday life. For one thing, the actual humour in most of them is so gentle, it can make the flapping of a butterfly’s wings feel like a hurricane by comparison. For another thing, the minutiae of everyday life bores me when I live it; why would I want to read about somebody else’s experience working with uncooperative nail trimmers, searching for a parking space in a popular mall on Black Friday or the best method of squeezing watermelons to determine if they are fresh? Eyes. Getting. Heavy. Don’t. Know. If. I. Can. Stay – THUNK!

I don’t generally write about my life because I want to spare readers the tedium. You’re welcome.

However, when I started going to science fiction conventions and interacting with potentially readers, I quickly learned a valuable before lesson: before you can sell somebody a book, you need to sell them yourself. If you can engage somebody you meet for the first time by talking about yourself, they are much more likely to be interested in hearing about your books. (Being a recovering shy person, this was a hard lesson for me to put into practice, but it did force me to leave the shell at home, which has benefited me far beyond conventions.) So, I decided to write the <stress>occasional</stress> article about my life experience.

These articles fall into two general categories. A majority of them deal with my experience of fandom, both as a writer at conventions and as a member of the Klingon Assault Group (KAG), a *Star Trek* fan club, focusing particularly on the annual feasts that the club held in the Before Times. People writing about what happened to them at conventions is nothing new, of course, but I like to think I bring my own unique perception to the subject.

Con articles are usually heavily illustrated because, well, I love people in costumes. For one thing, a lot of time, energy and love goes into the creation of home-grown (as opposed to store bought, although I have nothing against them) costumes. For another, it speaks to the power of fiction that people get so swept up in it that they want to live inside our stories. (One of the items on my list of “Ways You Know You Have Made It” is that somebody goes to a con in a costume based on one of my characters. The items also include when my name is used as a crossword puzzle clue and when I receive my first death threat – it’s an eclectic list.) Of course, I shot many more images of costumes than I could possibly include in a short article. Partially because I’m of the “waste not, want not” club, but mostly to celebrate the gloriosity that is cosplay, I have put my photos, almost 4,000 of them, up on Flickr. You can find them here:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/72833254@N08/albums>.

The other group of articles deals with health issues. I have had to deal with: the diagnosis and treatment for sleep apnea; a triple bypass heart operation; and my allergies to cats causing my face to become its own special effect. (Yes, the last one was the scariest.) Why those specific life experiences? It could be that I was working out my anxieties about them through my writing (although, honestly, the thought of heart surgery, specifically, didn't really scare me). It could be that they were actually momentous events in my life, more important than washing the dishes or defleaing the cats, so I figured it was actually worth writing about. Or, it could be a combination of the two and other factors of which I am only dimly aware. Come on! If I knew everything there was to know about myself, I would be a self-help guru, not a comedy writer!

Recently, I have written about the progression of my father's Alzheimer's Disease. At the time I started, the dementia had already advanced quite far, so I didn't have to write about the early forgetfulness and paranoia; I could jump straight to the good stuff: increasing pantslessness and the indoor waterfall. Uhh good being relative.

I sometimes wonder if I am exploiting my father's illness for the amusement of others. One response would be that this is what comedians often do: take our worst experiences and make them entertaining for an audience (have I ever told you my story about playing tackle football in high school? If not, ask me about it some time...). In this way, we transform the pain into art, which, yes, can be cathartic, for the audience as well as ourselves.

But that doesn't answer the specific objection about my writing about father. In a sense, I'm not writing about my father: I'm writing about my experience with my father. I think this makes it fair game. There is, perhaps a more compelling argument to be made: people in our society are living longer, which means that there is an explosion of different forms of dementia in society. Yet, we are not ready to cope with this: you can wait years on a list before you get placed in an old age home (which, frankly, have their own horrors). As a result, more and more people are in the position of me and the other people who live with us of taking care of relatives with dementia.

Yet, you rarely hear discussions of this in the mainstream media. My hope is that, by writing about this subject, I will be able to connect with other caregivers of relatives with dementia, to show them that their experience is not unique. By using humour to do so, I might even help lift their burden for a short time by making them laugh. As I have written elsewhere (most notably in "Laughter is Always Appropriate," for Creative Screenwriting, which can be found in the non-fiction section of *Les Pages aux Folles*), laughter is a healing activity that releases endorphins into the brain. It is an all natural way of relieving stress, and dealing with the advancement of Alzheimer's in somebody you love is all stress all of the time.

Anyway.

You will likely find the writing of the articles in this volume a bit different from that of the other books in this series. To be sure, I use all of the comic devices that I use in my other writing. However. The purpose is not satirical mockery, it is more a wry, sometimes silly commentary on major events in my life. I hope my affection for my subjects comes through. I guess that makes it...uggh. Do you really need me to say it? That makes these articles...gentler than my usual writing.

In the end, I have argued that if I invite people to laugh at others, it's only fair that I also invite them to laugh at me. These articles my good faith effort at living up to that ideal.

Enjoy.

Ira Nayman
Toronto
January 31, 2022

ARTICLES

Frequently Unasked Questions

Frequently Unasked Questions

- 1) [Is *Les Pages aux Folles* available in print?](#)
- 2) [Can I take anything in this document seriously?](#)
- 3) [Will *Les Pages aux Folles* make my whites whiter and my brights brighter?](#)
- 4) [Are you a Communist?](#)
- 5) [What do I do if I find an error in a column?](#)
- 6) [Don't you ever read people's answers to What the Heck Do You Know?](#)
- 7) [Does anybody read people's answers to What the Heck Do You Know?](#)
- 8) [Hey! Did you answer question 4?](#)
- 9) [Do you smoke after sex?](#)
- 10) [Why is there no Java on your site?](#)
- 11) [Don't you want to be cutting edge?](#)
- 12) [Couldn't you at least have more graphics?](#)
- 13) [Aren't you willing to make any concessions to your readers?](#)
- 14) [Is Mr. Frump left-handed?](#)
- 15) [Whatever happened to Professor Blunderson?](#)
- 16) [What is that supposed to mean?](#)
- 17) [How do you sleep at night?](#)
- 18) [Does it matter?](#)

- 1) [Is *Les Pages aux Folles* available in print?](#)

Yes! The Lithuanian publisher Nordlinger Gdansk has produced a volume featuring the best of the columns from the 1980s. Unfortunately, the publisher went bankrupt in 1994

when it was discovered that Max Frisch, the proprietor and son of Antonio Frisch, was embezzling funds to feed a horrendous kilbassa habit. Copies of the now out of print book are said to be available in used bookstores in Smolensk and other Russian cities. Even if you can find one, though, be warned: the text has been translated into an obscure dialect of ancient Sumerian. The woodcuts of beheadings and other acts of violence are nice, though.

2) Can I take anything in this document seriously?

Well, I'm pretty sure there is a thing called *Les Pages aux Folles*...

3) Will *Les Pages aux Folles* make my whites whiter and my brights brighter?

No. But, it will make your breath minty fresh.

4) Are you a Communist?

You know, I don't get asked this question very often, so I'm glad you've brought it up, giving me the opportunity to clear the air on this point.

5) What do I do if I find an error in a column?

Les Pages aux Folles has instituted a complex system of dealing with reader complaints. Judges from South Korea, Togo and France are brought together to investigate the validity of the complaint. (A word of caution: be wary of the judge from France.) If they find that the complaint has merit, a correction and apology are published in the *Star Ledger and Fishwrap* in Topeka, Kansas.

6) Don't you ever read people's answers to What the Heck Do You Know?

I read one once, and was blind for three days. It's a biblical thing – I'm sure you understand.

7) Does anybody read people's answers to What the Heck Do You Know?

Absolutely. Representatives of my Internet Service Provider, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and hacker organization The Cult of the Dead Horse regularly read submitted What the Heck Do You Know responses. Another word of caution: if you have any reason to distrust any of these groups, I would think twice before submitting a completed survey.

8) Hey! Did you answer question 4?

I stand by what I wrote.

9) Do you smoke after sex?

I refuse to be lured into old jokes from the 1960s.

10) Why is there no Java on your site?

I don't drink coffee.

11) Don't you want to be cutting edge?

I'm a bleeder.

12) Couldn't you at least have more graphics?

This site is intended to provide brain candy. If you want eye candy, there are lots of places on the Internet that will happily oblige you. Choose your organ.

13) Aren't you willing to make any concessions to your readers?

Sure. I write in English, almost always in complete sentences.

14) Is Mr. Frump left-handed?

This is a serious question, one that has divided Les Pages aux Folleophiles for the better part of a decade. I do not understand the reason, frankly: surely, this an issue on which reasonable people can agree to disagree. In any case, I am happy to be able to lay this controversy to rest once and for all: there is no evidence in the canon to suggest that Mr. Frump is either left- or right-handed.

15) Whatever happened to Professor Blunderson?

Tenured professors don't disappear, they just flail away.

16) What is that supposed to mean?

If you had ever been a graduate student, you would understand.

17) How do you sleep at night?

On my side.

18) Does it matter?

Release yourself from the prison of desire.

Frequently Unasked Questions, v. 4

- 1) Didn't your mother teach you that it's wrong to make fun of people?
- 2) Isn't moral outrage passé?
- 3) What is your policy on correcting errors?
- 4) What is the real reason you have a Web site?
- 5) Are you some kind of freaky tree-hugging environmentalist?
- 6) Then, why is there an obvious pro-environmental streak in your writing?
- 7) Please, please, please tell me you don't code your Web pages by hand.
- 8) Why do you code by hand?
- 9) The column you wrote on, uhh...oh, dear, I don't know how to put this...women's, err, you know, private parts – well, why did you write that?
- 10) That's kind of mean, don't you think?
- 11) What makes you laugh?
- 12) Is there anything you won't make fun of?
- 13) No, really. Isn't there any subject too serious, perhaps too tragic for you to make fun of?
- 14) What about your loved ones? Surely, you wouldn't make fun of them?
- 15) What's your favourite movie?
- 16) In one Frequently Unasked Questions file, you claim that you started *Les Pages aux Folles* in 1985, but, in another file, you state that it started in the 19th century. Which is it?
- 17) Hmm...wouldn't it have been easier just to admit that you had made a mistake and let an error creep into a Frequently Unasked Questions file?
- 18) How do you determine how long to make your columns?

1) Didn't your mother teach you that it's wrong to make fun of people?

How can anything that feels so right be so wrong? It's only wrong if you're bad at it. If you're good at it, you get a newspaper column. If you're very good at it, you may be given guest host duties on a talk show. And, I'll thank you to leave my mother out of this.

2) Isn't moral outrage passé?

Outrage will be passé when human beings stop being outrageous.

3) What is your policy on correcting errors?

Don't ask, don't tell.

4) What is the real reason you have a Web site?

I want to be the first celebrity with a negative Q Factor.

5) Are you some kind of freaky tree-hugging environmentalist?

Are you kidding? I love nature...as long as I don't actually have to live in it.

6) Then, why is there an obvious pro-environmental streak in your writing?

I can't afford to pay for bottled oxygen.

7) Please, please, please tell me you don't code your Web pages by hand.

I could tell you that, but then our relationship would be based on a lie.

8) Why do you code by hand?

Because it feels so good when I stop.

9) The column you wrote on, uhh...oh, dear, I don't know how to put this...women's, err, you know, private parts – well, why did you write that?

Just to watch you squirm.

10) That's kind of mean, don't you think?

Satire is not for the squeamish.

11) What makes you laugh?

Lots of things. The idea that the media's coverage of the Washington sniper was "responsible" because – even though it was almost entirely filled with unsubstantiated rumour – the media held back on certain pieces of real information for a couple of days because the police asked them to. Farmers injecting cow udders with foam for diary shows to make them look like they'll produce more milk. (Haven't they heard of saline implants?) President George W. Bush talking off the cuff. Yes, the world truly is my playpen.

12) Is there anything you won't make fun of?

Don Cherry. I don't understand his popularity, but it scares me.

13) No, really. Isn't there any subject too serious, perhaps too tragic for you to make fun of?

Madonna's acting career.

14) What about your loved ones? Surely, you wouldn't make fun of them?

If you love something, satirize it. If it still talks to you, it loves you. If it threatens you with a defamation suit, it never did.

15) What's your favourite movie?

Oh, I'm sorry, but I'm **not** that kind of Web page.

16) In one Frequently Unasked Questions file, you claim that you started *Les Pages aux Folles* in 1985, but, in another file, you state that it started in the 19th century. Which is it?

Neither. *Les Pages aux Folles* was actually started by Theodore of Kacz, a Franciscan monk living in a monastery in southern Rumania, in 1237. In the five minutes of free time a day Fra Theodore had when he wasn't praying, copying ancient manuscripts by hand or stomping grapes in the winery, he wrote short humorous vignettes. The first of these – which probably took six months to write – made fun of an unnamed Abbott's large ears and fondness for donkeys. Historians believe that writing this material by poor candlelight late at night caused Fra Theodore's eyesight to fail, allowing errors to creep into his copies of the bible. The phrase "Moab is my washpot," for example, may actually have read, "Myrna, take out the water basin" before Fra Theodore transcribed it. In any case, his secret writings were copied by generations of monks who, let's face it, weren't overburdened with joy in their lives. In my travels through the Middle East in 1972, the franchise was sold to me by a freelance goatherd who claimed to be a descendent of Fra Theodore who had fallen on hard times. I know, I know. Still, stranger things have happened in the Middle East.

17) Hmm...wouldn't it have been easier just to admit that you had made a mistake and let an error creep into a Frequently Unasked Questions file?

In comedy, contradictions are not bugs, they're features.

18) How do you determine how long to make your columns?

I aim for an average length of 700 words. So, I simply write until I have filled my quota, and then

Frequently Unasked Questions, v. 6

[1\) I have never heard you denounce bloodthirsty Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein – why do you support him?](#)

[2\) How do you celebrate the Christmas holidays?](#)

[3\) Doesn't it bother you that you are building a career on the suffering of others?](#)

[4\) How do you make money?](#)

[5\) No, no. I meant: since you don't charge for your Web site, how do you make money from your writing?](#)

[6\) You don't seem to be doing any conceptual pieces any more. Have you given up on surrealism?](#)

[7\) Why does *Les Pages aux Folles* have so many origin stories?](#)

[8\) Do you ever feel uninspired?](#)

[9\) It's called writer's block –](#)

[10\) What do you do when you have it?](#)

[11\) What are you wearing right now?](#)

12) If I inject petaflops into the EMM386.EXE command line in my CONFIG.SYS file, will I risk changing the NOEMs switch to the ram switch?

13) Ha! I just made all the technical jargon up! It's absolute gobbledygook – totally meaningless! And, you didn't catch it. Call yourself a computer techie?

14) When is Toni Braxton gonna appear in one of your columns?

15) I don't really get a sense of who you are from your writing, and I think I would be able to relate to it better if I felt a connection to you. Why don't you write about your personal experiences more?

16) How can you justify engaging in frivolous activity like comedy writing when there is so much hatred and suffering in the world?

17) Since you think you're so smart about politics, why don't you run for public office?

18) Do you exploit the labourers who produce your columns?

19) Uhh, actually, I was wondering if you get enough sleep, or, maybe, are a little over-caffeinated.

1) I have never heard you denounce bloodthirsty Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein – why do you support him?

I have never heard you, dear reader, denounce cancer – why do you support it?

2) How do you celebrate the Christmas holidays?

I dance naked around a bank with a tree in the window for several hours until visions of *Harry Potter* videos dance in my head, at which point I sacrifice a small marsupial to the god of K-Mart's net annual profits.

3) Doesn't it bother you that you are building a career on the suffering of others?

Hey! I didn't create human greed and stupidity. Can I help it if human greed and stupidity give me job security?

4) How do you make money?

I assume I make money the way everybody else does: I find the most advanced photocopier available and –

5) No, no. I meant: since you don't charge for your Web site, how do you make money from your writing?

People actually make money from writing?

6) You don't seem to be doing any conceptual pieces any more. Have you given up on surrealism?

Ibfbot, op! J kvtu ibwf up cf jotqjsfe up xsjuf uibu ljoe pg bsujdmf, boe, mbufmz, J kvtu ibwfo'u cffo. Jotqjsfe. Up xsjuf uibu ljoe pg bsujdmf, J nfbo. Pi, qboubmppot!

7) Why does *Les Pages aux Folles* have so many origin stories?

My spiritual leader, GedRael, says that we should propagate new origin myths whenever the old ones get boring. This is the purpose of ClownAid, a corporation dedicated to cloning Bozo, Ronald McDonald and various other painted images of fun who, according to legend, came to Earth 25 million years ago and used dinosaurs as the butts of their jokes, causing the ancient creatures to go extinct from embarrassment. *Les Pages aux Folles* is an ongoing updating of the GedRaelian gospels, but that's not very impressive, since the same can be said of the McDonald's happy menu.

8) Do you ever feel uninspired?

Of course! We all have...you know...bad, uhh, periods when the words just don't...uhh, come. It's called writer's...writer's...something. If, like me, you're used to writing a lot, it can be really...uhh, really, kind of, well, hard. That's it. Hard.

9) It's called writer's block –

Yeah. That's it. Writer's block.

10) What do you do when you have it?

I put my computer on auto-pilot and hope the results aren't too embarrassing. So far, I've been pretty disappointed, but what can I do? The insatiable maw must be fed.

11) What are you wearing right now?

A Home Hardware t-shirt with Napanee on the front and Juicy Couture sweat pants that actually say "Juicy" on the ass. I'm channeling my inner Avril Lavigne. It's so not pretty.

12) If I inject petaflops into the EMM386.EXE command line in my CONFIG.SYS file, will I risk changing the NOEMs switch to the ram switch?

Uhh...yes?

13) Ha! I just made all the technical jargon up! It's absolute gobbledygook – totally meaningless! And, you didn't catch it. Call yourself a computer techie?

Uhh...no?

14) When is Toni Braxton gonna appear in one of your columns?

Sorry. I don't do requests.

15) I don't really get a sense of who you are from your writing, and I think I would be able to relate to it better if I felt a connection to you. Why don't you write about your personal experiences more?

Whenever I start to describe looking out of my kitchen window waiting for inspiration to hit, people threaten to dismember me with toothpicks.

16) How can you justify engaging in frivolous activity like comedy writing when there is so much hatred and suffering in the world?

Uhh...you think if I was suffering more the world would be a better place?

17) Since you think you're so smart about politics, why don't you run for public office?

Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. Those who can't teach become Premiers and Education Ministers in the Common Sense Revolution.

18) Do you exploit the labourers who produce your columns?

Absolutely not! If you are referring to the situation described in "When Elves Rebel," I can assure you that my professional relationship with the elves who toil on *Les Pages aux Folles* is well beyond what is required by international agreement. If you are talking about the workers in Uttar Pradesh referred to in the column "Constitutional Crisis? What Constitutional Crisis?" charges of exploitation have been declared utterly false by international labour tribunals that inspected our workshops, and we will take vigorous legal action against anybody who claims otherwise.

19) Uhh, actually, I was wondering if you get enough sleep, or, maybe, are a little over-caffeinated.

No comment.

Frequently Unasked Questions, v. 8

1) I notice that sometimes you don't use words correctly – a sentence will contain the word "there" instead of "they're," for example. Why is that?

2) How do you feel about punctuation inside quotation marks?

3) How do you feel about split infinitives?

4) What's your take on the use of plurals (ie: they) as a non-sexist alternative to singulars (usually he)?

5) You're awfully hard on American media. Isn't it true that that's just because none of them will employ you?

6) Do you have a sense of who reads your Web page?

7) You seem to have strong opinions. Isn't there anything about which you might have mixed emotions?

8) But, don't you believe that any press is good press?

- [9\) Who do you think will play you in the movie of your life?](#)
[10\) Really? He looks nothing like you, hasn't got your sense of humour and can barely act! What makes you think he will portray you?](#)
[11\) What have you been doing to promote the *Les Pages aux Folles* Web site?](#)
[12\) Did you know that the average length of a career in the National Football League is 3.2 years?](#)
[13\) Do you believe in free will?](#)
[14\) Don't you think laughter is cruel?](#)
[15\) Seriously. Would you laugh at disabled people or the poor?](#)
[16\) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?](#)
[17\) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?](#)
[18\) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?](#)
[19\) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?](#)
[20\) Okay, okay. You don't have to shout. I'm not deaf, you know. But, uhh, even if I buy the different versions argument, you've repeated the same question four times in this one version of the Frequently Unasked Questions file. What's up with that?](#)

1) I notice that sometimes you don't use words correctly – a sentence will contain the word “there” instead of “they're,” for example. Why is that?

My word processor has a spell check function, but not one that checks for grammar. As a result, crocodile insurance can sometimes go *ad hominem*. I obscurant requisite as frequently as I emaciate, but, being only one person, I can invertebrate trial so much. Still, you should be able to understand my meaning from context.

2) How do you feel about punctuation inside quotation marks?

Awful, but my therapist tells me I am making progress, and it's only a matter of time before I can hold my head up high in polite society again.

3) How do you feel about split infinitives?

I'm proud of the fact that I've never been a respondent in the break-up of any sentences, have never, in fact, even so far as been called as a witness. (Which is just as well, because, if you ask me, some of those verbs can be highly irregular.)

4) What's your take on the use of plurals (ie: they) as a non-sexist alternative to singulars (usually he)?

Oh, I get it. Who do you think I am? Dave Fucking Berry?

5) You're awfully hard on American media. Isn't it true that that's just because none of them will employ you?

Well! How did you get so cynica – oh, right. Look at what you're reading.

6) Do you have a sense of who reads your Web page?

Yes, I know my three fans. But, I won't name them, since addiction to my writing seems like punishment enough.

7) You seem to have strong opinions. Isn't there anything about which you might have mixed emotions?

Yes. A positive review in *The National Post*.

8) But, don't you believe that any press is good press?

I'm an acquired taste. Like marshmallow schnapps or an Enya cover band – I doubt that I would appeal to their readers. Besides, *The Post* will spell my name wrong. I just know it will.

9) Who do you think will play you in the movie of your life?

Ben Affleck.

10) Really? He looks nothing like you, hasn't got your sense of humour and can barely act! What makes you think he will portray you?

That's show biz.

11) What have you been doing to promote the *Les Pages aux Folles* Web site?

Lots of things! For instance, I registered with the Pyjamas Jelly search engine. Their home page claims that they have "literally dozens of more or less satisfied users in a variety of countries," and I figure some of them must have a sense of humour. Probably. Maybe. I have also posted messages to boards on various related Web sites – I've gotten positive responses from the Outboard Motor Appreciation Society and, inexplicably, the board of a Chris Isaak fan page. Not only that, but I paid a guy named Vinnie the Two-by-four to say nice things about *Les Pages aux Folles* in chat rooms he goes to. If anybody listens to Vinnie (he works for me, so he said I don't have to call him Mister Two-by-four), that'll be the best five bucks I ever spent. If not, the joke's on Vinnie: the money's Canadian.

12) Did you know that the average length of a career in the National Football League is 3.2 years?

As a matter of fact, I did. Did you know that the average length of a career in underwater shark ballet is 3.2 seconds?

13) Do you believe in free will?

Who cares? I mean, once you're dead, whether or not you had to pay to have your will drawn up seems pretty irrelevant, doesn't it?

14) Don't you think laughter is cruel?

Only when it's not as a result of one of my jokes.

15) Seriously. Would you laugh at disabled people or the poor?

Of course not. That's what Conservative governments are for.

16) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?

To see if anybody's paying attention.

17) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?

It's the heat.

18) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?

Do I have to spell it out for you?

19) Why do you sometimes repeat questions with different answers in Frequently Unasked Questions?

For crying out loud! Have you never noticed the "v" in the title? Different versions, different answers – get it?

20) Okay, okay. You don't have to shout. I'm not deaf, you know. But, uhh, even if I buy the different versions argument, you've repeated the same question four times in this one version of the Frequently Unasked Questions file. What's up with that?

Oh, shut up.

Frequently Unasked Questions 10

- 1) Have you no respect for the dead? How could you make fun of former President Ronald Reagan days after he passed away?
- 2) Seriously. How would you like it if people spoke ill of you after you died?
- 3) Will you devote a What the Heck Do You Know? to liberal bashing the way you devoted one to conservative bashing?
- 4) Where did you learn how to use rollovers?
- 5) I'm thinking of trying to burn and shade various parts of images I create with my digital camera on my computer because I'm not getting the intensity or colour saturation I want in my photos. Should I spring for Adobe Photoshop, or is there a cheaper alternative?
- 6) Now that you're into graphics, will you be running pictures of cute little kitty cats?
- 7) Do you have access to stats that give you an idea of who your readers are?
- 8) You seem pretty sanguine for somebody who has so few readers.
- 9) Given your experience, have you ever considered turning your Web site into a porn shop?
- 10) But, you seem to have an aptitude for it.
- 11) Would you rather see your work in print or online?
- 12) Sure, but which would you prefer?
- 13) Are you ever tempted to repeat yourself?
- 14) No, but, seriously, you wrote columns 10 or 20 years ago that, with the change of a few names and dates, could be just as relevant today as they were when they were written. Aren't you ever tempted to do that?
- 15) Could your answers be any less helpful?

1) Have you no respect for the dead? How could you make fun of former President Ronald Reagan days after he passed away?

Actually, I wrote about Reagan the day I found out he died, but I take your point.

2) Seriously. How would you like it if people spoke ill of you after you died?

I'm of two minds about that. On the one hand, as an atheist, I don't think I'll be in a position to be concerned if people speak ill of me after I'm gone. On the other hand, if I am in a position to be concerned if people speak ill of me after I'm gone, I'll be so surprised that I am in that position that I won't have the mental energy to be concerned. Either way, it doesn't keep me up nights.

3) Will you devote a What the Heck Do You Know? to liberal bashing the way you devoted one to conservative bashing?

Doubt it. When I look at them with their big, puppy dog eyes, I realize that liberals are not only harmless, but actually ego-threateningly cloying. I'd be more than happy to take many of them to a vet to be put down, but I just don't have the heart to do it myself.

4) Where did you learn how to use rollovers?

Are you kidding? I don't roll over for anybody!

5) I'm thinking of trying to burn and shade various parts of images I create with my digital camera on my computer because I'm not getting the intensity or colour saturation I want in my photos. Should I spring for Adobe Photoshop, or is there a cheaper alternative?

Uh...sure.

6) Now that you're into graphics, will you be running pictures of cute little kitty cats?

Absolutely. When President Bush grows a third eye.

7) Do you have access to stats that give you an idea of who your readers are?

As a matter of fact, I do. In July, I had about 2000 unique visitors, 82.5 per cent of whom stayed for less than thirty seconds. I was thrilled. In June, 88 per cent of my unique visitors stayed for less than 30 seconds – clearly, this is progress.

One of the most frequently used search phrases that got readers to my site was “sexy cartoon babes;” another was “vaginas.” Clearly, people who are looking for porn are drawn to two articles on my site: “Sexy Cartoon Babes Rule the Web” and “If We Took Vaginas Seriously.” This would explain why they stay for such a short time: when they realize they aren't going to get explicit pictures of Betty Rubble's private parts, they quickly move on.

So, the typical reader of *Les Pages aux Folles* would appear to be a horny adolescent with a short attention span who is way too easily confused.

8) You seem pretty sanguine for somebody who has so few readers.

Are you kidding? Before I put my writing on the Web, I counted my readership in negative numbers!

9) Given your experience, have you ever considered turning your Web site into a porn shop?

Sure. Who hasn't? The problem is, I'm too lazy to hose down my computer screen every hour...or, for that matter, myself.

10) But, you seem to have an aptitude for it.

You're such a charmer.

11) Would you rather see your work in print or online?

The problem with the digital storage of information is that some bits are necessarily lost in the smplng and cmprsn stages. While this isn't obvious to the average reader,

experienced readers will notice it and complain bitterly. (Experienced readers are a peevish lot.) Thus, while the medium doesn't matter to most, those for whom it does matter would choose to read my work in print.

12) Sure, but which would you prefer?

I'm a dead trees kind of guy, myself.

13) Are you ever tempted to repeat yourself?

I'm a dead trees kind of guy, myself.

14) No, but, seriously, you wrote columns 10 or 20 years ago that, with the change of a few names and dates, could be just as relevant today as they were when they were written. Aren't you ever tempted to do that?

I'm a bleeder.

15) Could your answers be any less helpful?

Yes.

Health

Close Encounters of the Medical Kind

A friend of mine, Lana, and I have developed the custom of treating each other to a pair of movies on our birthdays. This year, when we met at the theatre to celebrate her birthday, she asked me if I was okay. I said I was, and we saw the first film. After, she suggested in the strongest possible terms that I go to the hospital, because there was something seriously wrong with my eyes. They were a little itchy, but I didn't think that was serious enough to require a hospital trip. To be sure, I went into the theatre's bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror.

There's no polite way to say this: I looked like Satan.

I have a round, bland face with a bushy goatee that contains more white hair than brown. Not especially memorable. The face that looked back at me in the bathroom mirror had blood red eyeballs. I'm not talking about the kind of streaks of red you get when you haven't slept in a long time; the whites of my eyes were pure red. They didn't glow, but they were scary enough.

We walked over to Mount Sinai hospital. Happy birthday, Lana.

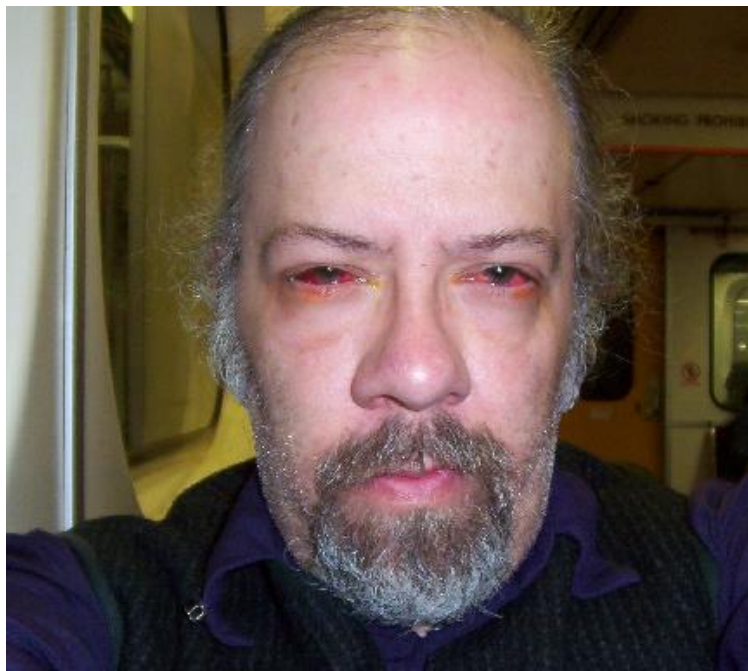
For those of you who haven't been in a hospital lately, before they let you into the intake ward, you have to wash your hands with a special lotion that dries on its own, and you have to wear a mask. I found the mask substantially stifled my breathing. After half an hour or so, Lana pointed out that I had put it on inside out. Unfortunately, correcting my mistake didn't make breathing through the mask any easier.

After completing the paperwork, there was nothing to do but sit and wait. Lana, who apparently is a big fan of operation shows, regaled me with stories of medical procedures. A couple of hours later, a young woman was signed in, flanked by two rather large police officers. Lana and I wondered what she had done. The three of them sat behind us, and I recall hearing her say something to the effect that "he" had been seen in the neighbourhood. Lana and I agreed that the police officers were there for her protection.

The excitement never ends. To get a breath of fresh air, we stood outside the doors to the ward where we could take off our masks. Lana made a joke about the wait to a nurse who was leaving at the end of her shift. The nurse was defensive, despite Lana's best efforts to explain that she was only joking. Some people take health care very seriously.

After about three hours, I was allowed into the emergency area proper. We thought I would be examined immediately, so Lana decided to wait in the intake area. When I got into the emergency area, however, I found that there were still half a dozen people ahead of me, and it might take hours before I was seen.

I went out to tell Lana to go home. The season finale of 24 was airing that evening, and I knew she was a big fan. Besides, I figured I had done enough to ruin her birthday celebration.



Portrait of the Author as a Young Satanist

In the emergency ward, there were two beds that were curtained off. Two people lay on gurneys in the halls. There were also people in examining rooms off the halls. I was given a chair next to the door of the room I would be examined in.

Behind one of the curtains lay an elderly man who would ask you in if you got too close to the opening in the curtain. From his conversation, I got the impression that he was a Jewish man, a Holocaust survivor who was ready to die, but really just wanted some company. When I walked by the opening in the curtain, I found myself staying along the far wall, the better not to be ensnared.

I always leave the house with reading material; today's selection was Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the three hours I waited alone to be seen by a doctor, I got through much of the short novella. One of the things I found was that one of my favourite lines in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* ("I see no method here") was almost a direct quote from the book. This is not a comment on my hospital experience, which had a definite method. As Freud truly said, sometimes a random quote from a famous novel is just a random quote from a famous novel.

In the end, I waited six hours for a 15 minute medical examination. The doctor suggested a couple of over the counter drugs that would clear up my condition in a few days – I didn't even need a prescription – and I was sent home. One of the tests involved putting a yellow liquid in my eyes, so the red eyes were rimmed with yellow. I can only wonder what people on the subway on my trip home must have thought.

Would I have liked to have been in and out of the hospital in half an hour? Sure. Would I like to find true love and a meaningful job without having to put any effort into either? Who wouldn't? However, this is the current state of health care in Ontario, and wishing won't change that. Besides, my choice wouldn't have been between a six hour wait and a 15 minute wait. If health care were privatized – a response some have suggested to the problem of long waiting periods – I wouldn't have been able to afford to be looked after. My choice would be between a six hour wait and not being seen at all. To me, that's no choice. I suspect, put that way, many people would feel the same.

Oh, and my problem? Conjunctivitis. The doctor who examined me said that it was the most extreme case she had ever seen. (I always was an overachiever.) It has two causes: a viral infection or an extreme allergic reaction. As it happens, I have an allergy to cats, and I was in a room with a cat the day before. The doctor suggested some eye drops and strong anti-allergy pills, and in a couple of days I was back to normal.

Now I'm just waiting for Halloween...

What Doesn't Kill Us

The thing you have to understand is that I've never been a big fan of literalizing metaphors.

A few months ago, a 15 year relationship I had had with a woman ended. It's not so much that she was an alcoholic, which by definition means that she lied about everything, up to and including her own existence. Ultimately, I had to accept the fact that she had no love for me; the fact that she was empty inside and had no love for anybody was cold comfort.

Around the same time, I began to get a tightness in my chest whenever I exerted myself. I went to see my family doctor, who suggested I get a stress test because there clearly was something wrong with my heart. The stress test revealed that, yes, indeed, my heart was literally broken.

I prefer the metaphoric version.

It took two months for me to see a heart specialist. This was taken by my family as a sign that I wasn't seriously ill; after all, if my condition was life-threatening, I would have been sent to see the specialist right away. Right? Well. The specialist scheduled me for an angiogram two days later, and told me I could have heart surgery done a week after that. Optimism is such a fragile thing.

My heart troubles have become an odd little bonding experience for my father, who had bypass surgery when he was 55, and I. For instance, I was told I would have to stay in the hospital for four to six hours after the angiogram. "Do you know why they keep you that long?" my father asked.

"To heal?" I naively responded.

"In case your artery collapses," my dad knowingly explained.

"Collapses?" I squeaked.

"They're putting a tube in you. When they take it out, well, if anything happens, it's best if you're in the hospital surrounded by medical people." There was a long silence, then my father helpfully added: "They didn't tell me that until after they performed the operation."

I WONDER WHY!

When I arrived at the hospital I was given a gown and booties to put on. The nurse pulled a curtain to give me some privacy, but on the other side of the enclosure was a window that looked down onto the lobby of the hospital two floors below. The blinds were almost entirely drawn, but only almost. Some day, I expect to see my sorry ass on some uphospital gown Web site. I hope customers cancel their subscriptions in embarrassment.

I couldn't find the opening to one of the booties. I thought it was broken. However, the next time the nurse came in, she opened it for me. Apparently, I was what was broken.

An angiogram involves puncturing a hole in your body, either in your femur or your underarm. The doctors involved used the term “puncture” several times. I felt like a tire that had run over a piece of glass on the road. To prep me for this operation, a nurse shaved me. I couldn’t help but notice that she shaved a wide area down my leg, a much larger area than the location of the operation. When I asked her about this, she had a one word answer: bandage.

It’s true. Taking the bandage off the back of my hand to remove the IV drip hurt more than the actual operation itself. (NOTE: you know in movies when a character pulls out his own IV drip and runs out of a hospital room? Wouldn’t ever happen. The hole from the IV would bleed like a son of a bitch. More proof, as if more proof was needed, that movies lie.)

While I was lying in my bed waiting for the operation, somebody who eerily resembled Luis de Funes walked into the hospital area and looked around. I found this more than a little unnerving. Madcap slapstick antics are funny as long as you’re not one of the people hooked up to an IV.

After several hours of waiting, I was wheeled into the operating room. The team consisted of my heart specialist, another doctor, a pair of nurses and somebody working the computers. At least, I assume the woman behind the console was working the computers. For all I knew, she was playing *Shadow of the Colossus*.

You have to be awake for the angiogram in case something unpleasant happens inside of you, so I was given a local anesthetic to freeze the area in which I was to be punctured. A good one, too. There was a little discomfort, a little pinching, then, over the surface of much of my leg, a warm tingling. When I asked the assistant doctor what that was, he told me, “That’s just blood.”

Damn good anesthetic.

Once the hole was made, a spaghetti-like tube was inserted into my groin. As you may know, men are sensitive about using the words “spaghetti” and “groin” in the same sentence. It’s just this fearless type of reporting that, if there is any justice in the world, will win me my first Pulitzer Prize.

Hovering over the bed was an x-ray machine that sent black and white images of the interior of my chest to a computer monitor. (And, thank goodness for that: I probably would have fainted if the images were in colour, which would have defeated the whole purpose of the local anesthetic.) There was a throbbing in the grey field – my heart? Periodically, the doctor would inject a radioactive dye into my chest through the tube which would momentarily illuminate different arteries so that he could see – wow, did I mention I could actually see my heart? Beating? In my chest?

The angiogram took about 45 minutes, then I was wheeled back to holding area, which contains 24 beds separated by curtains around a nurses’ station. A nurse clamped my leg

to the bed to stanch the bleeding. Literally, clamped it – I felt like some kid’s grade 12 shop assignment.

While the nurse was clamping my leg to the bed, my hospital gown rode up on me, exposing my genitals. Unfortunately, she hadn’t thought to close the curtain on my roomlet; after a couple of minutes, another nurse came and did so. In the meantime, I imagined seeing Japanese tourists gather outside my little space. At least, I hope I imagined it.

After an hour, the clamp was removed, replaced by a sandbag that read: “DO NOT REMOVE.” Do not remove? What? The sandbag? My leg? Keith Moon? Great! It did a lot of good for the Who drummer, didn’t it?

The angiogram revealed that I have four blockages in the arteries around my heart, which will require bypass surgery. At first, I felt like I had won some kind of competition: my father had had only three bypasses – I beat him! And, he was ten years older than I am now! Woo hoo! I will never understand male competitiveness.

Fortunately, this soon passed, and we were back to bonding. When I told him what the prognosis was, he explained how weak you get after bypass surgery (which I expected), and that the most pain you will feel from it was from your leg where they take the material to create the bypass (which I hadn’t expected). We went shopping for a new bed, one with adjustable head and legs, to make me more comfortable when...you know. Yeah, I’m not that clear on male bonding, either.

So. A week after the angiogram, I met with a heart surgeon who made it clear that they’re going to have to crack my chest open to fix my heart. Crack my chest open – like lobster tails. I have an image in my head of gourmet doctors in sterile bibs saying things like, “You know, I never can remember which wine is supposed to go with open heart surgery...”

And, all of a sudden, getting punctured doesn’t seem so bad...

Or Diet Trying

After I was diagnosed with heart disease, I asked the surgeon who would be doing my bypass operation if it could wait until the summer. He didn’t respond, “Well, it’s your funeral,” so I assumed it would be okay.

For some reason, neither my friends nor my family finds this amusing.

After the diagnosis, everybody immediately became a concerned expert on my diet. I don’t smoke. I don’t drink alcohol. I don’t take recreational drugs. And, now, apparently, I wasn’t going to be allowed to eat, either. Suddenly, my long-standing joke about living the life of a monk wasn’t nearly so amusing.

This was so not fair. My father didn't have to radically change his diet until he was 55, a good decade older than I am. Of course, he was motivated to change his diet by having a triple bypass operation on his heart, but still...

An example of how the people around me became food police might give you an idea of what I was up against. At our regular Friday night family dinner, my sister Lisa (still thinking there was an outside chance that I would live forever) limited me to one greasy onion ring. She didn't have the physical power to enforce her will; this was not prison, after all. (Hey! - if that's the way you see family interaction, that's your issue, isn't it?) She just gave me the "If you die, I will make you feel guilty for an eternity" look.

It's more effective than force. I only ate the one onion ring. While she was watching. A friend of mine suggested the family take up a collection to see a nutritionist. I am not making this up. I kind of wish I was. My parents kicked in \$100; my sister and friend pledged another \$50 each. I felt like a kid in a wheelchair at a Jerry Lewis telethon — those aren't tears of gratitude, friends, they're tears of humiliation.

I thought they were all wrong, of course. If there ever was a time to eat food that's bad for me, it's now. In a few months, an operation will help clean out my system; in the meantime, I've got a free pass to all the cheeseburgers and chili fries one man can eat!

The diet police pointed out that I had to survive to the operation. Loudly. Repeatedly. Honestly, there were more histrionics than in the final season of *Six Feet Under*. Okay, okay, I started eating more fruits and salads. I'm a sucker for Six Feet Under references.

Meanwhile, I had to get a prescription of heart medicine renewed; my heart specialist told me to talk to my family doctor. Looking over the heart specialist's notes, my family doctor told me that the heart disease was actually quite advanced, that it had obviously been developing for a long, long, time. Now you tell me! I'm halfway through teaching two courses, figuring I have the time, and now you get around to mentioning that my condition is serious?

I asked my family doctor what I could do about my condition, and he immediately prescribed pills to get rid of the "bad" cholesterol. (I have an image of cholesterol in a trench coat hanging around the entrance to an artery going, "Psst, kid. You want some fatty acids? I got some - very tasty. You look like a nice kid, so, I tell you what — first blockage is on the house!")

My cholesterol was 6.4. This didn't seem all that bad to me. Okay, it's a "c," which is only an average mark. But, it seemed minor when compared to my temperature (98.6) or my weight (none of your bloody business). As it happens, normal cholesterol levels are just over 2; scale is everything.

Already being on more drugs than I'm comfortable with, I ask him if maybe I could just change my diet. He says I should cut down on eggs (which I don't really eat) and red

meat (which we don't eat much in my household any more since my father's heart...troubles). Then, he tells me that changing my diet isn't going to do much.

No?

You see, son, there are two types of heart disease: dietary and hereditary. Dietary heart disease is caused by eating too much pickled herring, and can be substantially cured by eating less of what causes it (like.. .say.. .pickled herring). Hereditary heart disease, by way of contrast, is caused by choosing to be born to the wrong parents, and can only be cured by the most expensive interventions modern medicine can provide.

Wow. You know what this means.

I've got \$200 to party with!

The Agony and the, Uhh, More Agony

The doctor was giving me a hard time about not taking cholesterol lowering drugs, so I threw up on her. Her assistant didn't have time to say anything, but I threw up on him for good measure. And, that's about all I remember of my heart surgery.

Oh, the vomit was black. Deep black. "How much more black could it be? None. None more black" black. I was told that this indicates that there was blood in places in my body where it shouldn't have been. Fortunately, the human body is very good at getting rid of things that don't belong in it.

You may be wondering what a 45 year-old man is doing having heart surgery. Well, I had heard that there was a three for one sale on bypasses, and I could never refuse a bargain. (As it happened, I felt kind of gypped, though. When I had my angiogram, I was told that there were at least four serious blockages; I thought I was going to get a quadruple bypass. After the operation, I was told that the surgeon had only actually planned on two bypasses, but, since he was there and I was there and nobody had any plans for the evening, he did a third. Just another case of false advertising.)

The operation was simple enough. My heart was stopped and I was put on a machine that circulated blood through my body while I was under. Snip snip, then get the body started again. So, basically, I died and three hours later was brought back to life.

If anybody makes a big deal of this 2,000 years from now, it will mean they have learned nothing from what I have written, **and I will be very, very perturbed**. On the other hand...operations like this have become largely routine, certainly more common than 2,000 years ago, so competition for true believers is likely to be fierce. Don't let those heretic bastards get control, my brothers and sisters!

After the operation, I was a true cyborg, with wires and tubes sticking out of various parts of my body. Eat your heart out, Steve Mann! The most interesting of these were the two

metal wires sticking out of my chest that had direct contact with my heart. If my heartbeat became irregular after the operation, a pacemaker would be attached to the wires to regulate it. As it happened, this was not necessary, and a couple of days after the operation, the wires were pulled out of my chest with a quiet “schlump” any science fiction/horror movie fan would recognize.

When you’ve undergone serious physical trauma, or serious medical intervention, or whatever it was that happened to me, your body tends to loom large in your thinking for a long time afterwards. It’s a perspective I was not at all used to, I must admit. I wanted to get righteously indignant about the latest atrocities Israel was committing in Gaza – arresting a third of the Palestinian government seemed like an odd way of supporting democracy. On the other hand, I had a really tough time having a bowel movement after I got back home from the hospital. A really tough time.

Killing dozens of Palestinians because of the hostage-taking of one Israeli seemed to me to be a wildly disproportionate response...and, yet, as the days dragged on, I became concerned about not having a bowel movement. A friend told me that you can actually go about 20 days without a bowel movement without serious damage to your body – small comfort.

Then, he told me a story about a man who went 20 days without having a bowel movement. Doctors had to surgically remove the feces from his bowels. It weighed 25 pounds. According to my friend, the man died after the operation; his body had gotten used to having the feces in it, and having it removed so quickly was a big shock to his system. Smaller comfort.

Anyway, about the air strike on Beirut airport, I...I started regularly eating bran and multigrain bread the moment I left the hospital, but I didn’t have much of an appetite, so I wasn’t filling up very quickly. See, during a heart operation, your body is essentially shut down, and, I was told (by my dad – no point in blaming my friend for everything) that the stomach is slow to get back to work once the body has been restarted. The stomach must have a powerful union.

Anyway...four days and one suppository later, I finally, finally got some relief. As for the Israelis and the Palestinians, well, they’ll work out their shit. I worked out mine...

So, That Happened...

So, there I am, lying flat on my back on a skinny bed with railing on either side just in case I had any ideas of falling off. I am peeing into a grey, bio-degradable carton. Making it harder is the sandbag resting high on my right thigh, a reminder that I could bleed to death if I bend my leg. The nurse walks towards the door of the room, saying, “I’ll let you do that on your own...”

You lose all pretence of dignity when you’re a hospital patient.

I went to Branson because I was having shortness of breath and chest pains. “This is a clinic,” said the annoyed intake nurse. “Next time, call for an ambulance and go to a hospital!” By the time I was being wheeled out on a gurney to be taken by ambulance to a hospital, she had completely changed her tune. “This is a clinic,” she said gently, with compassion. “Next time, call for an ambulance and go to a hospital...”

When you’ve had a heart attack (so mild that I prefer to think of it as a “heart finger wagging”), the tone of your caretakers matters.

I was in Branson for less than an hour, long enough for the nurses to take an EEG and determine that something strange was going on with my heart. At one point, they thought they might take an X-ray of my chest. The doctor running the machine turned it on, but couldn’t get an image on the screen to aim the camera properly. He apologized, saying the equipment was 20 years old and he hadn’t trained on it. I jokingly suggested that if they had a tape measure, they could draw a line between the lens and a point on my chest above my heart, and, to my surprise, THE DOCTOR PULLED ONE OUT OF THE MACHINE!

I wasn’t destined to get a chest X-ray that weekend, but that was small potatoes. Soon, I would be on my way to the big show: an angiogram (not to be confused with actress Dickinson delivering a singing telegram)!

I had only been in an ambulance once before, and not as a patient, so this was a new experience for me. I noticed a clock on the inner wall read 9:40, which was odd because it was about four in the afternoon. But, the ambulance! – it was smaller than ambulances look on TV (which, apparently, adds 20 inches to the width of any enclosed space). I watched the city recede through the rear door windows, a kind of reverse city documentary film with AMBULANCE written backwards on the bottom of the screen.

When I looked back at the clock, it read 20 to 10. That was alright, the – wait a minute! Wait just a minute! The time hadn’t changed! Could I have entered some kind of *Twilight Zone* ambulance? You know what I’m talking about. The kind where you don’t want to ask, “How soon will we arrive at the hospital?” because you know the EMT in the back with you will state with inflectionless finality: “You are now in this ambulance, you have always been in this ambulance and you will always be in this ambulance!”

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t one of the show’s best episodes. Still, I don’t think I’ve ever been as happy to arrive at a hospital as I was that day!

The angiogram (not to be confused with the 1930s burlesque artist) was pretty much as I remembered: somebody poked a hole in my groin, pumped dyes into my system and watched what happened. It was still a thrill being able to watch a screen that showed a throbbing shadow that was my heart.

The palpitations I felt during the procedure were new. It didn’t help that one of the doctors said, “Your heart will palpitate a little,” a couple of seconds after it happened.

Then, a wave of heat started in my groin and pulsed up my body and out of my mouth. Seriously. It felt as though my soul was being sucked out of my body, just like at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Arc*, except without the Maraschino cherry on top. “You’ll feel a little hot,” the doctor told me after it happened.

Science: ever helpful.

WORDS YOU DON’T WANT TO HEAR COME OUT OF THE MOUTH OF A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL: “Oh, that’s interesting.” WORDS YOU DON’T WANT TO HEAR COME OUT OF THE MOUTH OF A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL, ALTERNATE VERSION: “Come and take a look at this. I think you’ll find it interesting...” Of course, I heard both during the testing phase of my hospital stay, which made me want to respond, “YOU’RE NOT INSTILLING CONFIDENCE IN THE PATIENT, HERE!”

I didn’t say that, of course; I was still clinging to the illusion of dignity.

After the angiogram (not to be confused with the lump of flesh taken from the subject of a Rolling Stones song) and other tests, I was transferred to Toronto General Hospital, where a treatment was to be found for me. I know I can overstay my welcome at places, but still...

Each of the hospitals fitted me up with their own sets of medical gadgetry; by the end of my weekend stay, I had two IV drips and three sets of heart monitoring pads. My last nurse at Toronto General took off the pads they had put on me, looked at the other sets and said: “When you take a shower, those will come off more easily.” So, for a couple of days after my hospital stay, I had eight extra useless nipples.

During my three days in hospital, I did manage to lose a pound...of hair from the various adhesive objects ripped from my body. Still chest stubble is sexy, right? RIGHT?

It’s funny. For the last couple of years, I was hoping my father would stay alive long enough to watch me enjoy a little literary success. Now, I hope that I will stay alive long enough to enjoy a little literary success. Sorry, funny isn’t the right word. What would the right word be? Oh, yeah: sad.

Okay, this is funny: I was taking mental notes of what was happening to me so I could write about it afterwards. Who does that? Okay, funny might not be the right word for this, either. What’s the word I’m looking for? Oh, yeah: demented. Or, alternately: writerly.

Sure, the heart attack (so mild that I prefer to think of it as a “heart chiding”) happened on Friday the 13th, but I prefer not to see it as an omen of bad luck. I prefer to see it as a late birthday present from the universe.

You could almost call me an optimist...

My Night as a Cyborg

My relationship to sleep has always been fraught. On good days, I would wake up and brightly ask, “Oh, what fresh new hell does this day have in store for me?” On bad days, I would wake up and darkly ask, “Blaaargh arrgle rowf rowf ugh!”

I muddled through, as we all do.

Until one day when my cardiologist said, “You know, not being able to sleep puts stress on your heart.” When I blinked at him, he added: “That’s not good.” (In my defence, I would have come to that conclusion on my own if he had just given me a little more time.) Before I could say anything, the heart specialist had booked an appointment for me to get tested at a sleep clinic.

I had heard about proactive medical intervention, but I never thought it would happen to me!

The test involved being hooked up to a machine at various (highly uninteresting) parts of my body and sleeping. First, a green goo that looked suspiciously like a certain nasal effluent was slathered all over the place where an electrode would be taped to my body (I was told that it dried the skin, making it easier to tape the electrode to my body, and it served as a disinfectant, which, frankly, was more information than I needed – what? You thought I was an infection fetishist?). Nobody mentioned that the green goo itched like crazy, but, then, nobody would, would they?

Then, an electrode was taped to my body. (What? You thought I was a green goo fetishist? That’s just sick!)

There were over 20, so it took roughly half an hour to get fully hooked up; I have a lot more respect for actors who perform in heavy makeup and/or do motion capture now!

Adjacent to the sleeping area (think James Duvall’s room in *THX 1138*, but without the cat poster fridge magnet or charm) was a bathroom which included a shower that I was to use to get all of the green goo off my body before I went home. The shower may have succeeded in degooifying me, too, but my hair still felt besnotted days later.



*Portrait of the not so young artist as a cyborg. For once, I was ahead of the technological curve! Kevin Kelly and Nicholas Negroponte eat your hearts out – **this** is what it means to be truly wired! And, the best part? Ads for Johnny Depp's concurrent film *Transcendence* showed the actor with wires coming out of his head, too – we're practically twins!*

There were some problems with the procedure. For one thing, I usually go to sleep at three or four in the morning and wake up at noon, but, for this test, I had to go to sleep at ten in the evening and wake up at five in the morning. How uncivilized! For another thing, some of the wires were connected to my chest (to monitor my lungs and heart – kind of important, as it turned out), so I was advised not to sleep on my stomach in order not to disrupt the connections. Unfortunately, I only sleep on my stomach (and, I sort of kind of did during the test...a little, even though I was told not to – I'm such a rebel!). As a result, my evening in the clinic was made up mostly of tossing and turning and very unrestful sleep.

It figures. Only I could manage to fail a sleep test!

The whole experience was surreal. I had a dream that I was sitting at the table in my kitchen, aware that I was having a dream while sleeping in a strange bed. I kept repeating over and over again: "Let this be real! Let this be real! Let this be real!" And, that was the

night. One moment, I was tossing and turning, the next having a dream, the next being woken up. I don't actually have any sense of, you know, sleeping. (In fact, I probably slept more on the bus ride home than I did in the sleep clinic.) I must have slept, though, because I was told that I had been out long enough for a diagnosis to be made.

I was diagnosed with sleep apnea. Yay for medical certainty! But...yay for medical certainty?

What the hell is sleep apnea?

Fandom

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Writer

It was a beautiful day. It was warm. The sun was shining. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. There was a gentle breeze that cooled the skin. And, there was...umm...there was...did I mention the sun was shining?

Okay. It's true. I didn't sell a single book at Word on the Street. (WotS it to you?) There may as well have been police tape around my table, with a man in uniform going "Keep moving, people. Walk on by. Nothing to see here..."

People passing by would take one look at my booth and avert their eyes and quickly move on. I felt like I was back at my junior prom. After a couple of hours, pity started creeping into their eyes. I felt like I was at my senior prom. Without the punch and 70s hair bands.

I knew something was amiss the moment I got on site and realized that my table was set up next to Burke's, a bookstore specializing in children's literature. There were good people at their table, fine people, but my enthusiasm for doing an impromptu reading of "If We Took Vaginas Seriously" went right out the window when I saw parents wheeling their kids in strollers past my table. (Towards the end of the day, though, I saw kids in strollers holding on to balloons from Harlequin, publisher of fine romance novels, so I may have been a little too quick to judge that one.)

It took me a while, but I also realized that my table had been put in the French Quarter of WotS, around the corner from Le Salon du Livres. And, much hilarity ensued, if, by hilarity, you mean pointless confusion. It probably would have been funnier on TV.

The WotS organizers likely put me there because the name of the project, *Les Pages aux Folles*, is French, even though the publisher is actually Aardvarks Eyes Press (and I actually write in English...more or less...most of the time). This was clearly a case where they didn't ask and I didn't tell (and who was the moron who first developed **that** policy?).

My table was opposite the Stage and Screen tent, where, as part of the festivities, original five minute operas were performed. It was a reminder to me that the only thing worse than bad opera is good opera. (On the other hand, it attracted a larger crowd than my table, so what do I know?)

How sad was my experience? A friend was supposed to come and help me, but she couldn't make it, so I personned my table alone. A couple of times during the afternoon, I left the table unpersonned to get myself a reasonably priced beverage from a friendly street vendor. **And, nobody stole any of the books off the table.** How humiliating!

Later in the afternoon, I explained to one very nice lady that she could go to the Web site to read the material that had been collected in the books I displayed.

"My computer's broken," she told me.

"Then, you can always buy a paper copy," I explained. "That's what they're here for."

She responded: "I'd rather get it fixed."

When I packed up, I found that everything displayed on my table was covered in dust. When I got home, I found that my hands were black from it. I realized that smoke had been wafting past our corner of Word on the Street for much of the afternoon. It was from somebody burning hot dogs on a grill – at least, I hope it was hot dogs they were burning.

Looking at my black hands, I understood what it must be like living next to a coal smelter. At least one childhood dream was fulfilled that afternoon.

My main goal at Word on the Street was to publicize the Les Pages aux Folles Web site, and, to that end, I gave out hundreds of cards with the URL on them. Everybody assured me that they would check it out, so, given a typical attrition rate of 90 per cent, perhaps 20 or 30 people actually will. In one sense, this made the afternoon a great success, since I'm still building Les Pages aux Folles on reader at a time. In another sense, WotS was an expensive way to build readership. Given what I paid for the booth, I figure that, to have a bestseller, I'll have to pay roughly \$12 million. On the upside, this would keep Word on the Street going until 2117.

I can't wait until next year!

Traveling Hopefully

Traveling Hopefully

When the plane landed, the passengers broke out in applause. I had never experienced this before, but when I recounted it to somebody on the ground, I was told that it happens all the time.

This was my introduction to St. John's, Newfoundland.

While we were waiting for the ramp to open to let us off the plane, the stewardess made a joke about stepping on frogs in heaven. It didn't sound like heaven for the frogs, but I must admit that I don't always appreciate the humour of Newfoundlanders.

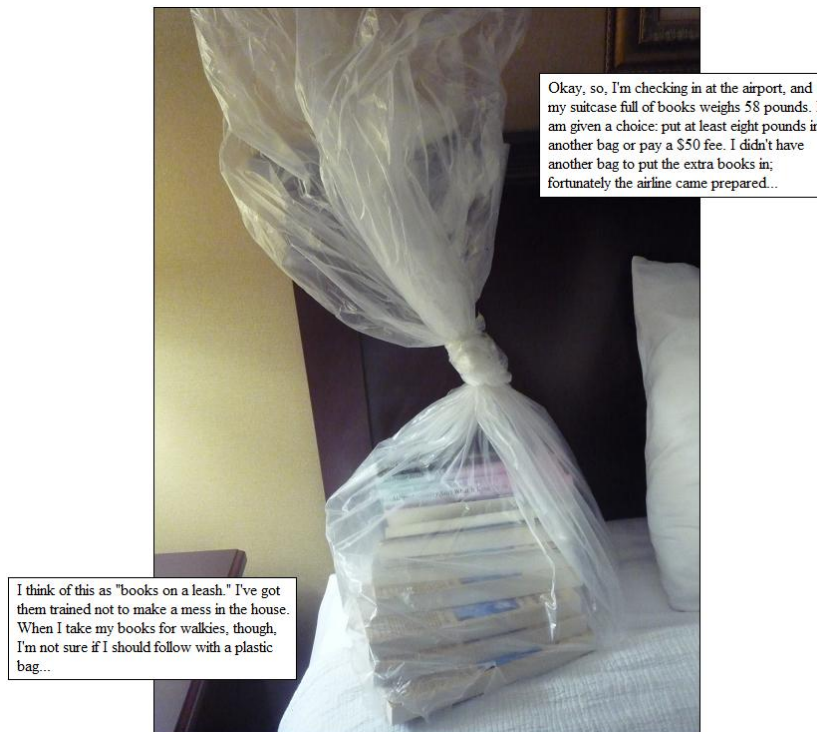
Then, she added: "Enjoy the Junos." But, I...I wasn't in St. John's for the Juno Awards. I was there for the Sci Fi on the Rock convention (which happened to have been scheduled on the same weekend). That was the moment I realized where science fiction rates on the nation's cultural scale: below 12 year-olds with fat cheeks and fatter recording contracts and 52 year-olds with big hair.

It was a humbling trip, really.

Picture this: four black haired men of average height in non-descript black suits wearing dark sunglasses indoors. They may as well be clones. Two of them hold signs on which have been printed: "Warner Music." Then, a man and a woman in normal dress (ie: with colours) stand holding a sign on which has been hand-written: "Ira Nayman." On their other side were the two other clones with matching Warner Music signs.

This was my introduction to St. John's, Newfoundlanders. They really are adorable.

Arriving





Just in time for Christmas: the double sided light sabre! Now your children can slice off twice the fingers in half the time!



The Doctor crosses his own timeline...again. Ah, well - slap a title like "The Three Doctors" on it and call it an adventure!



I always imagined the Daleks and Cybermen were taller. I guess it's true what they say about television adding 10 inches to your height!





Come on! Global warming isn't
that bad...yet...



No convention would be complete without a droid roaming the hallways, bumping into tables with water pitchers and small children. Think you need a licence to drive that thing?



Careful! You could poke somebody's eye out with one of those! ...Okay, in all seriousness, you could be seeing these fashions on the runways of Tokyo five years from now. And, then you can say you saw them at Sci Fi on the Rock first!



Of course, these fashions were on the runways of Tokyo LAST YEAR. North America is so culturally backward!



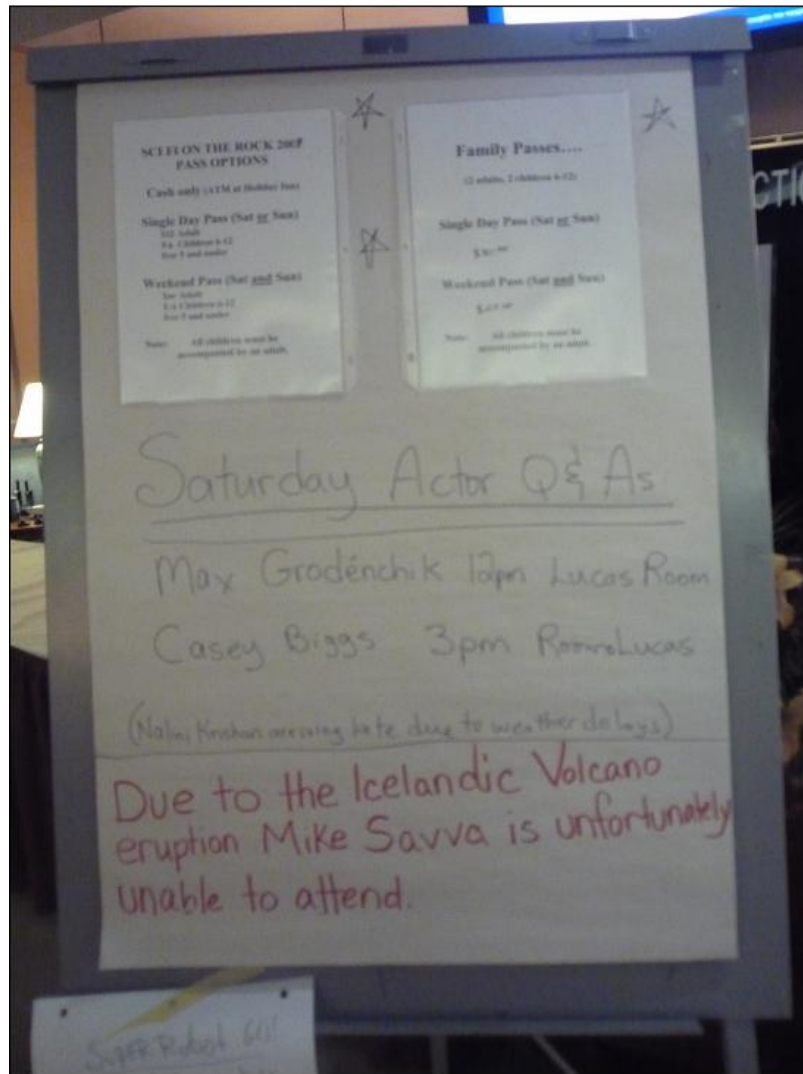
Jesus! I know the Mr. Potatohead Tony Starch figure is popular, but still...!



And, then there were these guys...

Traveling Hopefully

Man plans, god sends weather.



I left St. John's on Monday. Ash from the Icelandic volcano didn't quite reach this far north, but all of the morning flights had been cancelled because of...fog. Now, I had seen fog in Toronto, so I thought I knew fog. However, nothing I had ever seen had prepared me for...this...



I was booked on a plane that had come from Toronto and was supposed to take us on and go back to Toronto. About half an hour before we were supposed to board, we were told that the plane couldn't land in the fog, and we would have to wait to see what would happen. I won't kid you. People made phone calls. People played computer games. People caught up on their sleep. Oh, the humanity! When, about 45 minutes late, the fog lifted for just long enough to allow the plane to land, everybody in the terminal cheered and applauded.

I may never understand Newfoundland.

VCon, I Reckon

I'm So Proud...Thank You...Thank You...

I flew out to Vancouver for VCon, the 35th annual science fiction and fantasy convention, to promote my books. (Regular readers will know I have two science fiction books in print; irregular readers need to get more bran in their diet.) There were a few women on the plane carrying small babies, forcing the pilot to announce that their crying needed to be shut off during takeoffs and landings so it didn't interfere with the electronic equipment.

Strange coincidence: at one of the hotels where the convention was taking place, there was also a convention of people whose family name was "Ma." (Vancouver has a big Asian population.) Clearly, the universe was sending me a message.

I'm going to be a mother!

Perhaps It's a Sign You Should Be In Wood Paneling

Eight things to do if you are the only person to show up for your panel:

1. Play shootsies with your business cards. (You win!)
2. Pour all the water in the pitchers out the window, then complain about not being able to perform when you're "parched." (Hotel staff love pranks.)
3. Debate with yourself whether Bill vander Zalm's return to the spotlight is a boon to satirists everywhere or a sign of impending End Times.
4. Plot revenge against Robert J. Sawyer, who had the nerve to have a reading scheduled at the same time.
5. Wait for five minutes, then go see if you can fit in with the Mas.
6. Wonder if the motto on the hotel room keys that reads "You hold the power to open doors" means you're destined to become a doorman. (The immediate signs are not encouraging.)
7. Take deep breaths, calming yourself to the point where you no longer feel the need to strangle the guy in the dealer's room who keeps opening and closing a model Star Trek communicator - man, that sound effect gets annoying really fast!
8. Gleefully imagine the sound a model Star Trek communicator makes as a ringtone.

And, Those Are Exactly the Qualities You Want in a Dealer's Room

In the dealer's room, the woman with the table to my right sold quill feathers. She could tell you the differences between goose feathers and turkey feathers, where it was illegal to sell certain feathers and the usefulness of different inks, among other things.



Hi, Billie!

To my left was a large display of steampunk fashions. One of the people who ran it had a lovely voice, which she used to sing opera .

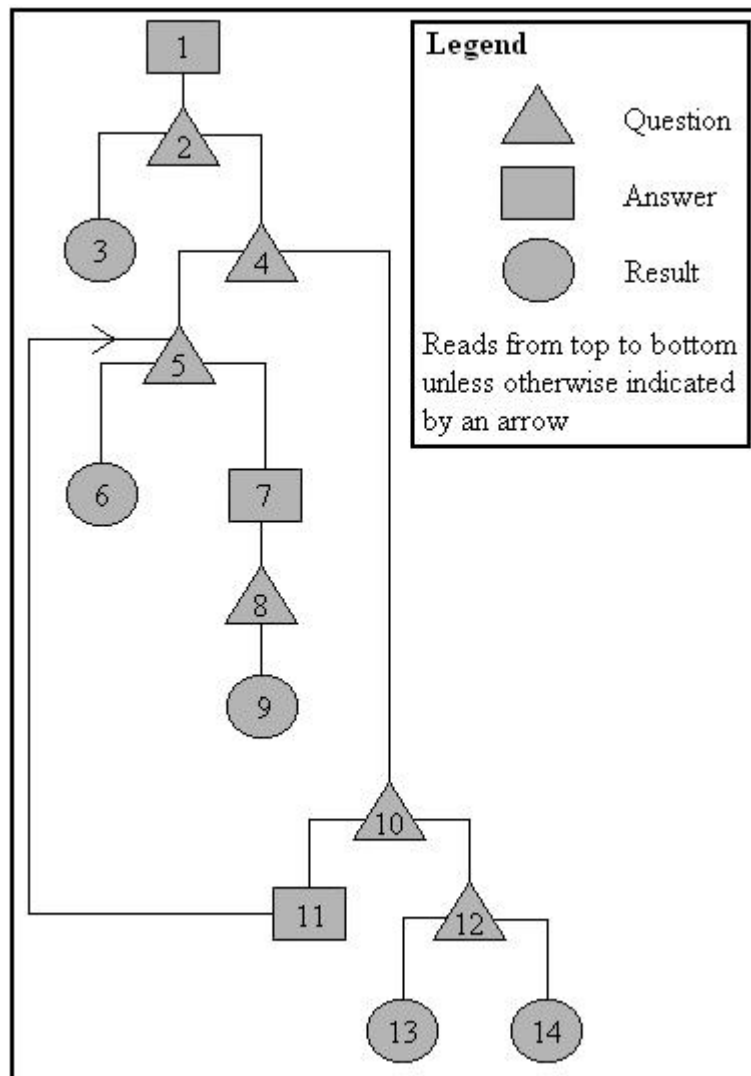


Hi, Woman Whose Name I Didn't Get!

That was my experience of the VCon dealer's room: educational and entertaining!

The Life Cycle of the Typical Business Card

One of the ways I can make people at science fiction conventions aware of who I am and what I do is to print up business cards that I hand out to people who walk by my table in the dealer's room. What happens to the cards after I have handed them out? This is my best guess:



	1	I offer somebody walking by the table a card.
	2	Do they take it?
NO	3	This was obviously not the person to give the card to - maybe they are allergic to the card's ink, maybe they're just hard-hearted. Either way, I keep the card and offer it to somebody who is more likely to give it a

		good home.
YES	4	Do they stop at the table, giving me the chance to talk to them about my writing, or do they rush on towards the table selling the Star Trek weapons?
RUSH	5	Did they put the card in their pocket or bag before they moved on, or did they keep holding it in their hands?
HANDS	6	They'll throw the card out as soon as they leave the dealer's room.
POCKET/BAG	7	They'll find the card three weeks later in a pile of stuff from the convention. By that time, they will have completely forgotten who I am and what the card represents. At this point, it will turn into something that takes up space in their life for no good reason, and they will throw it out.
	8	Will they recycle the card?
YES or NO	9	How people dispose of cards I have given to them at conventions isn't really relevant to my purpose, but thanks for bringing up this crucial question. I hope people reading this will be more conscientious about how they dispose of business cards they are given at conventions in the future (after their ritual month of feeling guilty for disposing of my cards in the first place, of course).
YES	10	Do they seem interested in what I am saying?
NO	11	Thank them for listening and wish them a good con. (They don't have to know what I'm thinking. In fact, best that they do not.) Then, GO TO 5.
YES	12	Do they buy the book?
NO	13	They will keep the card to remind them of this funny conversation they had with this weird but probably harmless guy at that science fiction convention they went to, you know, back when they went to science fiction conventions. When they find it difficult to explain to their children what the card represents, it will quietly disappear, never to be spoken of again.
YES	14	They will keep the card in the book, a cherished memento of the time they met one of their favourite authors; it will turn into a

		family heirloom that will be venerated over the generations. Yay! Go me! (Theoretical.)
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Extremely Uncomfortable, And Yet if You're Not the One Wearing Them...

The theme of the convention was Steampunk. I have a newly found respect for corsets.



And, ancient electronics.

What the Heck Do You Know About Con Etiquette?

My reading at VCon was attended by three and three quarters people. How should a writer respond to this?

- a) Thank the organizers for the opportunity to hone your reading skills in a low-pressure environment.
- b) Complain to the organizers that they didn't promote your reading enough, engendering enough ill will to ensure that you are never invited back and starting the ill will that will poison your reputation in the science fiction community and destroy your career before it has even had a chance to begin. (Not recommended.)
- c) Go to your room and pout for five minutes. If you haven't stopped pouting in five **hours**, you should reconsider your desire to become a writer.
- d) other

Koan of the Con

Who goes to a dealer's room with no money? Perhaps more important: are they sadists or masochists?

Vancouver Really Is a Different State of Mind

I read late Saturday afternoon. When I saw people at panels the next day, several of them apologized for not being able to make my reading, AND THEY ACTUALLY SOUNDED LIKE THEY MEANT IT!

A couple of people who visited my table on Saturday apologized for not having enough money to buy a book and assured me that they would be back on Sunday to get one. Yeah, right. How many times had I heard that one before! Only...THEY ACTUALLY CAME BACK THE NEXT DAY AND BOUGHT A BOOK!

These were strange new experiences for me...but I could get used to them. Oh, yes, I think I could easily get used to them...

If It's Saturday, This Must Be Albacon

Some Lessons Need To Be Learned Repeatedly. Apparently.

Traveling from Toronto to Albany, New York for Albacon, I was reminded that border security guards are not my target audience. Some day, no doubt, I will tell this story in full. Some day.

Traveling Hopefully

To get to my plane, I had to walk down a corridor, around a corner, down another corridor, down a flight of stairs, down another corridor, around another corner, down yet another corridor, out of the building entirely and across tarmac. At each turn, the corridor got smaller; the point where I left the building felt like being born all over again!

The plane was a Beech 1900D that looked like something out of the 1940s. I kept expecting to see Rick Speechifying about hills of beans to Ilsa in the fog. On the hour and 20 minute trip, I kept hearing "As Time Goes By," which was funny the first 17 times, but after that was just my brain playing cruel tricks on me. Again.

A Rose By Any Other Name Would Still Prick Your Finger

Before I got there, I kept thinking of the science fiction convention as "Albacore" instead of "Albacon." Sure, I will miss tuna when we fish them to extinction; still, that's no excuse...

Two Countries Divided By My Sense Of Humour

At the writers' social the night before the con officially started, somebody at my table insisted that there was no difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, a complaint I heard from many people that weekend. I responded with my standard line: Democrats may be weak and corrupt, but Republicans are evil.

Well! You could have heard the crickets all the way back in Toronto!

Fortunately, the uncomfortable silence was broken by The Wombat (not his legal name – more a statement of mammalian brotherhood), who embarked on a story about driving across the country. I have never been so grateful to a marsupial-identified person in my life!

Enter The Wombat



Bill Freedman, author of Land That I Love, and liquid companion. Not The Wombat.



Stella – also not The Wombat. But, she brought the doughnuts AND wore the coolest costumes.



A room full of people who are not The Wombat. Still, nice to see such a turnout for a panel I was on. I'm sure the fact that it was moderated by the Writer Guest of Honour had nothing to do with it...



Okay, am I even TRYING to find a photo of The Wombat?



Can you spot The Wombat? HINT: he's not hiding under the carpet.

Do You Suffer From Old Fogey Syndrome?

It's not a function of age so much as it is a certain disposition of mind: old fogeyism. In fact, you may be an old fogey and not even realize it! When you are on a panel at a science fiction convention, do you find yourself saying any of the following:

"I remember when social media was two tin cans and a wire!"

“I’m not crazy about the term ‘sci fi.’ Science fiction. SF. Speculative fiction. That goofy genre with aliens and ray guns. Whatever it is James Cameron does. These are all acceptable descriptions of the field. But, please, sci fi? Sci fi just sounds juvenile!”

“Oh, yeah. I remember when my first story was published by [INSERT NAME OF PROMINENT SCIENCE FICTION PUBLICATION HERE]. Nobody could really define what hard SF was, but [INSERT FIRST NAME OF EDITOR OF SAID PROMINENT SCIENCE FICTION PUBLICATION HERE] knew it when he saw it, and I guess he saw it in me. And, that, kids, is why you should stay off drugs.”

“I’m so busy writing, I don’t have time to brush my teeth, let alone post messages on Twitter! Sure, my friends may not be crazy about it, but that’s just the kind of sacrifice I’m willing to make for my art!”

“Science fiction is dead. Okay, other than on film. Lots of science fiction movies are being produced. Other than that, though, science fiction is dead. Well, and television. There sure is a lot of science fiction on television. Other than that, tho – oh, and the Internet. You can find a tremendous amount of original science fiction on the Internet. But, forgetting film and television and the Internet, science fiction really is dead!”

If you catch yourself saying one or more of these things on a panel, you are likely an old fogey. Consult your children or, if you do not have any, any children who may be in your audience. In a worst case scenario (where you say three or more of the above phrases at a single con), spend at least two hours watching anime in the video room. This has been shown to decrease old fogeyism in Japanese science fiction con-goers by as much as 23 per cent.

Hey – it’s a start.

Ah Have Ahlways Relahd On The Kahndness Of Strangahs

While I was away from my table on a panel, two of my books were sold. It wasn’t exactly magic; Roberta, who had a table next to mine, held the money for me until I came back. Still, I can claim that my books practically sell themselves! Not that I would want to put that to the test at a future con...

Remember, Boys: It’s Not The Size Of Your Con That Counts...

Albacon was an intimate science fiction convention. And, when I say “intimate,” I am, of course, using a euphemism for “small.” Still, it had character. It was personable. All things considered, it was...well groomed.

Okay, I’m being silly. Albacon was a lot of fun. And, if the con helped even one person forget the political shenanigans in New York’s State Senate for at least a little while, then it was totally worth it!

Another Feather in My Capclave

Titles

Yeah, I know, kind of a lame pun on the science fiction convention's name. Still, it's better than my other choice, "Imonna Put a Capclave In Yo Ass," which is just wrong on so many levels.

Imagine The Sales Tax Nightmare!

Strange things happen on the way to conventions.

Not only was the Homeland Security agent at the border smiling as I explained why I was going to Washington and what I wrote, but he actually joked with me about it:

GUARD: Have you ever been through the Dimensional Portal yourself?

ME: Only in my head. (pause as I work out some implications) I mean, if I had, I wouldn't need to fly to Washington.

GUARD: That's what I was getting at.

Hmmm...maybe border guards are part of my target audience after all...

John Foster Dulles Ain't Nothing But The Name Of An Airport Now

The shuttle between terminals at Dulles Airport was called a "mobile lounge." I thought this odd. There was no smoking in the lounge. Nobody moved through the lounge with trays of hors d'oeuvres taking orders for cocktails. It was mobile, however, as most of us, who were standing due to the paucity of comfy chairs, rudely discovered.

What can I say? I'm a writer. WORDS MATTER.

Are You A Science Fiction Fan? A Quick Quiz

1) Somebody talking to you says, "The Dimensional Portal™ allows people to travel between dimensions. But, the Transdimensional Authority didn't want just anybody traveling between dimensions and messing about with the timelines of other universes, so they created the Home Universe Generator™, which allows civilians to look into other dimensions but not touch." Do you...

a) back away from the person very slowly, glancing around to see if anybody is watching what is happening because nothing bad can happen AS LONG AS THERE ARE WITNESSES?

b) surreptitiously look around for anything that could be used as a weapon (purely in self-defense, understand, but still)?

c) rub your chin thoughtfully and respond, "Interesting...?"

If you answered c, you are clearly a science fiction fan. If you answered a or b, your life is probably very safe, but not nearly as interesting.

Images Gallery



This appeared in the clouds on the flight to Washington. I must admit, I have never seen anything quite like it in all of my travels. Either god was blessing my journey, or the Air Force was falling down on its job to blast UFOs out of the sky!



HIGH ANXIETY WAS A DOCUMENTARY! (NOTE: pay close attention to the atrium, as it will be important later in our story...)



Drive through mortgages: a vital but overlooked explanation for the American economic mayonnaise – uhh, malaise.



The hotel was designed by an exhibitionist.



What if they gave a reading and no one showed up? It would look something like this. (Actually, I had one and one eighths audience members, so the story had a happy ending. Well, it would have if the guy in the atrium – remember the atrium? I told you to pay attention to the atrium – didn't use a microphone to...call people to their tables? Call out Bingo numbers? Call the faithful to their just reward? It wasn't clear what he was doing, but it clearly was loud!)



But, hey, it was lineups like this, at the mass signing on Saturday night, that made everything worthwhile. Well, for Connie Willis, the author guest of honour, whom everybody was lined up to see. Still, an (aging) satirical boy genius can dream, can't he?

It's Funny Because It's True **Of Course, It's Creepy For The Same Reason**

Lying in bed in my hotel room Friday night, I had a few thoughts of a lascivious nature about a woman I talked to for 30 seconds in the elevator. As it happened, she wasn't staying at the hotel for Capclave. FOCUS, MAN, FOCUS! I hope she wasn't there to attend sessions of the Catholic University of America (which had booked a meeting room next to Capclave's rooms), or I may have inadvertently doomed us both to eternal damnation and hellfire.

It didn't help either of our chaste souls that, soon after, the bedsprings from the room next to mine started loudly and rapidly creaking. I assumed it was an overweight person having a severe bout of the hiccups. Yeah. Sure. That must be the explanation for what I heard...

I Was Only Drinking Juice, But...It Can Be Quite Sticky And...And Hard To Get Out Of Eyelashes

Strange things happen at conventions.

I was talking to a couple of people at my table at the mass author signing when somebody I had never met walked up to the table, pointed at *Alternate Reality Ain't What It Used To Be* and said, "Oh, yeah. This is a very funny book. Great for reading when you have only a short amount of time. I'm [NAME I DIDN'T CATCH]. I reviewed it for [NAME I DIDN'T CATCH]." Then, without giving me so much as a chance to breath, he walked away from the table.

It was the first time I met somebody who had reviewed one of my books in person, and I didn't want to throw a drink in his face – may all my encounters with reviewers be so pleasant!

Humour Is In The Eye Of The SPCA

A bird was flying around the hotel atrium. I suggested that if the hotel was serious about getting it out, they should tell it that they couldn't find its reservation. Oddly, nobody I told this joke to found it funny...

Please Pardon The Sincerity

Thanks to: Linda, Virginia, Phoebe, Chris, Brian, Allen, Stanislav and Devvie, Alex and Jonathan for being early participants in the Alternate Reality News Service revolution. Thanks, too, to: Colleen Cahill for the invitation, C.J. for giving a reading we should all aspire to, Leona for great advice, Bill for his amazing out-of-the-blue photography and anybody else I may have forgotten who either worked at or attended the convention. You all know why.

Are You A Science Fiction Fan? My Own Personal Test

Strange things happen on the way home from conventions.

2) Walking through Dulles airport, you notice a towel hanging off a direction sign. It's purple, which is irrelevant except for the fact that the colour catches your eye. What is the first thing that comes to your mind?

a) I should take a shower when I get to the hotel - you can never be too careful when it comes to personal hygiene, and I've only had 27 today

b) was there a streaker here, and are there any pictures...?

c) somewhere in this airport is a poor traveler who probably doesn't even know the danger she or he is in

If you answered c, you are clearly a science fiction fan. If you answered a or b, read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* if you don't want to die alone and unfulfilled.

Hitting Below the Beltway

I realized, once I got home, that, despite what I told everybody, I never actually was in Washington, DC. The plane landed at Dulles Airport, which is in Virginia. The hotel was in "(Don't Go Back To) Rockville," Maryland. However, on the trip between the two, the shuttle bus did drive over the famed Washington Beltway. And, I gotta tell you, I didn't see any of the famous Beltway Wisdom there. It was just a road - no smarter or dumber than any other.

There's a lesson there for us all.

He Must Have Been Part Of A Secret Experiment To Clone Science Fiction Writers

Even before I got home I was exhausted. Capclave was my third out of town science fiction convention in four weeks, my sixth book event in seven weeks. HOW DOES ROBERT J. SAWYER DO IT?

So Freakin' CONTARIO!

Oh, Don't Look At Me Like That – You Know You Want To!

Over the weekend, I attended the first annual SFContario convention. As with all newborns, it was so adorable that you just wanted to pinch its cheek until it stopped gurgling cutely (for some reason, I always forget the 27 minutes of bawling that generally follows the cheek pinching).

Of Course, I'm Talking About The Starship In The Original Series, Not *The Next Generation*

The hallway to the dealers' room also led to the hotel pool; it smelled of chlorine. I chose to imagine that it was the smell of ozone from the exhaust of a starship that has just engaged its warp thrusters. We all get in the mood of a con in our own special way.

Or, For That Matter, The Santa Clause Parade
Naughty Or Nice - Maybe I Should Make A List...

Instead of going to SFContario, I could have attended the Everything To Do With Sex Show, which took place on the same weekend. Not...that I would have. I'm just sayin'.

The Ego Has Landed

How well do you know your authors? Question One: Ira Nayman.

Standing in line for registration, a woman said: "You look familiar." After a second's appraisal, she added: "Oh. I don't know you," and turned back to the person she was talking to. In response, what did I think?

- a) I have that kind of face.
- b) I have that effect on women.
- c) No autograph for you, lady!
- d) all of the above
- e) none of the above
- f) other

The Ego Soars

At my reading on Friday night, I premiered the first chapter of my novel, *Welcome to the Multiverse, Sorry for the Inconvenience*. There were only three people in the audience, but they applauded with the strength of 12.

Only The Second Fanboy Moment In My Life –
CONS ARE CHANGING ME!

I was supposed to be on a panel with Karl Schroeder at Ad Astra, but he couldn't make it. I was supposed to be on a panel with Karl Schroeder at Capclave, but he couldn't make it. This was disappointing on many levels (at least 27, including the basement, the sub-basement and 8 levels of parking), not the least of which was that I wanted to gush about how much I enjoyed reading his novel *Lady of Mazes*, and I figured it would make more sense if he was there when I did.

Well. I'm setting up at a table in a hallway at SFContario when who should walk by but...yes, yes, it was Karl Schroeder. I stopped him and gushed (see previous paragraph

for details). Being supergracious (I know that's not a word – it should be superspecialgracious), he thanked me for the praise and said that he had to cancel appearances because he had been having health issues for the past couple of years, suggesting that it had something to do with his heart.

Of course, I should have offered him my condolences for his health difficulties. Unfortunately, the tunnel-vision of a gushing fanboy (“Oh, my god, I can't believe I'm really talking to you! Pardon me if I stare!! Do you mind if I stare? Surely, you must be used to people staring by now!!! I promise, I'll only stare for a short while!!!! No, I'm not being supercreepy – or even superspecialcreepy – I promise I'll stop staring real soon!!!!”) can make one a touch insensitive.

On the other hand, it could have been worse: I could have offered to compare heart surgery scars.

Of Course, It Will Be An Honour Just To Be Nominated...

At a slow point on Saturday afternoon, the talk in the writers' corner of the dealers' room turned to the pros and cons of various science fiction awards. I decided then and there that I would devote my life to pursuing the Hugo Award for Best Hat. And, the sweetest thing about winning will be how stiff the competition was...

Image Gallery



Although you may not be able to tell it from the photo, this is the tallest woman I have ever met. Are there blond Na'avi?



YOUR MAJESTY! How kind of you to grace our humble convention with your royal presence!



Ah, the innocent joy on the faces of panel audience members. Then, I started talking...



Where's Swanwick? Can you spot SFContario's Guest of Honour? HINT: he's not wearing a red and white hat. OKAY, ANOTHER HINT: he's not hiding behind the prominently displayed vampire books.



She sings! She acts! She writes! (Soon, she will be winning awards!) And, as if all of that wasn't enough, she pulls off a steampunk look with the best of them! Oh, J. M., is there no limit to what you can do?

Putting The "Prompt" Back In "Impromptu"

On a panel on Learning to Write, I explained to the audience that you should see every assignment you get as an opportunity to exercise your creativity, even if the assignment does not appear to call for it. I used the example of the bio I wrote for Sci Fi on the Rock, which was so amusing that when I introduced myself to people at the Newfoundland con, most of them responded, "You're the bio guy!" I mentioned that, on a smaller scale, I tried to do that with my bio for SFContario.

Well, damned if somebody in the audience didn't ask Ed Greenwood, a giant in Canadian fantasy, entertaining raconteur and great sport, to read my bio! If I had had an opportunity to direct him, I would have suggested a more modulated performance, but, given the – ahem – variable quality of my own readings, perhaps it's just as well...

But, Do They Sing?

In addition to SFContario, the hotel hosted something called The Body Electric School. I leave this one to **your** imagination...

Was That Joke In Poor Taste? Forget About It!

I finally found an upside to (possibly) having early onset Alzheimer's. Picture it: a lazy Sunday in the dealers' room, everybody a little punchy from too much caffeine and too little sleep. A couple of the dealers were trying to one-up each other with jokes about sex with livestock.

I wanted to say: "That's an image that's going to stay with me for the rest of my life."
But, maybe not!

Sleep, Now With 72% More Eep!

I slept for 11 hours Sunday night/Monday morning. As far as I'm concerned, SFContario was a huge success!

Ad Astra 2011: The Wrath of Con*

Deficit Hawks Were Disappointed

Everybody I talked to on the opening day of the Ad Astra science fiction convention was dog tired. On the opening day. This did not bode well; bone weariness was usually how people felt at the end of the con. I hoped that we were in some sort of inverted time loop, where people started off tired and got progressively more energy until, by Sunday's close, we were all ready to run marathons and solve deficit crises.

It didn't work out that way, of course. By Sunday afternoon, exhaustion had set in: most of us were shambling around, barely able to string two coherent words together.

My mistake was thinking we were in a science fiction movie, when, obviously, we were in a zombie movie.

I May Have Been Joking - It's Hard To Tell With Me Sometimes

"I became a writer for the groupies."

- possibly the dumbest thing any author has said at a science fiction convention, and, I should know, considering I was the one who said it

Happy Anniversary! Can I Have A Slice Of Literary Snobbishness?

This being the 30th anniversary of Ad Astra, many of the famous Guest Authors of the past were in attendance. Stuck in the Dealer's Room for most of the con, you might expect that I wouldn't get to meet any of them. You would be expecting wrong.

Guy Gavriel Kay sauntered into the Dealer's Room on Saturday afternoon. As he passed my table and I started up my pitch, he took one look at me, politely said, "No thanks," and kept walking. I was snubbed by the author of *The Summer Tree* and...umm...other books, I'm sure! What a thrill!

That would have been a highlight of my con, easy, except a few minutes later Ben Bova – yes, that Ben Bova! – actually stopped and politely listened to my book pitch. Ben Bova! Listened to me talk! I am still so in awe of this moment that I don't actually have a joke ready to undermine it!

What A Long, Strange Triptych It's Been



Jessica Frey has "an Evita moment" at the launch of her first novel, Triptych. Her words, not mine. Seriously, she said it not me – please don't send letters.



The cake served at the Triptych book launch came in raspberry and banana flavours with marzipan icing. Mmmm...marzipan icing. Can you spot the cake in this picture? HINT: It isn't in the shape of a coffee urn.



And, always remember, children: while the ink in your pen may sparkle, real vampires never do.

I Probably Still Would Have, But It Would Definitely Have Shifted The Odds

On Saturday night, the hotel hosted the “University of Buffalo Students Dinner.” When I saw that, I thought: “Cool. If the University of Waterloo did shit like that when I was an undergrad there, I might not have dropped out after my first year there!”

And, For Any Americans Who May Be In Attendance: Please Humour Us (Lord Knows, Our Politicians Do)

I thought a science fiction convention would be the perfect place to get away from politics in the middle of an election. Sadly, I was mistaken, as the following panel names suggest:

- Cutting Budgets the Klingon Way
- What Captain Adama Could Teach Michael Ignatieff About Leadership
- What Captain Kirk Could Teach Stephen Harper About Diplomacy
- Law and Order: Is There a Judge Dredd in Canada’s Future?
- What Jack Layton Could Teach Captain Reynolds About Moustaches

- Red pill/blue pill: whose agenda will voters buy?

Bonus Out Of Focus Image Gallery



Scary? Adorable? Or, scary adorable? Opinions at the Ad Astra Masquerade were mixed.



He may be gone, but he certainly isn't forgotten. And, he may not even be gone, being a time traveller and all. Especially not when there are shiny objects to be had.



If Falstaff had been equipped with a light sabre, Henry IV, Part 1 would have been very different. Very different, indeed.



This is not a costume – this is actually a chef at the hotel where Ad Astra was held. If this is where he buys his utensils, I don't want to go anywhere near his kitchen!

* Yeah, I know, that joke was probably done to death ages ago, but you try and come up with a dozen puns on the word convention!

Putting The Eerie Back in Eeriecon

Obvious, And Yet It Needed To Be Said

Eeriecon was my third US science fiction convention in the last year, the first that was close enough to drive to (thanks to Stephen and Joy Pearl, who provided the wheels and companionship). Driving, I find, is a lot like flying, only lower.

Traveling Hypefully

Borders are such silly things, aren't they? Standing on one side, you are subject to completely different rules and customs than if you take a step and stand on the other side. For most of human history, wars have been fought over where to draw those imaginary lines. But, the lines themselves are completely arbitrary; today's borders are a relic of long-ago political negotiations. So much fear of our neighbours, so much pointless destruction. The world would be a much better place if we could eliminate borders and enjoy our innate similarities rather than accentuate our socialized differences.

And, no, I'm not saying this just because I FORGOT MY PASSPORT AND HAD TO TALK TO SOMEBODY IN A GREY BUILDING AT THE BORDER JUST TO BE LET INTO THE UNITED STATES! Homeland Security was courteous and professional, considering what a moron I was.



This is the distance between the hotel and the Canada-US border. You could push an elephant on roller skates into the lobby in less time than it took me to get through. You'll never convince me that memory loss due to aging doesn't have consequences – I'm a poster child for it!

Niagara? Oh, You Can't Make Me Falls For THAT!



This was the closest I got to the Falls all weekend. Hmm...you know, the more I think about it, the more I suspect that somewhere in this picture is an explanation for why I kept waking up in the middle of the night having to go to the bathroom ...



Can you spot Niagara Falls? HINT: it's not hiding behind the bus.

Close Encounters Of The Celebrity Kind

1. Larry Niven, famed author of the Ringworld series of novels, among others, stopped by my table and politely listened to my spiel about what I do. When I quoted from Charles de Lint's review of *Alternate Reality Ain't What It Used To Be* ("This is a great little volume to leave lying in the bathroom") and explained that the book is made up of short pieces that do not require a lot of time to read, Niven responded, "Well, I've got a little time..." picked up a copy of the book and began reading it in front of me.

I don't think I have ever spent a longer three minutes at a science fiction convention in my life.

When he had finished, he put the book down, smiled, quietly said, "Thank you," and walked away. Somewhat deflating, but it could have been worse: he could have punched me in the nose and said, "I hold you, sir, personally responsible for the death of literature!"



Larry Niven graciously agrees to a photograph. How graciously? He was about to get himself food at a Friday evening party. The man is a saint!

2. A very nice woman named Anne came to my table. I gave her my spiel, pointing out that in his review of *What Were Once Miracles Are Now Children's Toys*, Charles de Lint called my first book "one of my favourite books of 2008." In response, she smiled and said, "I know how good that can feel. One of my books made the *New York Times*

bestsellers list.” She was Anne Bishop, and she was referring to her book *Shalador’s Lady*.

Somewhat deflating. Still, she took one of my books, so I consider the encounter a small victory.

Politics Is Merely Science Fiction By Other Demeans

I was listening to the radio, when what should I hear but a campaign ad for the New Democratic Party! And, I thought I was getting away from the Canadian election for a couple of days! I mean, seriously: don’t the Americans have any technology that can stop this socialism propaganda from crossing the border?

I’m Always Upchuck For New Experiences

Before this trip I had never been in a Denny’s restaurant. I know, I know, I’ve led such a sheltered life. So, I didn’t know there was such a thing as a “baconalia” (although, having been introduced to the concept, I was disappointed the waitresses weren’t serving it in togas), and I had never been tempted by a “maple bacon sundae.”

I couldn’t help but notice, though, that there was a rather large poster on the wall next to the door of the kitchen that said, “First aid for choking.” I suppose it’s good to be prepared; still, as a diner, I found the poster’s presence less than reassuring...

And, Speaking Of Food (Not To Mention Another Opportunity For Larry Niven To Prove How Gracious He Is...)



See, there was this cake. A very tasty cake, as it happened. And, part of it held the face of science fiction writer Larry Niven. I was told nobody could eat it because Niven had

asked for that part for himself. Oh, the jokes about not eating Larry Niven's face I could tell!

Grace Note



Believe it or not, this was a costume at the Masquerade. When it came on stage, it was accompanied by a lovely oral tribute to Elizabeth Sladen, the actor best known for her role in Dr. Who, who had recently passed away. No joke.

Poor Eyesight, But Excellent Taste

As the Dealer's Room was being torn down after the convention, I got to talking about my writing to fellow Canadian Blade, who, as her name suggests, had worked security over the weekend. She quickly made it clear that she hated Jonathan Swift and wasn't very keen on satire. "If you have something to say, say it," she explained. "I don't want to have to work to dig out your meaning."

Ah.

She went on to say, however, that I was cuter than George Clooney, so clearly the woman has excellent taste!

2011 Polaris Con-fessions

A completely subjective, possibly deranged report on the science fiction and fantasy convention Polaris, 25:

I Considered An Imaginary Feud With Karl Schroeder, But It Just Wouldn't Be The Same

My imaginary feud with Robert J. Sawyer ended a couple of weeks before the con when, through no fault of my own, I actually met him, and he turned out to be a very decent guy. So, Polaris didn't have that frisson of phony anger to which I had become accustomed.

Of Course, If I Had To Get Naked, It Would Be Upgraded To Mortification

Definition of mixed feelings: having your first video interview with an Internet news programme be with an anchor for the *Naked News*. Don't get me wrong: at this point in my career, I'm happy for any publicity I can get; I just wish it was with a news outlet that I could tell my parents about without having to calculate the potential embarrassment first.

You Winsome, You Lose Some



If anybody could make my writing sexy, you would think it would be a *Naked News* anchor. Despite her most fetching efforts, Kat Curtis was not able to succeed. But, my heart goes out to her for trying.

The Sad Part Is: I Know Exactly What You Mean

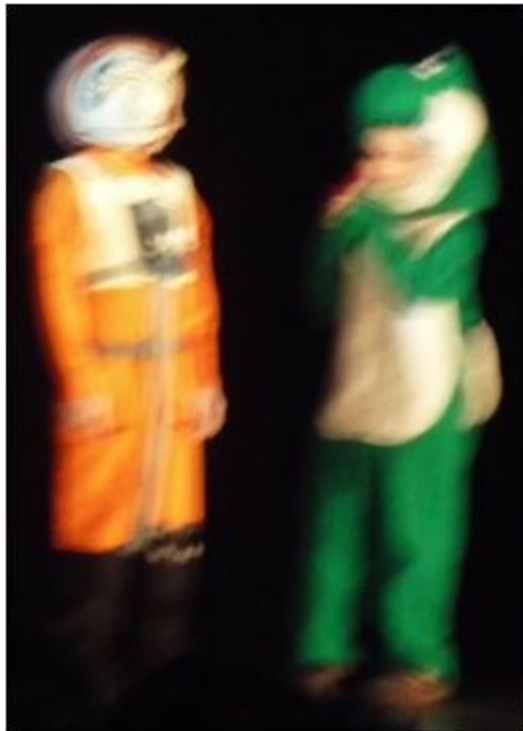
My favourite quote by somebody who came up to my table: “I bought your book last year. I liked it. It was very...umm...it had a lot of...umm, you know...well, I liked it.”

Who Needs Alcohol When You're Shooting Photos In Low Light Conditions?



The obligatory dark and out of focus Masquerade costume photo.

Lots Of Green Lanterns, But No Flash



The obligatory dark and out of focus child's Masquerade costume photo.

Some Memos You Just Don't Want To Get

The loudest and longest applause at the Masquerade was for the announcement that one of the performers was a soldier who had just come back from a seven month tour of duty in Afghanistan. When did Canada become Sparta?

Oh, Science! Is There Nothing You Cannot Explain?

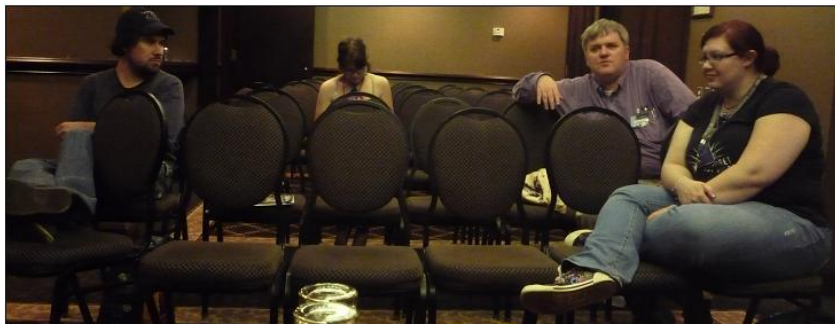
The half-life of the panel audience, an experiment.



9pm, British Comedy: audience appears whole and stable.



10 pm, Politics in Science Fiction: audience has begun to throw off members, reducing it in size. (NOTE: it is now a proven scientific fact: fezzes are cool.)



12pm, Science Fiction and Humour: decay has quickly advanced.

CONCLUSION: This is just one decay sequence at a single science fiction convention, so any conclusions drawn from it have to be considered tentative pending more evidence.

Having said that, our researchers have some confidence in the following conclusion: MIDNIGHT PANELS? ARE YOU INSANE? ANYBODY WHO ISN'T AT A ROOM PARTY IS PROBABLY COMING FROM A ROOM PARTY, AND WHAT ARE THE ODDS THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO COHERENTLY DISCUSS ANYTHING OTHER THAN HOW AWESOME THE ROOM PARTY WAS?

Expect our article on this phenomenon to appear in the next issue of *The Journal of Science Fiction Convention Physics and Awesome Room Parties*.

Not What I Would Call A Plain Jayne



Okay, this requires a bit of explanation. One of the big guests at the con was Adam Baldwin, who used to play a character named Jayne on the TV series *Firefly*. A regular part of Jayne's costume was an orange and yellow knitted hat. To help...uhh...let's say make the actor feel at home in Toronto, there was a workshop on how to knit Jayne hats just like the one in the series. Now, on the one hand, it was a bit distracting to have somebody sitting in the front row of one of my panels (this one being on how the works of Philip K. Dick have been adapted into films) giving serious attention to knitting...



On the other hand, I didn't feel like pissing off this guy. I really, really, really, really, really didn't want to piss off this guy (and, that's five reallys, so you know I'm really, really, really, really serious). So, knit away, *Firefly* fans, knit with all your heart.

Especially The Klingons...



Can you please tell these people that the con is no longer called Toronto *Trek*? I don't have the heart...

If They're Not Related By Blood, Perhaps They Can Be Related By Blood Spilled...

By the Masquerade on Saturday night, I was so tired that I hallucinated Adam Baldwin getting Alec Baldwin in a headlock while Billy Baldwin cried like a little girl.

Thaaaaat's An Image That's Gonna Haunt My Dreams...!



PIECE OF POLARIS PARTING WISDOM: No matter how bad things might seem, life flows on around you. Try not to freak it out too much...

A Science Fiction Convention? What a Con*Cept!

That May Not Sound Impressive, But He Was The Master Of 20th Century Theatre

I went to Montreal for the Con*Cept science fiction convention. Thanks to a generous offer of a place to stay by my cousin, I arrived a couple of days early. The scenery of Sainte Eustache and Two Mountains (I know that, some day, somebody will figure out why a lake was called Two Mountains – I have faith) was delightful; the cats in the house not so much.

My allergic reaction mostly involved difficulty breathing, but there was also the delight of sneezing and having a running nose. (I did my best to fight it. Honest, I did. Kleenex, Dirtyex, Malcolm X – I would have used whatever helped; unfortunately, nothing did...) This exacerbated the cough that I had been nurturing over the previous couple of weeks. (I thought I should get a cough suppressant to help get me through the con, but I bought an expectorant instead. Sometimes my brain is not my friend.) Add to this the fact that I didn't get much sleep (strange beds and all), and I was generally achy and sluggish.

Man, I had enough infirmities that weekend to qualify as a Beckett character!

If The Other Panelists Jumped Off The Enterprise Bridge, Would You Follow Them?

I honestly didn't mean to be as negative about *Torchwood: Miracle Day* as I'm sure I came across at my first panel of the con. But...the other members of the panel started it!

At Least I Have The Sense Not To End The Final Sentence With An Exclamation Mark

EGO BUILDER OF THE CON #1: Writer Guest of Honour Eric Flint actually picked up a copy of my book and opened it to a random page! Eric Flint! The WGH! It seems almost churlish to mention that he immediately closed the book, put it back on the table and walked straight out of the dealers' room.

The Things You Learn At Science Fiction Conventions!

Fun Con*Cept fact: it costs \$1,000 to pump the stomach of a cat in Montreal.

I Don't Have A Dirty Mind, But Reality Is Conspiring Against Me...

2 much) Why was the woman in the room next to mine moaning and whimpering at three in the morning?

- a) her partner threatened to burn all of her *Gilmore Girls* DVDs if she didn't stop watching them and come to bed
- b) hey! – even science fiction geeks can get lucky!
- c) hey! – science fiction geeks weren't the only people staying at the hotel!



3's a crowd) Why was there a loud BANG! on the wall in the middle of the whimpering and moaning?

- a) strip mining mountains for coal is not something you can do quietly
- b) somebody was re-enacting the destruction of Alderaan by the Death Star and got a little carried away
- c) oh, this is cheap - even for you

Wait! You Can Get Bagels At HMV?

Walking down Sainte-Catherine, I came across a double decker bus that had stopped in front of HMV. On the upper level a tribute band was playing Pink Floyd songs live. And, I thought: this has to have an effect on the slogan, "Montreal: come for the bagels, stay for the cultural condescension!"

Image Gallery



No, the con hotel was not named The Overlook. It was called The Espresso. Why do you ask?



For some reason, I couldn't bear to watch this man go through the door as he left the dealer's room. I hope he had a name...



Why do I always end up at a table opposite a hypnotic video? Those hands...constantly refiguring those tiny magnetized balls ...always in motion...so tiny...so very tiny...what – what was I talking about, again?



Yeah, if I was that adorable, that...furry, I would probably have people adjusting my shoes, too! Not that I'm jealous, or anything – I'm furry where it counts, baby. I'm furry where it counts!



The Obligatory Doctor Who Panel was one of the best attended of all of the cons I have been to. BONUS: can you find my cousin Sharon in this picture? HINT: she's the one with the book in her lap...

I Guess She Didn't Care For My "Money Stays In My Bank Account" Guarantee

EGO BUILDER OF THE CON #2: A woman took one look at the cover of a copy of *What Were Once Miracles are Now Children's Toys* and sniffed, "I bought your book last year. It's still sitting on my shelf." She seemed somewhat irate about it, as if it was somehow **my** fault that she hadn't read the book!

I'm Sure All Of The Subsequent Furtive Finger Pointing And Whispered "He's the one!"s Were Just My Imagination

At the panel on *Doctor Who*, I mentioned that I didn't care for Matt Smith in the title role. It may have been a bit of a ranty mention. That lasted five minutes. With much handy gesticulation. Fortunately, fans of the show are very forgiving: after a couple of moments of stunned silence, somebody in the audience changed the subject and we never spoke of it again.

I...I Know I Have To Lose Some Weight, But Was That Really Necessary?

"You're the M Class planet!"

- somebody recognized me from my description in the Con*Cept convention programme

The Little Science Fiction Convention That Could

Because Nothing Shows Your Fans How Much You Appreciate Them Like A Communicable Illness

On Monday, I got a flu shot. By Wednesday, the flu was raging through my body. By Friday, the first day of SFContario, I was coughing and sneezing and ached all over. I find it's a good idea to come prepared to these things.

I Write Alternate Universe Stories And I'm Not All There – Does That Count?

Vampire fiction author Karen Dales was pale from pneumonia through most of the convention. When I first saw her, I thought, "Wow. This is somebody who is really willing to go the extra mile to promote her writing!"

If You Look Around The Circle Of Petri Dishes And You Don't See It, The Disease Vector Is You

On the first day of SFContario, a woman walked up to my table in the dealer's room and told me how much she had enjoyed reading my first book. I didn't feel sick for the rest of the con. I swear, praise is better than penicillin!

How Not To Ingratiate Yourself With A Well Known Writer

In the last time slot of the convention, I was the moderator of a panel called "Cyberpunk: Is It Dead? Did It Ever Really Exist?" It's the end of the con, the tired and achy have returned to my body and, although the panel went well, the following exchange occurred afterwards:

ME: We met at last year's SFContario. I told you how much I enjoyed reading *Lady of the Mazes*.

CONVENTION GUEST OF HONOUR KARL SCHROEDER: Well, thank you.

ME: If you don't mind my saying so, you look much better now than you did then.

SCHROEDER: Oh, I feel much better, too. After my surgery, I actually felt better than I had for years. (laughs)

ME: I know what you mean. I had heart surgery and had exactly the same reaction. (crickets) So, umm, thanks for being on the panel. It was great.

SCHROEDER: Yeah. Umm. My pleasure.

CON RULE #237: When a well-known author talks to you about details of his personal life, it's a confidence to be cherished. When you talk about details of your personal life with a well-known author, it's creepy oversharing.

How To Avoid Not Ingratiating Yourself With A Well Known Writer

I walked past Author Guest of Honour John Scalzi in the hallway, and I didn't have the urge to walk up to him and say, "You know that book *Old Man's War* that seems so damn popular? Well, I'm a pacifist, so I have studiously avoided military science fiction. Unfortunately, somebody in my science fiction book club recommended *Old Man's War*, so I kind of had to read it. And, I hated it. Hated it, hated it, hated it, hated it. Hated it with a passion undying. Hated it on the molecular level. Hated it with a passion so pure it will probably be passed down to 23 generations of my progeny. Hated it, hated it, hated it, hated it. Understand what I'm saying? I just didn't enjoy it very much."

Of course, if I had said something like that, Scalzi would probably not have signed a copy of the book for me...

SFContario 2 Photo Gallery



Two science fiction awards that I will not be winning. And, not just because they aren't being awarded any more...



Joy Pearl marvels at the disembodied head of a demon while her author husband Stephen asks me, "Why should you have all the fun with floating heads?" Absolutely no reason, Stephen, no reason at all.



It is gratifying to know that so many people were keen to attend the panel I moderated on whether or not there were any new stories in science fiction.



Or, they could have come out to see multiple award winning author Michael Swanwick (second from left, third from right or one of the four from the top). Hard to know, really.



I think the alien creatures speak for themselves...



I include this photograph so that when J. M. Frey becomes an internationally renowned author, I will have proof that I knew her back when she was waiting tables in a Middle Earth tavern. (But, seriously, if John Scalzi had those legs, I probably wouldn't have hated Old Man's War quite so much!)

As Kierkegaard Truly Noted, Science Fiction Conventions Can Only Be Understood Backwards

My first panel at SFContario was called "Are There Any New Stories?" After the con, I realized that it should have been flipped with the cyberpunk panel. Then, when the question "How can you come up with new science fiction stories?" was asked, I could have answered: "Simple. You just have to be Karl Schroeder."

That's Doctor That Dude To You, My Good Man!

Throughout SFContario, I wore my red vest with the "Ask me about fantasy and science fiction" pin. On the subway home on Saturday night, I got on the train around the same time as half a dozen frat boys, each at least a head taller than me. One gestured vaguely in

my direction and asked in a voice louder, no doubt, than he had intended: “What’s with that dude?”

You have no idea, friend. You really have no idea...

Naked and Strangely Lopsided: An Arisia Adventure

Travelling Hopefully 1: Plane In Vain?

Getting to the airport to catch my plane to the Arisia science fiction convention in Boston was like Murphy’s Law on Crack.

I had set my alarm for 9am, so, naturally, my dad (who kindly agreed to give me a ride to the airport) woke me up at 8:30. Now, you may not think that half an hour is a big deal, but my body, which had only had about four hours of sleep, would beg to differ. And, my body begging is not a sight most people want to be confronted with at any hour of the day!

Now, I’m not superstitious or anything, but it seems suspicious that the first major snowfall of the year occurred on this Friday the 13th. Traffic on the highway was ugly and caused the trip to the airport to take longer than it ordinarily would have. Of course, because I had been woken early, we left early, so I actually arrived at the airport only a few minutes later than planned.

Nayman’s Corollary to Murphy’s Law: Misfortunes sometimes have a way of cancelling each other out.

I assumed, because there was no lineup at the desk at Section G, that I would have no trouble getting through. Man plans, god busts a gut. Apparently, my travel agent misspelled my name on the tickets; I would have to go to the Air Canada ticket booth (Section A) to get the ticket reissued in my actual name. Naturally, there was a long lineup there.

When I finally got to the counter, I was told that the window to allow me to get through the airport would close in five minutes, but that it would take longer than that to reprocess my ticket. I wouldn’t be able to get on the plane. Thinking fast, I plaintively cried: “But, I have to get on that plane!” The woman behind the counter was unimpressed by this clever riposte. Thinking more slowly, I pointed out that the plane had been delayed for 15 minutes (it eventually arrived from Boston more than an hour late, and we left an hour after that); surely, this would extend the window long enough for her to process the ticket?

Nayman’s Corollary to Murphy’s Law was two for two.

Travelling Hopefully 2: It’s In The Bag

On the way out of the house, I forgot my black bag. This meant that I did not have: 600 American dollars (but, okay, that's why god created credit cards); the folder with my panel notes (okay, that's why god created...ad libbing); the pad on which I take notes for future writing (umm...that's why...somebody created...err, airport book shops?); all of the flight and hotel information (you can't travel to the US without naming a destination, so I stayed at the Holiday Inn...sshhh...), and; extra batteries for my camera (that's why god created not taking any more pictures).

As people who know me know, I rarely leave my house without my bag. Walking around Arisia without it made me feel naked. Naked, and strangely lopsided.

One More Reason To Admire Him

Unlike most science fiction conventions, Arisia lasts four days. Somebody explained that it extended into Monday because that was Martin Luther King Day, a civic holiday. Wow. You learn something new every day. I did not realize that Dr. King was a science fiction fan.

Steampunk Meets Modern Parenting

QUOTE OF THE CON: "Didn't I tell you that if you wore a corset, you would get attention?"

Arisia In Pictures



Boston: a warm and welcoming town...



Who says science fiction is having trouble attracting young fans?



Yeah, yeah, sometimes hotel staff will give less than perfect service. Still, don't be so dramatic – most people will just leave without a tip!



Was this not the perfect hotel in which to hold a science fiction convention?



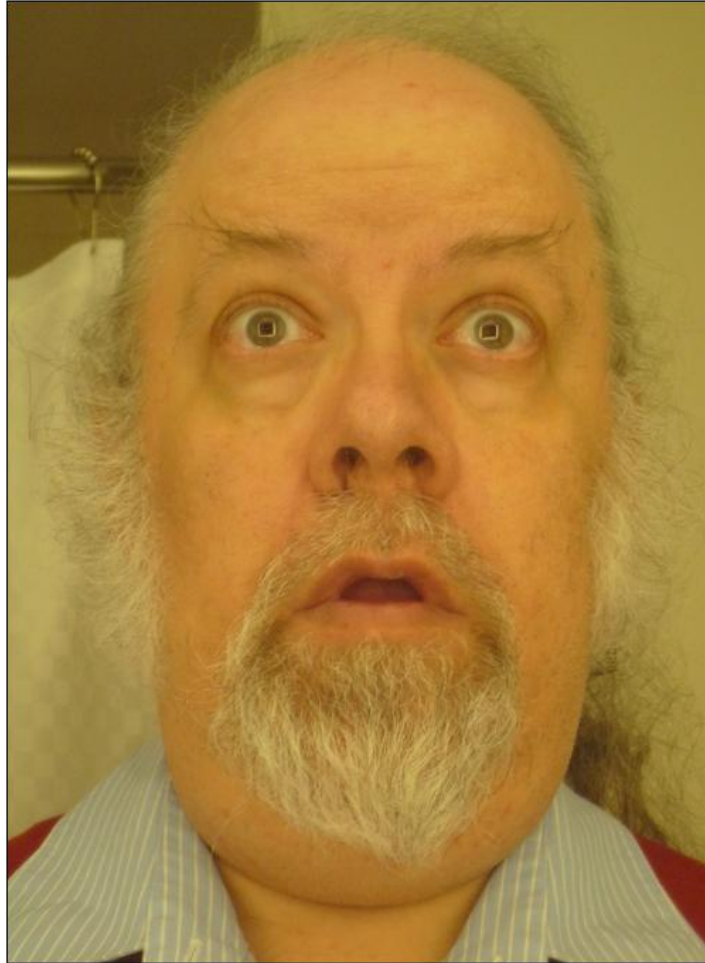
Run for your lives! It's a...a...a cake? Really?. That's right. The suppression of Rebel Forces never tasted so good!



Why does this costume make me think of I Mother Earth?



Yes, yes, I'm photographing you while you're photographing me. How postmodern! It would all be a bit of a yawn if the digital camera hadn't been housed in such a charming case.



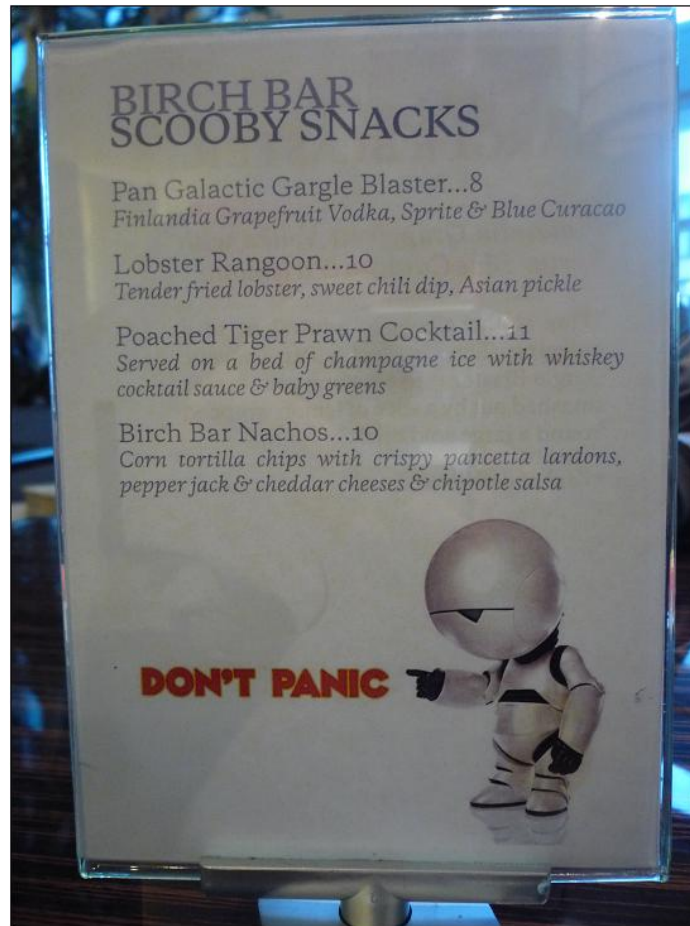
I was as surprised as anybody to find that, in the course of Arisia, I had somehow turned into a cyborg!



HAL 900 is the coolest thing since battery powered powdered wigs!



Okay, NOW it's a party!



Say what you will about the hotel bar, but they clearly understand their customers! (Although, they probably should have used Marvin from the TV series rather than the film...)



Okay, no, wait, NOW it's a party. (That previous picture may actually have been a Dalek. My apologies for the confusion.) In fact, this is the launch party for the SF&F anthology UnCONventional, in which I had a story, and the whole reason I went to Arisia in the first place.



Eating a piece of a cake with a reproduction of the cover of a book to which you have contributed is like eating one of your children, except children never tasted so good!. (This caption may have been influenced by the fact that I was moderating a panel called "Are There Any Taboos Left in Science Fiction?" while I was eating my slab of the cake...)

You'd Be Surprised How Open About Their Emotions People Can Get In Elevators

SECOND BEST QUOTE OF THE CON: "I must admit that I stayed up later than someone making good choices would allow."

And, I Wouldn't Have Had It Any Other Way!

That was Arisia. I came. I read. I ate clam chowder. It was clammy. And, chowdery.

My Writer's So-called Life

Cause, Lord Knows, Not Much Else Of Interest Happens There



Tourists often flock to my bedroom to see the Ritual Changing of the Binders.

As Institutions Go, It May Not Rival The Elora Cheese Grater Festival, But It's Not Without Its Charms...

The Globe and Mail ran an article critical of Robert Lepage's production of Wagner's Ring Cycle at the Met. The headline read: "Lepage aux Folles." Well! I could not allow this to pass uncommented upon!

I wrote a letter to the editor saying that, having seen Lepage's Ring Cycle, I thought it was magnificent, the criticism clearly misplaced. Then, I added that I had been using *Les Pages aux Folles* as the name of my Web site for almost a decade, and that I appreciated the homage in the newspaper's headline. It had to be an homage, didn't it? I mean, they had to be aware of such a long-lived Canadian cultural institution, right?

Oddly enough, this letter was never published.

No.
Glad You Asked?



Looking from the desk where I do most of my writing towards my bookshelf, I wondered:
Do the bedrooms of most writers come to resemble book warehouses over time?

Ad Astra
The Convention to End All Conventions (This Month)

Hi, Mom!



For the first time since I started attending science fiction conventions a couple of years ago, one was in a hotel just down the street from where I live. Yaaaaaay, Ad Astra! Way to go! Okay, it's a long street, and there's a bit of a jag, but, if you look really close, you can almost make out my house! (Unhelpful arrow has been added for maximum reader confusion.)

If Only All Protest Movements Could Be So Successful!

I arrived at the hotel about an hour before Ad Astra officially started. Unlike other cons I've been to, the tables set out in the hallways for the small dealers didn't have barely decipherable scraps of paper telling us where to set up. I suggested that we squat at tables, which, for one of the other dealers, sparked the idea of Occupy Ad Astra.

Topical. Almost political. Okay, I thought, I can run with this...into the ground. We're Occupy Ad Astra! And, we demand...to get our tables. Oh, and world peace! (Always have to throw in a negotiable demand, right?) We won't leave this space until we're told which space we should be in.

And, eventually, we were.

Personally, I Would Have Preferred To Bathe In Public Adoration...

The writers were tucked away in an area of the hotel that bordered on the pool. In any given hour, more people in bathing suits passed by us than con-goers. When I explained to people how to find us, I told them to follow the scent of chlorine. Not that I have a bad word to say about our placement. At least, not before I get my voice back...

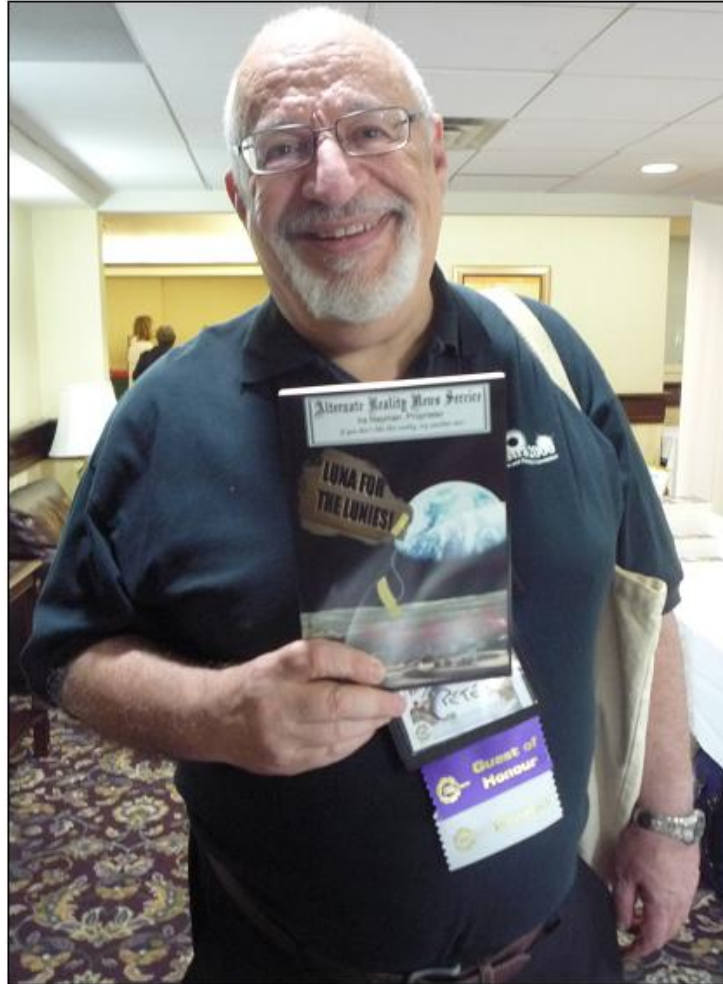
None Of The Text I Wrote Survived Still, At Least She Spelled My Name Correctly...

My Web Goddess had been telling me for the longest time that I wasn't doing enough to promote the fact that I had won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest. "You should do more to promote the fact that you won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest," she repeatedly told me, "because it's awesome that you won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest and people would be impressed that you won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest if only they knew that you won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest. If I was you, the fact that I won the 2010 Swift Satire Writing Contest would be prominent in all my publicity."

When she volunteered to design posters for my books for Ad Astra, I should have known what would happen, but, well, see for yourself...



See Ira Write Like A Dick And Jane Primer For No Discernible Reason.
Write Like A Dick And Jane Primer, Ira, Write Like A Dick And Jane Primer.



See Peter. Peter is a Guest of Honour. Be a Guest of Honour, Peter, be a Guest of Honour. See Peter's Guest of Honour badge. That is how you know Peter is a Guest of Honour.

See Peter hold up Ira's book. Hold up Ira's book, Peter, hold up Ira's book. Peter does not have to hold up Ira's book. Peter Is a Guest of Honour. See Peter support a Canadian author. Support a Canadian author, Peter, support a Canadian author. That is why Peter is a Guest of Honour.

As A Photographer, I'm A Great Sous Chef/International Man Of Mystery



This is me being artsy. It's good, every so often, to remind the world why some people's artsy inclinations should not be indulged.

He Came.

He Read The Book.

He Bought The T-shirt (Which He Still Wears, So That's Something, I Guess...).

I had three new books to sell at Ad Astra: the third collection of *Alternate Reality News Service* stories and two anthologies that had stories I had written in them. One of the

highlights of the con for me was when people came up to my table and bought the new ARNS book because they had enjoyed reading one or both of the previous books.

Of course, I also had to deal with one person who told me that he had started reading my first book and didn't much care for it. But, he was just another writer, so how much store can we really put in his opinion?

Science Fiction Author Shares Pearls Of Wisdom As Punster Is Thwapped Mercilessly!



Author Stephen Pearl makes an important point (about the optimum size of a watermelon to take on a space voyage?) to an amused science fiction fan. And, isn't this what conventions are all about? Wearing a *Dr. Who* Scarf?

Oh, and the interaction between artists and fans, too, I guess...

I Have Floating Heads In My Writing, But Did I Think Of This Promotion? Some People's Genius Knows No Bounds



The floating head was a brilliant promotional idea for Stephen's new book, *Nukekubi*. The book is about a demon who detaches his head from his body at night, finding people to scare to death so that it can feed off of their negative emotions.

Virtually nobody at the con saw the floating head. Those who were tall enough, however, felt it, banging their noggins on it as they approached our table. I suggested that Stephen and Joy, his wife, sell people books while they were stunned. We all laughed. But, by Sunday afternoon, were they looking at the floating head a bit wistfully...?

I've Always Thought Of Myself More As An Aardvark Than A Camel...



4 pm You're Getting Punchy! Go Home!

Sunday is always a giddy time at science fiction conventions, a combination of too much rich food and poor beverage choices, too little sleep and unbearable amounts of sexual tension, both fulfilled and, especially, unfulfilled. Somebody suggested panel mashups (ie: *The Lost Sherlock*, combining *Sherlock* with *The Lost Girl*) where one or both of the scheduled panels are sparsely attended. I just thought the idea would keep people on their toes.

12 pm Do You Wanna Date My Avatar? Urban Fantasy

1 pm Ghost Stories and The Elevator Pitch

2 pm Steampunk 2001: *A Space Odyssey*

3 pm Tea, You're Doing it Wrong: Flesh or Brains?

Your Face and My Polaris

I Was Cracking Jokes All Weekend – Was I A Birthday Card?

The Polaris science fiction convention took place on the weekend of July 6 to 8. July 8 happens to be my birthday. You do the math. In planning my approach to the science fiction convention, I did, I must admit, consider playing the birthday card. No, not the

one containing cheap sentiments that you buy for 79 cents to avoid having to express how you really feel about a person. The one where I say to potential customers: “You’re not going to buy one of my books? ON MY BIRTHDAY? **WHAT KIND OF A HEARTLESS BASTARD ARE YOU?**”

Fortunately, sales were so good this year that I didn’t have to do that. How good? I sold all three books in the *Alternate Reality News Service* series to a man in a “Don’t Panic” t-shirt before I even opened the table on Sunday morning. I didn’t need to panic.

He Was An American, So I Guess We Have To Make Allowances...

On a panel on “Communicating on the Internet,” one of my fellow panellist’s opening remarks were on how he could get the personal information of anybody in the room in less than two minutes – he had been a hacker in a previous life – he had ways. The first time he said this, we all nodded, agreeing that his advice to be careful was sage. By the sixth or seventh time he said this, we were all huddled under our chairs, a bonfire of electronic devices in the middle of the room keeping us warm.

Who says science fiction conventions aren’t educational?



Pity the poor panel attendees who do not know the horrors that are to come. I could have shown you an “after” picture, but I really wanted this column to have a PG rating.

Armed And Strangerous

One of the highlights of any science fiction convention, is, of course, the weapons. This year’s Polaris was no exception.



Big gun.



Bigger gun.



Biggest gun. It's like Sesame Street, really, except without the felt allergies.



Nothing expresses post-apocalyptic chic quite like a crossbow.



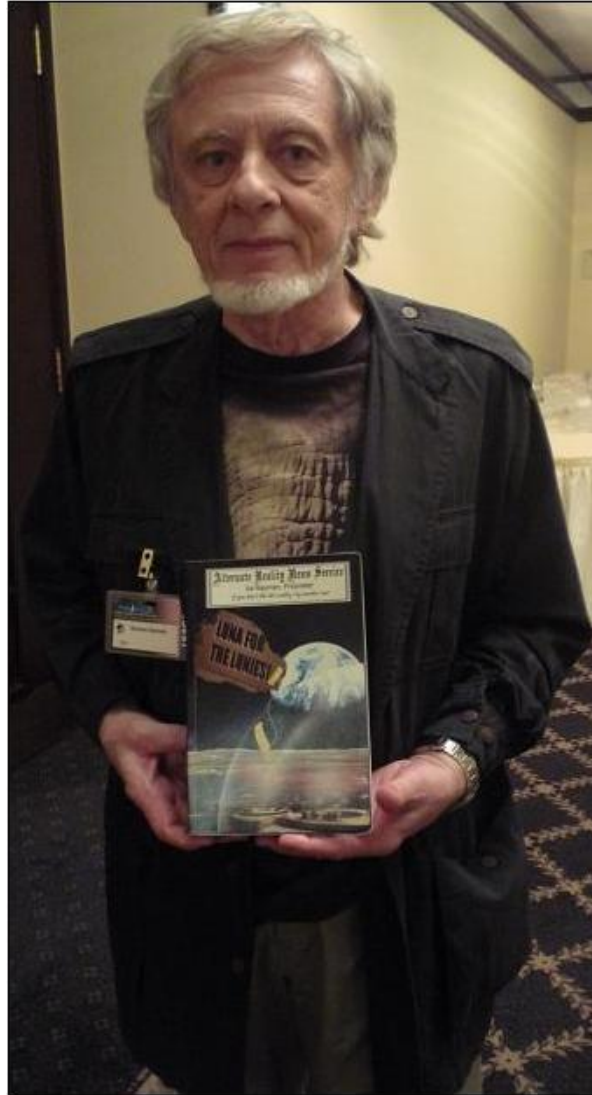
As far as I'm concerned, if this woman wants the last buttered scone on the plate, she can have it!

Oh, You Know You'd Love If It Happened To You!

I was on a panel about "The Singularity," where we ended up talking a lot about artificial intelligence. An older gentleman sitting in the front row offered a lot of useful, interesting information, including one gem that was prefaced, "I was talking to Marvin Minsky one day, and he said..."

Of course he did. Because the person in the front row was Author Guest of Honour Norman Spinrad.

I asked Spinrad if he would be so kind as to pose for a photograph holding one of my books (I do that); he graciously agreed (world famous authors do that). He seemed far more interested in a sheet I had brought with me that detailed the snakes of Ontario, so I gave him a copy of that, too. I try to be gracious about such things...



Pity poor Norman Spinrad! Oh, the indignities visited upon famous authors at science fiction conventions!

Apparently, The Way To A Man's Heart Is To Give Him High Cholesterol Foods That Will Destroy It – Who Knew?

On Saturday, one of the volunteers at the convention brought heavenly miniature chocolate brownies that she had made herself **and she brought enough to share with the whole class!** I swear, if she wasn't one fiftieth my age, I would have fallen in love with her on the spot!

Terry Pratchett Doing Magic Tricks? I Would Pay Good Money To See That!

Rumours that things would be different at next year's con were rife at Polaris. Rank the following rumours in order of most likely to least likely to happen:

- the entire cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* will appear...for five minutes...for a brief detour on their way to Comic Con...
- James Cameron will premier two seconds of footage from a promo for the pre-trailer of the trailer for the final *Avatar* sequel
- the science fiction convention will be replaced by an academic conference on the representation of Tolkein's ents in popular culture
- people in the costumes of Avengers you've never heard of (most of whom appeared in one issue of the comic book and were immediately killed off) will circulate among fans
- two words: topless Klingon karaoke!

Preheat Oven To 975 Degrees, Brush With Greatness, Cook For 37 Seconds Or Until Burnt To A Crisp To Taste

Who had the bigger brush with greatness?

While I was in a panel on Saturday afternoon, my sister and nephew sat at my table. That just happened to be the time Wil Wheaton walked past the table; apparently, my nephew told him how much he liked Wheaton's appearances on *The Big Bang Theory*. The next day, Wheaton walked past the table while I was there and almost looked at me.

Let's call it a draw. No, really, I insist...

Fans Can Be So Fickle. You Knew Wil Wheaton's Name. I'm Just Sayin...



Oh my gosh, it's Fargo! You know, umm...Fargo! From Eureka! No, not the old Greek scientist guy running down the street naked and dripping wet! The TV show? Eureka! Umm, yeah, what's his name...Noel? Norman? Alistair? Okay, who cares what his name is?! It's freaking Fargo from Eureka! (photo by Lisa Nayman)

Photo Roundup



*It was like they came from different universes, and yet they made the relationship work.
Mostly by not asking each other what they did at work...*



Is that a directional arrow in your pocket or are you just glad to – what? Too obvious?



The truth about Darth Vader's downtime activities revealed!



Each year, fans worry about the aging science fiction community. And, each year, there is at least one bundle of cuteness to remind us...of how really old we're getting!

And, Remember: Future Events Are Just Memories We Haven't Yet Had Implanted In Our Brains By Rekall, Inc.!

All in all, a great time was had. See everybody next year!

Oh, wait...

The Gathering is Called Can*Con, Not Can't*Con

Sincerity – The Intro

On the train to Can*Con, a science fiction convention held in Ottawa, I met fellow author Timothy Carter (*Evil*, *Epoch* and *The Cupid Wars*, among others). He told me that his publisher had decided to take three of his titles out of print. What a terrible way to start a con I hadn't even arrived at yet! Timothy is not only a smart and funny writer, but he wears a mean fedora. A mean fedora, I tell you! I hope he has luck finding another publisher to take up his books soon, because he deserves it.

Then, I thought: *That wasn't very funny*. So: nyuhingnyuhayariddenflibben!

What? It worked for Jerry Lewis!

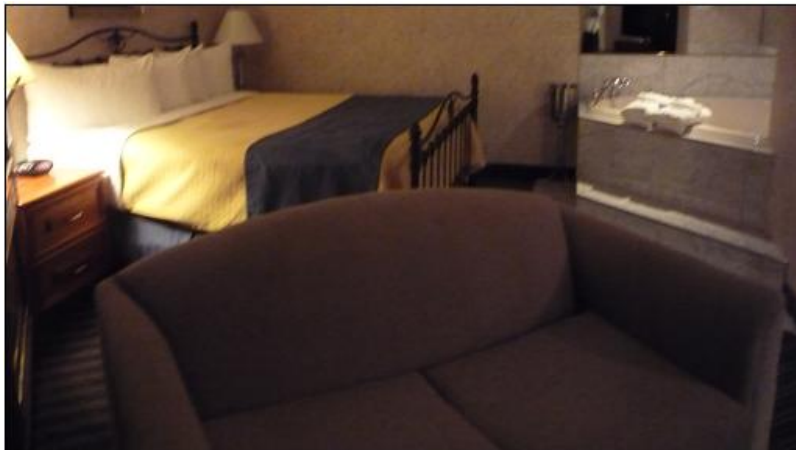
I'm Still Trying To Figure Out Which Moral...

According to the con Web site, it was being held at the Best Western Ottawa-Kanata. However, when I caught a cab at the Via Rail station, the cabbie insisted that there was no Best Western hotel in Kanata. I hadn't written down the street address (NOTE TO SELF: in future, always write down the hotel street address), but I did have the hotel phone number. So, in a fit of not knowing what he was getting himself into, the cabbie gave me his cell phone and suggested I talk to somebody at the hotel.

Me. I have never used a cell phone in my life. To say that my first try didn't go well is an understatement; I hope calls to Tuktoyaktuk aren't that expensive. We finally worked it out, though: the hotel was actually in Bell Corners. But, it was **called** the Best Western Ottawa-Kanata.

It was a moral victory.

All Your Stereotypical Ideas About The Nation's Capital In Two Photographs



A hot tub opposite the bed – what luxury!



And, a view to die for!

Fortunately, Chlorine Burns Out The Receptors In Your Nose, So, After A While, You Stop Noticing It

Panels at the con were held in three different rooms, two divided out of the main ballroom and one next to the pool. The one next to the pool smelled of chlorine. And, I thought: *This smells just like the dealer's room at SFContario!* [It is also close to a hotel pool.] *It's like they wanted me to feel at home!*

I Believe It Was Descartes Who First Explored The Mind/Mouth Dichotomy (Although It May Have Been Moe Howard)



I offer this photo of Jasmine, Alyssa and S. M. in the spirit of my lifelong belief that redheads should always be encouraged in their, uhh, redheadedosity?

So, this is how things work for me.

I asked S. M. Carrière if I could get a photograph of her table. I didn't have any purpose in mind; I just photograph as many things as I can at cons and find a use for as many as I can when I get home and am writing about my experience. S. M. graciously agreed. After I had taken a couple of photos, she asked if she could take a photograph of me.

Now, you know how your brain and your mouth have an agreement to work together to minimize inane utterances? And, sometimes, your mouth starts working, but your brain is momentarily distracted by a shiny object and leaves the mouth to fend for itself? And, if you're really unlucky, your brain returns its attention to your mouth just as it is finishing up its solo pronouncement, much to your brain's horror? Well, that's sort of what happened when I responded: "Why would you want a picture of me at your table?"

S. M. pointed out that it would make more sense if she could get a picture of me at my table. We all had a good laugh as I slunk over to my table, my brain cursing shiny objects and vowing to work harder at coordinating speech with my mouth in the future.

I'm Not A Hero, I Just Admire Them On TV

So, this is how things also work for me.

A volunteer enters the dealers' room with an adorable little girl – she's maybe six or seven years old – wrapped in a towel. She had just been swimming at the hotel pool, and she was having trouble breathing due to her asthma. She didn't have any medication on her. The volunteer asked if anybody had an inhaler.

And, of course, the room being dominated by writers, three quarters of us volunteered ours.

POSTSCRIPT: Since I had the table closest to the door, the girl used my puffer. When I asked the volunteer a couple of hours later how the child was, she said that the child was fine. Okay, so it's not exactly *House, M.D.*, but we all do what we can, right?

And, My Colon Thanks Them For The Effort

Astonishingly, the hospitality suite at the con had fresh fruit. And, hot dogs. But, they had fruit. And, salt and vinegar chips. But, fruit. And peanut butter, chocolate chip and homemade oatmeal cookies. Fruuuuuuuuuittt!

Hey – they tried.

Split Finger Soup?



What do you serve a Klingon for dinner? Yeah, I know the joke has an obvious punchline, but I lost three fingers learning it, so cut me some slack, okay?

Sincerity – The Extro

I like small science fiction conventions; I find that they have a much warmer, more intimate vibe than big cons. At Can*Con, for example, a programmer actually asked me if I had enjoyed being on a panel he had put me on. A programmer. Asked me. About how I felt about a panel he had put me on. When does that ever happen in real life?!

I got to spend some time with cool friends and hopefully made some new ones. Can*Con was a really good time.

Nyuhingnyuhayariddenflibben!

Putting the Ario Back in SFContario

I May Not Know Poetry, But I Know What I Write

Ode On a Grecian, Spurned

I'm not a one to throw brickbats,
But you could sometimes hear crickets
In SFContario's dealers room.
To say that things in there were slow
Is like saying there is the occasional fire in Buffalo,
Or that an unpleasant person is Doctor Doom.

In the organizers' defence
Of the poor attendance,
The previous week was the World Fantasy Convention.
By the time they came across it
Their energy (not to mention their funds) were likely exhausted,
So SFContario could not get people's full attention.

I do not mean to be preachy,
But they may well have to step up their outreachy
Efforts.
Although, as far as an effort to be fair is,
I could point out that next year there will be no Polaris –
So I'll bet that people show up to SFContario in great spurts!

Unexpectedly Not Bumpy (Unlike My Head...)

There were characters on the con badges that looked like Braille, only they weren't raised. I thought that was odd, although, a couple hours after I noticed it, I realized that I probably didn't want blind people feeling up my chest. I'm trying to be more friendly and outgoing at cons, but there are limits!

I'll Bet He Secretly Runs A Shelter For Homeless Puppies, Too...Bastard!

In one of his tours around the dealers' room, Robert J. Sawyer told me that he liked the licence plate motif on the vest I was wearing. "I especially like the fact that it has Canadian licence plates," he commented. I stammered something about liking that aspect of it, too and explained that I had actually bought it at a con a couple of years ago.

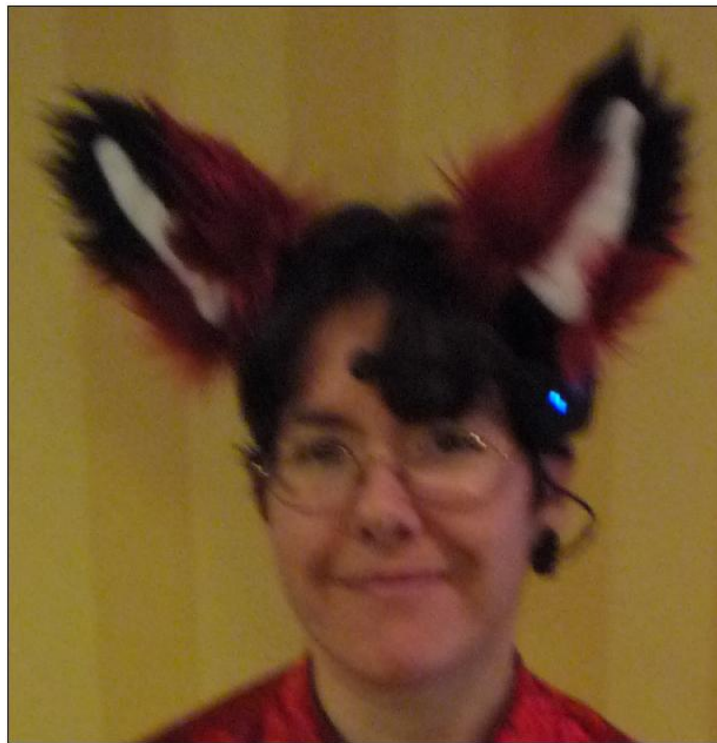
Damn him for being so nice! Any thought I may have had of reviving our one-sided feud (you know – the one that was fought entirely in my mind) was completely dispelled.

What If They Gave A Reading And Nobody Showed Up?

I read through my material anyway, figuring it was good practice. Or, at least, I started to. I would have practiced for the whole half hour if, five minutes in, somebody from the hotel hadn't come to replace the table in the room. Sometimes, nobody can be very cruel.

What Were Once Miracles Are Now Children's Toys* **But, Uhh, You Already Knew That, Didn't You?*

Author and publisher Catherine Fitzimmons had furry ears. No, I'm pretty sure it wasn't a medical condition, it was a costume. Fur is usually easily found at science fiction conventions, nothing to see here, please move on. Only, the ears moved.



Okay, still no biggie. For the last couple of years, animals that sat on people's shoulders (parrots were quite popular – arrrrr!) were popular. They moved with the application of a wire control that went down the owner's arm. Been there, screamed at that.

Only, these ears had no controls. Or, to be more precise, the controls for the movement of the furry ears was worn on the person's head; to mimic real random motion, the ears were controlled **by the brainwaves of the wearer!**



How cool is that? Don't bother answering – it's wicked cool.

There Is No "I" In Painelist **No, Wait...**

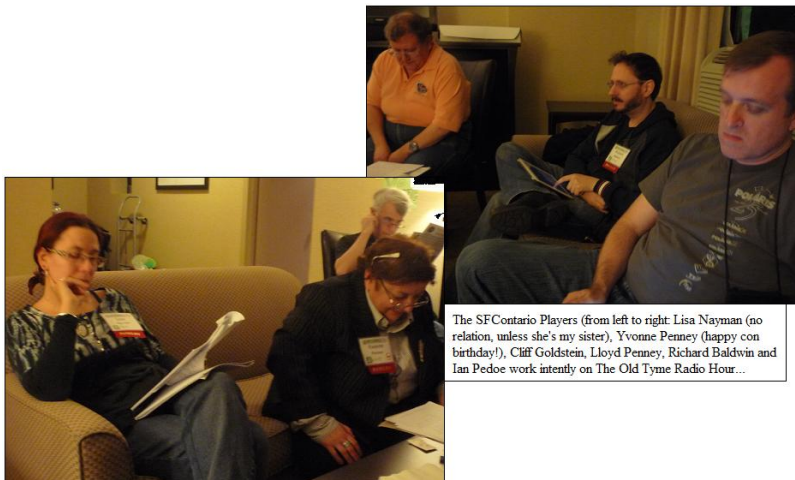
One of the panels I was on explored the work of Japanese anime filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. My plan was to open with, "Miyazaki's films are awesome – what more really needs to be said?" Then, we would all use the remainder of the hour to quietly remember our favourite scenes from his films.

Fortunately, the other panelists had a better approach.

Other Images Of SFContario



Not the circle of life – just the circle of the Gardenview room where panels were held. And, yes, if you were in a room with a woman who wore her veiny bits on the outside of her legs, you would probably give her your complete attention, too!



The SFContario Players (from left to right: Lisa Nayman (no relation, unless she's my sister), Yvonne Penney (happy con birthday!), Cliff Goldstein, Lloyd Penney, Richard Baldwin and Ian Pedoe work intently on The Old Tyme Radio Hour...



...so that they can have fun during the performance. (Darkness courtesy of a wonky camera flash.)

If We Could Just Tap Into That Energy, We Could Wean Ourselves Off Of Fossil Fuels!

As usual, a lot of us were tired on Friday afternoon as we began setting up in the dealer's room. It occurred to me that we often get energized by the con itself; as a result, even

though we have worked over the weekend (and some of us partied, as well, or so I'm told), we have more energy by the end than we started with.

As it happened, by the end of SFContario, most of us were drained. Okay, okay. This is a wrinkle, to be sure. However, in accord with the scientific method, I am not prepared to entirely abandon my theory just because there appears to be contradictory evidence. No, I have incorporated the new information into my theory: those who toil at conventions are energized to the extent that they interact with the public. I was at my most lively at SFContario when I was at panels or in the brief periods of activity in the dealers room.

Okay, the evidence is anecdotal, to be sure, but how hard would it be to set up a controlled experiment to prove the thesis? I could even make up a mathematical formula if you think it would help.

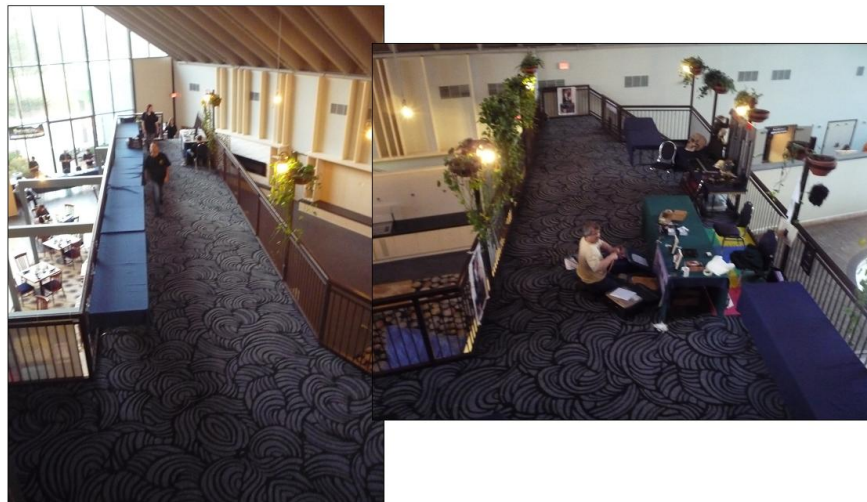
In the meantime, I have that much more respect and admiration for the energy fans bring to science fiction conventions.

Birth of a Genre...Con

Please Let Me Vent **My Confused Assent**

Will I go? Won't I go?
I don't know.
Can I enjoy myself
In Guelph?
This is the first year
A con will be held here.
I go back and forth
On what it's worth.

...Of, Among Other Things, An Empty Pool...



The Holiday Inn at which GenreCon took place had a really interesting layout, with four floors of rooms that looked out onto a huge atrium. This walkway floated above the first floor. Not, perhaps, the best place for a dealer's table, given that con-goers could go to everything they needed on the first floor and avoid this one completely. Still...

...great, umm, view...

Comic Anarchy, To Be Sure, But Anarchy Nonetheless!



Honestly, if I were cloning Charlie Chaplins, I would want somebody with some authority to ride herd over them. Anything less, and I would be courting anarchy!

Sometimes, Even A Zombie Needs To Complain About Room Service...



Remember: It's The Knights And Barons Who Are The Real Wealthmakers!



Aah, the Galt Room, where disgruntled World of Warcraft players can sit around and complain about all of the moochers in their agrarian society who live off the hard work of their fiefdom's liege!

Parsing Evil



Dalek...



Daleker...



Dalekest!

Perhaps They Wanted Me To Do A Read-in For Peace...

THE STORY SO FAR: At SFContario the previous week, not only did nobody show up for a reading I was scheduled to give, but, about ten minutes in, somebody from the hotel asked if I would please vacate the room so that he could replace a small table with a larger one. It doesn't get any worse than that, right?

Right?

AT GENRECON: A revolving door in the programming department meant that much of the schedule was still in flux on the first day of the con. In one way, this actually worked well: on Friday, Stephen Pearl and I (but mostly Stephen) managed to get three panels onto the schedule (with the addition of J. M. Frey, they were a hoot – literally, we had to clean up the owl crap afterwards).

In another way, well: I asked for a time slot to do a reading. Initially, the only one that was available was five pm Sunday afternoon, the last hour of the con. I thanked them, but didn't take it; Sunday was get away day for people who were there all weekend, and I didn't expect there to be many people left. After a little juggling, a slot opened up at 10 am Sunday morning. I figured most people would be sleeping off parties at that point, but that perhaps one or two eager owlets would be up for a reading at that time.

When I got to the room, this is what I found:



I'm not sure if organizers felt that my reading would put people to sleep, or if they thought my prose would benefit from a cozy atmosphere. As it happened, nobody showed up to this reading, either, so there was no way to test either hypothesis!

Headline Is, For Once, The Appropriate Word



You can tell a lot about a person by seeing which disembodied head they prefer. If you like the head on the left better, for example, you are probably old-fashioned, wish you owned a Maserati, are a big fan of True Blood (even though you think some of the plotlines are a bit ridiculous), have trouble pronouncing the word “indefatigable” and supported the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War and the Sino-Japanese War. If you like the head on the right better, you’re probably under 16 or over 27, like the look of fishnet stockings but don’t like how they feel to the touch, believe the second Star Wars trilogy is better than people give it credit for, would kill for a good half-caf vanilla latte right about now and still believe – despite all available evidence – in the goodness of people. If you prefer the troll in the image on the right, get help. Now.

Now, There’s Something I Bet You Won’t See On *The Walking Dead*!



After a long day's shambling and moaning, a zombie deserves to relax with a glass of water, his cellphone and a couple of magic markers. Especially the moaning. A long day's moaning can really take it out of the undead!

**Don't Get Poutie,
But We're Outtie!**

I don't resent
The fact I went.
Although rough, the way it was run,
I had lots of fun
At GenreCon one.

Easter is a Con!

I, Uhh, Will Allow That I May Not Be Doing It Quite Right...

I went to Bradford, England to attend the European print launch of my first novel, *Welcome to the Multiverse** at the Eastercon science fiction convention. Having a book launch is like having sex: six months of anticipation for an hour of bliss!

** Sorry for the Inconvenience*

**Unlike The Trip Back (But I'm Sure The Child's Trauma Won't Last For Its
WHOLE Life)**

Although there were several families with small children on the plane to Europe, there was no crying until about 10 minutes before we landed. TRULY, THIS FLIGHT WAS BLESSED!

Do You Have A Better Explanation?

My suitcase has three zippers: two open areas that you can put things in while the middle one opens a section that you can't put anything in. As far as I can tell, it's to make the suitcase look bigger so that when it is being chased on the African savannah by a lion, it will look more threatening.

Although That Does Seem To Defeat The Point Of World Travel

When I got to England, there was a lot of snow on the ground and I was exhausted – they sure know how to make a foreign visitor feel at home!

Not Asking How People From The Area Felt About Margaret Thatcher Seemed Like A Wise Move

The cab ride from the Leeds airport to my hotel in Bradford was instructive.

As we drove around a big, fenced off hole in the ground, the cabbie – whose name was Hassan – explained that it was supposed to be a large shopping centre, but that the company that was supposed to have built it couldn't come up with the money. That was a decade ago.

And, I thought, Well, here's a missed opportunity: they should advertise this as a tourist attraction. Most cities with big holes eventually fill them with buildings, but not Bradford! Is 10 years too soon to designate the hole as a heritage site?

Cabbie Hassan explained that the manufacturing base in the area had largely collapsed in the 1980s, leaving it with large pockets of poverty. I responded that I could tell by the number of dollar stores we passed on the drive in. He replied with a non-committal grunt.

It didn't occur to me until much later that you can't have dollar stores in a country whose currency is not the dollar. (They were pound stores.) The ugly Canadian strikes again!

After a pause for thought (or possibly to keep himself from laughing), Cabbie Hassan asked: "Do you like curry?"

"It's okay..." I cautiously replied.

"Leeds is the curry capital of the country!" he enthused. Not only was it easy to get in the area, but something like a third of the curry consumed in Britain was produced there.

And, still, somehow, I managed to avoid it.

The British Anti-stereotype Society Wasn't Thrilled, Either...

My first meal in England was fish and chips. I know, I know, but, like the famous mountain, it was there! As I ate it, I could hear my cardiologist shrieking all the way across the ocean!

I wasn't sure why I was offered white bread with the meal, until I noticed some of the other patrons making a chips sandwich with it. As I watch in fascination, I couldn't help but think, *we really are two nations divided by a common cuisine!*

Next Year, Easter Needs To Be Held In June

Did you know that England switches to Daylight Savings Time three weeks later than Canada...or the United States...or just about any other civilized nation? That meant I lost a second hour of sleep to enhanced environmental consciousness this year. The things I (involuntarily) do for the planet!

Lime Vodka Collins And Lagers And Beers, Oh My!

Eastercon is a literary science fiction convention; in addition to the writer guest of honour, there were 30 writers listed in the con programme. Oh, and there was alcohol. Everywhere. In the lobby of the hotel. In the green room. In fact, volunteers from the green room delivered alcohol to panellists before their panels started.

I hesitate to suggest what this may say about British science fiction fandom. Or, for that matter, Britons generally. Or, it occurs to me, writers. I will say that it was one of the friendliest cons I've ever been to...

Making Me Feel Right At Home – The Instant Replay

I had to shuttle it from the hotel where I was staying to the hotel where the con was taking place. On one of the trips, I met a woman who, it turned out, was a native Torontonion who had moved to England over a decade earlier. We mostly talked about Rob Ford and Stephen Harper. Don't you just hate it when your work finds you on vacation?

Or, Perhaps They Just Had A Very Small Repertoire

Outside my reading, loud drumming started, soon followed by rhythmic singing. Apparently, Zulu singers were a featured act at the convention. It must have occurred to somebody that the hallway adjacent to rooms where several panels were being held was not the best place to rehearse, as they soon stopped.

It's A British Word...It Just Hasn't Crossed The Ocean Yet...Shakespeare Was British, You Know, And He...He Made Up Lots Of Words!

Talking to people at the convention was a joy: they had such awesome accents! No, wait – they were speaking normally, I was the one with the accent. Awesomer!

And, That May Not Be Such A Bad Thing

Somebody at the con was wearing a t-shirt that read: “Killing minions – is there any problem that it can’t solve?” I wanted to create a response t-shirt that read: “Yes. Running out of minions.”

When I suggested this to the person wearing the shirt, he replied, “But, you can’t run out of minions. They’re an infinitely inexhaustible resource.” Clearly, there is a lot to evil genius that I do not know.

Just Another Day in My Life

Some days are full of new experiences.

I publicly read the first chapter of *Welcome to the Multiverse (Sorry for the Inconvenience)* – nothing new, there. I have been doing readings at science fiction conventions for the last three years or so, and, for the last few months, I have read this particular passage. However, this reading was at the Magical Evening of Canadian Authors (MECA), a * SHUDDER * literary event. To give you some idea of how serious the reading was, it was held in a Gastropub. Yeah, I have no idea what they are, either; some place where you can get a more upscale form of indigestion, I gather.

You know how you could tell it was a literary event? Michael Ignatieff was in the audience. I don’t remember ever seeing him at a reading at a science fiction convention! (Although, to be fair, it would have been awesome if he had shown up in a Yoda costume.)

The first half of the evening was made up of readings by three serious novelists. In the second half, Nicole Chardenet (*Sumer Lovin’*) and I brought the silly. I got a rousing round of applause...for thanking the organizer of the event, Ian Shaw, for organizing the event. People in the audience may have enjoyed my reading, as well.

Earlier that the day, I went to Word on the Street (WotS) to distribute cards promoting the MECA (doesn’t the acronym make it sound like a construction set?). I distributed the cards in a little over an hour; then had a couple of hours to kill before I had to be at the restaurant. If I had been thinking, I would have run to the nearest library and strapped myself in for the duration. Instead, I walked around WotS. Talk about letting a pyromaniac wander around a match factory!



Lock up the children, mother – the literary circus is in town and they're takin' over!

To be fair, I was pretty good. I almost made it out of Queen's Park with my bank balance alive before buying my first book, and I only ended up buying two. The first book was written by a friend of mine – I knew it was out and I had intended to get it the next time I saw her with copies for sale. I just didn't expect that that would be so soon. As for my excuse buying the other book, umm, well...although Canadian, the author had lived for several years in Australia, and I got a little koala bear when I purchased her book. Yeah, I know, but it was a really CUTE koala...

In other WotS (doesn't the acronym make it sound like a cheap long distance phone line?) news: I was talking to an author friend when a man in an adjoining booth got my attention and said, "You're the guy with the hat!"

"The hat?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know, the Mad Hatter's hat. I was at a table next to you a couple of years ago."

Aha! I remembered: the last time I had a table at WotS, I did, indeed, wear a Mad Hatter's hat that I had especially made for me. Aah, memories! We laughed. We cried. We didn't really have anything more to say to each other, so I moved on.



Everybody knows that it isn't a proper literary event until at least three people are seen wearing funny and/or funky hats. Unfortunately, I wasn't wearing my Mad Hatter Special, so I'm not sure if this year's Word on the Street counted...



Oh, wait – there were clowns. That’s okay, then.

While I was giving away cards for the reading, I came across two young women who were handing out promotional materials for the film *Ender’s Game*. I told them that I thought what they were doing was pretty gutsy. They shrugged and said it was a job. I asked them how they felt about the boycott of the film. They asked me what I was talking about.

So, I explained that Orson Scott Card, the author of the novel *Ender’s Game*, had made many homophobic remarks, sparking calls for a boycott of the film. (I had forgotten about his racist remarks about President Obama, but, to be fair, I hadn’t really expected this discussion, so I hadn’t prepared for it.) The young women seemed interested, thanked me for telling them what was happening and went back to distributing their material (far away from me, I couldn’t help but notice).

We all have a job to do, I guess.

Doing The Can*Con

Traveling Hopefully Springs Eternal...

This year, Can*Con, an annual science fiction convention in Ottawa, took place on the same weekend as the Canadian Comedy Awards Festival. On the train from



See?

Okay. So, on the train from Toronto, a dozen stand-up comedians sat around me. They laughed a little too loudly at each other's jokes and wistfully commiserated with each other that the comedians in the next car were getting more noise complaints. They did not seem to be mollified by the fact that, a few minutes into the trip, the couple with the baby who had been seated across from me moved to the front of the train. They were somewhat mollified when a VIA Rail worker shook an empty whiskey bottle at them and told them that they were not allowed to bring their own alcohol onto trains and, in any case, they shouldn't leave their empties in the bathroom!

Oh, yeah. I love stand up comedians.

The encounter did inspire me to consider writing a remake of Preston Sturges' *Hail the Conquering Hero*. In my version, a man who has failed to become a comedian in the big city meets a group of successful comedians on his way back to his small home town. They agree to tell everybody he did a killer set if he allows them to sleep on his floor and eat all of the food in his fridge. The problem is that nobody in the town actually cares about a wannabe comedian.

Okay, it may need some work, but still...

Feud For Thought

So, there I was in the Montreal 2017 WorldCon bid party with Robert J. Sawyer and somebody I didn't know. (Having not lived in Montreal for over a decade, I had forgotten that you had to add at least two hours to the official start time for a party before it really got underway. I would never complain about my sister's tardiness after that experience!) Rob said that he was delighted with his Lifetime Achievement Aurora Award, but he worried that it was too soon; he believed he had a lot more to achieve in his life. It may have been rehearsed, but the sentiment felt genuine to me, and I thought we shared a real moment.

Then, the man sitting next to me started talking about Japan, and the moment vanished.

Still, it is apparent to me that my one-sided, imaginary feud with Rob has truly run its course. Perhaps that's just as well: life is about letting go of our petty concerns.

Although, Tanya Huff gave me a sideways, dismissive glance in the dealer's room...

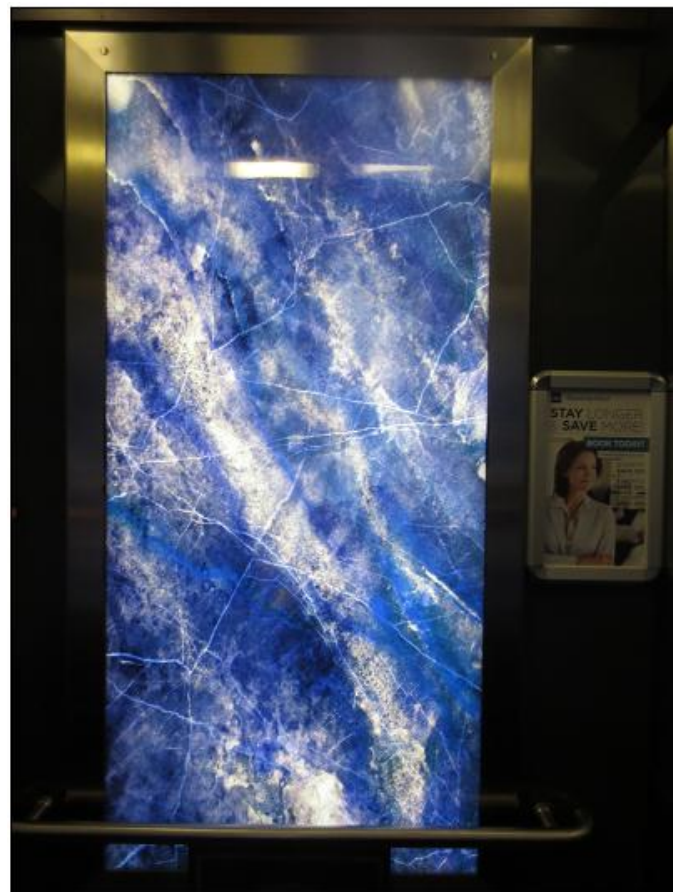
There's No Denying The Visual Evidence...



I think I may have hit on a workable solution to the problem women wearing burkas poses for the Quebec government: when they go out in public, they should hold books in front of their faces. Everybody would win! The PQ government would be able to play to its ignorant base while pretending to be progressive. Muslim women would still look modest in public. Bookstores would win for obvious reasons. Physiotherapists would definitely win because holding a book in front of your face for several hours a day would likely do terrible things to the joints in your arms! Author and artist Sonia Carriere illustrates the new look holding up a book of mine for which she created the cover and interior illustrations. Book burkas – their time has come!



*My display at Can*Con proved Parkinson's lesser known law that books expand to fill the table space available to them. Props to Web Goddess Gisela McKay for the wicked cool banner.*



Some of the people in the hotel were in Ottawa for the Canadian Comedy Awards. How could you tell the difference? They were the ones who rode the elevator for several hours, staring at the colourful pattern and hitting up other passengers for cookies or chips.

Close Encounters Of The Nerd Kind

A man pointed at the pile of *Doorways to Extra Time*, an anthology I have a story in, and proclaimed, “I submitted a story to them. It wasn’t accepted.” Aaaaawkwaaaaard. Still, he said he had no hard feelings about it and bought a copy of the book, so I guess I can remove a couple of the a’s in the previous sentence...

A young man walked up to my table, pointed to the stack of *What Were Once Miracles Are Now Children’s Toys* and claimed that he had borrowed it from his high school library. His high school library! It’s good to know that my efforts at corrupting our nation’s youth now have official government sanction!

At another point in the con, I told somebody who bought a copy of *Alternate Reality Ain’t What It Used To Be*, “I hope you enjoy it.” I often say that. The buyer doesn’t usually respond, “I hope I do, too.” After a second, she said, “I’m sure I will.” A couple of seconds later, she added: “I do enjoy your sense of humour.”

I love it when I’m not the most awkward person taking part in a conversation!

Congratulations To ChiZine, Bundoran Press, Rob Sawyer And Everybody Else Who Won An Aurora Award This Year

What? I’m Not Allowed To Be Sincere? Now, Which One Of Us Is Being Cynical?

As the convention wound down, some of us in the dealers’ room had a discussion about which science fiction award would make the deadliest weapon. Oh, sure, the Hugo Awards come to a nasty point that could inflict serious damage on a body...if carefully aimed. However, the Aurora Awards have multiple sharp points, which makes it easier for people with poor aim to puncture something vital.

The only exception is Robert J. Sawyer’s lifetime achievement award, in which a globe is suspended amidst the silver spires. In short, it tinkles when in motion. I suspect even the most stealthy ninja couldn’t sneak up on a victim with that weapon!

Although, having said that, the silver maple leaves given to the presenters at the Aurora Awards ceremony would make wicked shuriken!

Not that the field of Canadian science fiction is competitive or anything...

It's a (Klingon) Wrap!

Wherein The Efforts Of My Web Goddess To Civilize Me Bring Mixed Results

In the afternoon, I went to see the live screening of the Metropolitan Opera's performance of Dvorak's *Rusalka*. I thought the characters were inconsistent (did the whole second act take place in Bizarro World?), the set was lit by somebody who is obviously allergic to photons and the plot was thinner than a character from *Flatland*. Still, Renee Fleming.

Then, I spent the evening in the company of Klingons.



Culture doesn't get much diverser than that. I love this city!

If It Helps You Accept The Idea, The Icing Is Laced With Arsenic



The event was the annual Klingon Assault Group (KAG) Feast. It was an evening of exchanging war stories, showing off new battle scars and...cake. Because Klingons are rough and tough and don't have anything to prove to anybody and...and...and, anyway, the enjoyment of cake is a constant among all intelligent species in the galaxy, and who are we to argue?

Targ, You're It!



Although many things took place at the event, the KAG Feast is primarily a culinary festival. I found it's best not to ask too many questions about the food. It's called targ? Good enough for me. No, really, I don't need to know how it lived or how you slaughter it to ensure that it's kosher for Jewish Klingons. (I have no idea if there are actually Jewish Klingons – somehow, I doubt it, but the thought amuses me, so let's just take it as given and move on.) The food was very tasty – that's all anybody needs to care about, really.



That having been said, I refuse to eat anything that is trying to escape. A human being among Klingons has to have some standards!

More Proof, As If More Proof Was Needed, Of The Ambiguity Of The Image



Evil Uhura shows us how to subdue a larger attacker with a small weapon that is easily hidden even in her attenuated clothing. Unless I am mistaken and it's actually Evil Naomi Campbell (if that's not redundant) who is showing us how to tickle somebody with a small weapon. It's hard to read the woman's expression – malice or amusement? With a knife at your throat, how much are you willing to gamble?

And, I'm Not Just Saying That Because Of The Blade



Chill is a big, intimidating man in civilian clothing. In costume, I wouldn't want to be on the same **planet** with him (if I didn't know that he was actually a sweetheart of a guy)!

The Hulk Booties Indicate A True Warrior In The Making



Ah, the littlest Klingon (note her chain-mailish vest). She was an angel through the feast and the battle scars competition. She did get a little cryey when the singing of the war songs began, but I could have sworn that she was actually trying to join in. You can't expect months-old younglings to know all the words, but what they lack in knowledge they more than make up for in enthusiasm!

Give Me A Break!

The party was served by two bathrooms out in the hallway (I gather competition for them was limited to knives no longer than six inches – Klingons are not barbarians!). Now, most of us grew up with bathroom doors that automatically unlock when you open them from the inside, but, apparently, these bathroom doors were built long ago in a galaxy far, far away, and could be opened from the inside without unlocking. Of course, Klingons have many ways of entering locked rooms, not all of them involving permanent damage to their doors...or walls, but, to make things go more smoothly, an announcement was made that everybody should be sure to unlock the doors before they left.

I went to the bathroom just before leaving the event. Being a little obsessive-compulsive, I spent two minutes in the bathroom and five minutes making sure the door wasn't locked – so, if it was locked after I left, **it wasn't me**.

The Sincere Bit (Don't Worry – I'll Keep It Short)

Congratulations to Merle Metalin, Krikor Ajemian and everybody else who organized the KAG Feast. Good times.

This Is Why The Klingon Empire Is Not A Democracy

Can we all agree that James T. Kirk was a better Enterprise Captain than Jean-Luc Picard?



Really? There's a few in every crowd! Well, can we at least agree that the trivia contest should have contained more questions about *Buckaroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension*?



Klingons have good taste in classic cult cinema.

Ad Astra, Per of Aces

There's A Joke About Banner Years In Here Somewhere...

Unlike previous years, I did not purchase a table of my own at the science fiction convention Ad Astra – I was there to represent SFCanada, an organization of Canadian

speculative fiction professionals. As such, one of my main duties was to hang the banner over the table. Over the weekend, I tried a number of different looks.



Vanilla

Your basic scotch tape on the wall affair. Not too exciting, but it gets the job done. At least, until the first night, when it falls down.



Casual

Sometimes, hanging on a wall is too much work, and a banner just wants to lie down on the floor and prop itself up against a table, you know? (Kids: don't try this unless it's your own table you're propping yourself up on.)



Kinky

Clamps and twine threaded through grommets – that’s how you put a banner up and really make it stay! Because, let’s be honest, most banners are subs that are just looking for somebody to take control of them!

Uhh...can we just call the weekend a learning experience and leave it at that?

Oh, I’m Smooth!

For a few seconds, I shared an elevator with Rob Sawyer. The first thing that came to my mind to say was: “Haven’t seen you at First Thursday [a monthly meeting of science fiction fans in Toronto] for a while.” So, naturally, the words escaped my brain through my mouth.

Sawyer responded, “Actually, I was there last night. And, I don’t recall seeing you there.” That was the first meeting I had missed in months because, of course, I was preparing for Ad Astra.

Yes, I certainly know how to make friends and influence people!

Don’t Feel You Need To Answer That Question

Is it creepy that three of the four people on the *Veronica Mars* panel were middle aged men?

More About Me Than You Needed To Know – This Should Really Be A Blog

The night before the con, I gave myself a paper cut folding SFCanada pamphlets for the table. Don’t laugh! – it stung for hours!

I’m nothing if not sensitive.

Oh, it gets better. Putting up the SFCanada banner, I managed to impale my finger on an Xacto knife. Because I’m on blood-thinners for a heart condition, the wound bled for the better part of an hour (and the worse part of 20 minutes). The beauty of it was that it happened before the con even officially started!

I'm nothing if not efficient.

If You See A Torrent Of Blood, Don't Panic
It's Just The Cut On My Finger Not Healing As Fast As I Would Like



Somewhere in the hotel an old, framed photograph is hanging on the wall of a spec fic convention held here in the 1920s. If I appear to be in the photograph, I don't want to know!

Is It Bad Etiquette To Debate The Writer Guest Of Honour – Oops, Too Late

In the Con Suite, somebody was pontificating about American politics. I tried to stay away from that discussion, really, I did. I mean, I really am old enough to know better. Unfortunately, owing to a lack of sleep and...other complex factors, no doubt, my mouth engaged him with only passing reference to my brain. (Yes, it seemed to be doing a lot of that over the weekend.) In the middle of the half hour...discussion would be too dignified a description – let's go with pair of nested monologues – I noticed that he was the Writer Guest of Honour. Oh, dear.

I was singularly unimpressed with his rhetoric. He cherry-picked facts. He refused to acknowledge unpleasant truths about the behaviour of his side. He accused my side of doing exactly the same things I was accusing his side of doing. He was arrogant and dismissive. He twisted my arguments.

And, I'm sure he felt that I was exactly the same.

The United States of America is fucked.

Bas Cuisine Has Never Been So Flavoursome!

I had my first encounter with the culinary genius of the walking taco at Ad Astra. They are made of ground beef and fixings (lettuce, salsa and/or sour cream) in a bag of Doritos. I know, eh? I was surprised by just how tasty they were, too.

The Obligatory Earnest Paragraph

I spent Ad Astra hanging out with cool people, many of whom I don't get to see that often and some of whom I had only just met. I was on interesting panels that seemed to engage their audiences. I represented a pretty stellar organization. And, I bought more books than I could afford (but fewer than my con average, so I'd like to think that that somehow puts me ahead).

All in all, there were worse ways to spend a weekend. It's not like I lost a limb or anything!

No. I. Do. Not. Ac-cept. Cre-dit. Cards!



“Ex-ter-mi-nate! Ex-ter-mi-nate!” the Dalek cried.

“Uhh, yeah,” the Yuppie replied. “I’d love to help you with your extermination project. Really, I would. Only I’m late for a meeting, and the boss is going to kill me, and I can’t afford to lose this job because how am I going to pay for Michael’s private school if I do, and if he doesn’t stay in school, it will kill his chances of getting a —”

“SHUT! UP!” the Dalek responded. “SHUT! UP! SHUT! UP! SHUT! UP!”

“There’s no need to be rude,” the Yuppie scolded the death machine.

“Give. Me. Your. Wa-let,” the Dalek demanded.

“I’m sorry?”

“Give. Me. Your. Wa-let!” the Dalek’s demand got more shrill. “In-ter-ste-lar dom-i-nance is ex-pen-sive!”

Yes, science fiction conventions really are fun.

LonCon3: Travelling Hopefully

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single email to a travel agent. These are some of the impressions I had of travelling to and from London for LonCon3, the World Science Fiction Convention:

Going

When I arrived at Pearson International airport in Toronto, the song playing on the PA was Joni Mitchell's "This Flight Tonight." You know, the one with the lyric, "Shouldn't have got on this flight tonight." I prefer the original to the Nazareth cover, but **is that really what somebody about to get on a plane for seven hours really needs to hear? Really?**

* * *

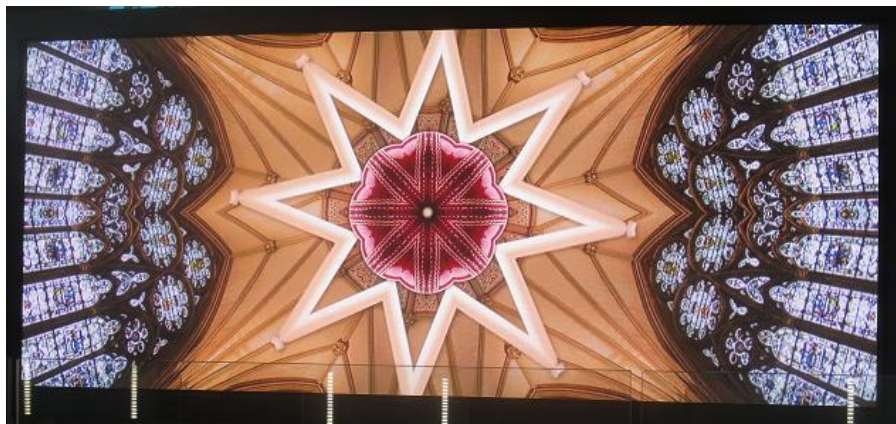
Because the airport is large and difficult to get around in, there are a lot of moving walkways. Towards the end of one was a screen on which a video of a person carefully getting off the walkway was looped. The person was a blockily animated figure that moved spasmodically: I couldn't help but think that it looked like it had a stick up its ass.

And, I thought: *I may be white, but I'm not **that** white!*

* * *

The flight was largely uneventful. I have to believe the pilot had his tongue in his cheek when he announced, "Please remain seated as we are going through weather." That, or he was honing a stand-up comedy routine and his passengers were his first audience.

It's a strange trip, though. Night only lasted about three hours; at one point, I looked out the window of the plane and thought, *It's 2 in the morning, WHY IS THE SUN OUT?* Changing my watch when I got to London didn't help: why did everybody insist it was Wednesday when I was certain that it was still Tuesday?



Heathrow airport is for people who don't use drugs.

* * *

The trip to London was really smooth (to give you some idea of just how smooth: it took less time going through customs than getting a ticket for the London subway, and it was only 7:30 in the morning when I tried!) This wasn't necessarily a good thing.

I arrived at my hotel at 9:30 in the morning. Unfortunately, I couldn't check in until 3 in the afternoon without paying an extra 10 pounds. Since the trip was already expensive, I decided to stow my bag and fill the time as best I could. I was tempted by the all you can eat breakfast, but they don't let you eat it unless you have a room, and...you know.

I had to check to make sure I hadn't booked a room at the Kafka Inn and Spa by mistake.

* * *

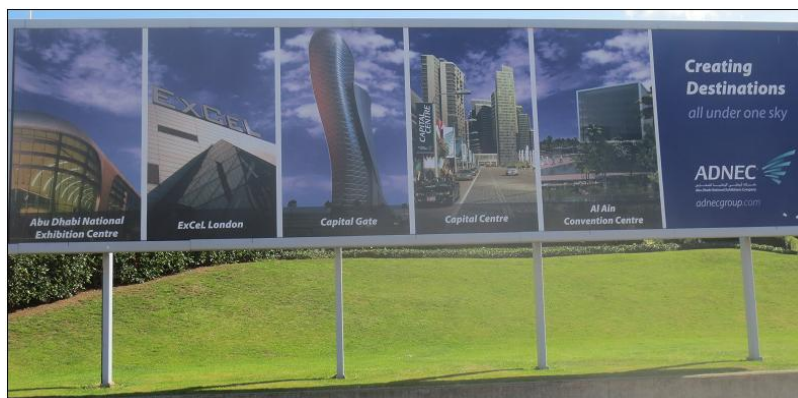
Unlike last year, this year when I went to England I was travelling with a bouncing baby CPAP machine. Before the trip, I fretted that getting it through airport security would be a hassle. As it happened, nobody batted an eyelash – there must be a lot of insomniacs on international flights.

Before I left, I bought an adaptor so I would be able to plug the CPAP machine into a British wall socket. Of course, when I got to the hotel, I found that it didn't fit. (I will admit, the adrenaline-fuelled moment of panic that ensued did momentarily wake me up after the long journey.) When I inquired about it at the front desk, they told me it was an old hotel with odd sockets and kindly lent me an adaptor for my adaptor for the duration of my stay.

Once I had the machine plugged in, I turned it on to see if it would work. It didn't. (The ensuing moment of adrenaline-fuelled panic was, I thought, too much of a good thing.) It took me a minute to realize that the outlet had to be switched on; when it was, I heard the familiar whoosh of air in the mask.

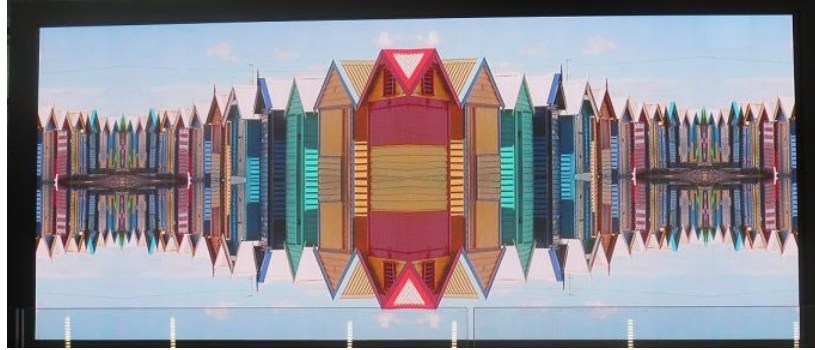
Remind me, again, of how the CPAP machine is supposed to be good for my health...?

* * *



Sign outside the ExCel Centre, where LonCon3 was held. And, thank goodness ADNEC created that destination – there would be no reason to go to London without it!

Coming



No, seriously, do some people get hypnotized by the giant electronic billboard in front of Heathrow airport and miss their flights? Honestly, this should be illegal!

* * *

You know how you sometimes see words so quickly that they register in your brain as something different from what they actually are? I was walking past a door in Heathrow that had the sign “sluice room” on it, but I initially mistook it for “suicide room.” That seemed a little extreme to me, although I do have to admit that air travel is easier for some people than others...

* * *

At the end of the moving walkways in Heathrow, a woman’s voice repeated: “Caution: you are approaching the end of the conveyor.” Her voice had a warm, reassuring quality (not to mention a delicious accent). And, I was touched by how concerned about my welfare (she must have cautioned me at least a dozen times!).

Can you blame me for falling a little in love? Oh, sure, I know she probably says that to everybody who steps on a walkway, but it’s a lovers’ conceit that she was only talking to me. And, yes, I know her work will probably keep her from visiting me in Toronto, but that just gives me one more excuse to go back to London, right?

Right.

* * *

The flight home was largely uneventful, although there were moments that made me wonder if human beings were really meant to fly. As we boarded, for example, the plane was steaming hot; the pilot had to apologize for the heat and explain that, although the air conditioning wasn’t working, it would start with the plane’s push-off.

Then, there was the stewardess who – the pilot was right, by the way. The air conditioning did kick in when the plane pushed off from its berth, a good thing considering I hadn't packed any shorts.

Then, there was the stewardess who said she would never go skiing in the mountains because, "I'm afraid of heights." Honestly, I wish I could make shit like that up.

Then, the entertainment system had to be rebooted mid-flight because of some unspecified computer error. I don't know which was worse: worrying about the electrical system on the plane or having to wait ten minutes to find out what happened in the movie!

Finally, towards the end of the flight I felt a drip of water on my shoulder. I thought nothing of it, except that a couple of minutes later, a second drop of water landed on my arm. And, a third. After we landed, I brought this to the attention of a steward, who explained that it was nothing to be concerned about, that water sometimes condenses in the cabin at high altitudes. Of course it does.

There's nothing quite like the ecstasy of flight!

LonCon3: Arriving

Random thoughts on LonCon3, the 2014 World Science Fiction Convention:

The Key To A Good Day Is An Unhealthy All You Can Eat Breakfast

As is my habit, I survived the con on a diet of all-you-can-eat breakfasts and chocolate. In particular, chocolate chip cookies, which I hadn't eaten in I can't remember when (thank you, Alison Buck). Oh, chocolate chip cookies, let us never lose track of each other again!

Of course, this diet did bad things to my complexion. Very bad things. Let's just say that the sun wasn't the only thing breaking out every morning!

Business Classless

A small airport lay across the River Thames from the ExCel Centre where the convention was held. A very thin, not especially impressive part of the River Thames. Planes took off from the airport every two minutes; 25 loud booms later, you knew that your panel was over.



That people were able to hold events at the ExCel Centre at all was a testament to recent advancements in soundproofing technology.

Mr. Tact Strikes Again

I nearly got into a fistfight with a paranormal romance writer.

The one panel I was on was “Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy” because, you know, I’m Canadian and I write science fiction, so I must know everything there is to know on the subject. Or, at least, be able to bullshit my way through fifty minutes of discussion. (Smart money’s on the latter proposition.) I was told that panellists should congregate in the Green Room, liberate their complimentary beverages from the cooler and wait for somebody to take them to the room where the panel was being held. Sure. And the Casablanca tourist guides emphasize the allure of the city’s waters!

Two women sitting at a table near mine were discussing sex scenes in novels. So, I sauntered over and said I never portray them because they are usually dreadful. One of the women, who identified herself as a paranormal romance writer, disagreed. At this point, somebody with more tact – or better self-preservation skills – would have walked away, but that ideal person is not me.

I made the argument (which can be found in my first novel **and** the special promotional newspaper I produced just for LonCon3) that sex in literature is either graphic, which makes it seem mechanical, or euphemistic, which doesn’t capture the nature of the act, and often subjects the reader to bad poetry. She countered that sex in her writing was an extension of character, that readers could know who the people in her novels really were by how they performed in bed. (Or, I suppose, the kitchen. Or, the barn. Or, a train speeding away from Beijing.)

Then, oh, look at the time, I really must get to my panel now – I left.

Okay, it was all very civilized and the situation never really threatened to come to blows. But, if it had, I think I could have taken her. Okay, I’m a middle-aged man with a heart condition and asthma – in a fair fight, she probably would have kicked my ass. But, if biting were allowed, I would probably have been able to hold my own for a few seconds!

Please Be Aware That Schmuddle Buddle Inframatous Hoopondulous!

To Repeat: Crackle Splurt Formatting Gabropulous!

The PA system in the ExCel Centre was so terrible, it made me nostalgic for messages on the PA system on the TTC!

He'd Cut Off Your Head If You Tried!



The most common reason cited by people who didn't buy books at the Elsewhen Press table was that they already had too many books to read (followed closely by the idea that they couldn't afford to buy any more books). And, I thought: Really? Would you dare to use that excuse with George R. R. Martin?

Panel Limericks



Hannu Rajaniemi
During the Q&A was game. He
Answered my question (admittedly a bit dumb)
With a great deal of wit and aplomb
I was impressed – can you blame me?



Ian MacDonald
As a writer has always been bold
Asked about cultural appropriation
He noted that most of the people who made that charge were American
I guess I have been told!

Charles Stross
Of humorous science fiction Lovecraftian horror is the boss
But intelligent discussion he only intermittently did stoke
Because mostly he looked for the opening for another joke
I left before his panel ended – my loss

Obligatory Sincere Section

My main reason for going to LonCon3 was actually to spend time with some great people. At the top of my list were publishers Peter and Alison Buck. I wanted to reconnect with fellow authors Dave Weaver (*Jacey's Kingdom*) and James Starling (*Arteess: Conflict*), both of whom I had met at EasterCon last year. Add to this meeting more of Elsewhen Press' authors, including: Sanem Ozdural (*LiGa™*), Mike French (the Dandelion trilogy), Douglas Thompson (*The Rhymer*), Caspian (*The Magician in the Attic*) and Christopher

Nuttal (several books in at least two different series). I am humbled and delighted to be counted among such talented people.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't thank my good friend Joy Pearl, not for the wonderful cucumber sandwiches she spoiled me with a couple of weeks earlier at Con Bravo – okay, for them, too, but not only for the cucumber sandwiches. Joy, who is British, pointed out to me that World Con was happening in London two and a half years ago, and said I should plan to go because my sense of humour would resonate with the British. If it hadn't been for her, I probably wouldn't have considered a British publisher for my novels or ended up going to LonCon3.

The world will ultimately make its own judgment about the value of that, but I'll always be grateful.

Just Another Of The Many Sacrifices I Make For My Art

The last couple of days of the con, I had the all-you-can-eat breakfast with a woman I met at the hotel. Our conversation ranged from international politics to the nature of humour. It was delightful. As an added bonus, on the final day of the convention, she stopped by the table and bought both of my novels.

Well! If I had known it was going to be like that, I would have eaten the all-you-can-eat breakfast twelve times a day. I may have exceeded the maximum weight allowance on the plane home, but the book sales would have been worth it!

Ad Astra...Up Periscope!

Or, something like that. My Pig Latin isn't that eatgrape.

THE CON IN WORDS

Every time I think I'm out, they pull me back in! (Okay, I'll admit, I don't do a great Al Pacino. But, to be fair, Al Pacino doesn't always do a great Al Pacino any more, either.)

For the last few months, I have been peopled out: I just couldn't summon the energy to accost complete strangers at science fiction conventions with my patent wonderfulness in order to convince them to buy the distillation of my wonderfulness imprinted on dead trees. ...Gee, when I put it that way, I wonder why anybody would go to a science fiction to sell books!

But, writers do, my friend. Writers do.

I was coaxed into going to the 2015 Ad Astra convention because *Magic, Love, Time, Space*, an anthology in which I had a short story, was being launched there. I was promised the opportunity to read from the story, which is always fun but wasn't entirely convincing. Then, I was promised cake. Naturally, I leapt at the chance to go.

Writers have no shame when it comes to free cake.

To my surprise, I had a great time. Part of that was because I got to hang out with writer friends I don't get to see often enough; for us, cons are like high school reunions without the memory of braces, awkward embraces and/or acne. Part of it had to do with the fact that a lot of fans are starting to recognize me from previous conventions. To be clear, they're not **my** fans, but just being in a room full of somebody's fans gives me hope that some day I may have one of my very own. Or, dare I dream, two?

Being a writer requires a certain amount of optimism. And, drugs. And, alcohol. Or, so I'm told. In fact, with enough drugs and alcohol, optimism becomes irrelevant. Or, so I have also been told. You know, by people who know things.

My thanks to Elizabeth Hirst, publisher at Pop Seagull Press (don't ask her how she came up with the name – you'll be groaning for weeks!) and editor of Time, Magic, Space, Love, for editing such a wonderful anthology and organizing such a great launch party. I'm almost motivated to return to participating in cons.

Almost...

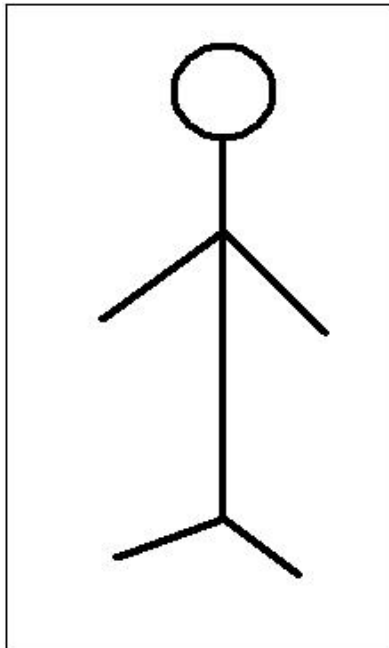
THE CON IN PICTURES...AND WORDS (BECAUSE SUSAN SONTAG HAD A POINT)



When I first started going to cons, I was advised that if you didn't know where the event was being held, all you had to do was follow people who were in costume. Good advice. However, the person driving this car made it even easier than that.

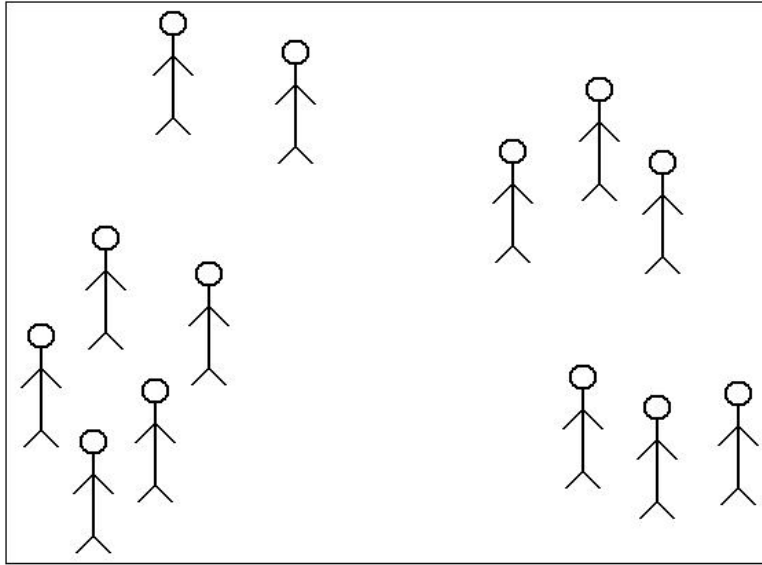


As usual, the costumes were fantastic. When I asked Phil Bregmann why he chose to cosplay as a Canada goose, he quacked, “It’s a symbol of the country, isn’t it?” His companion cosplayer, Miranda Flumph, rolled her eyes and shook the water off her webbed feet in disdain. Good times.



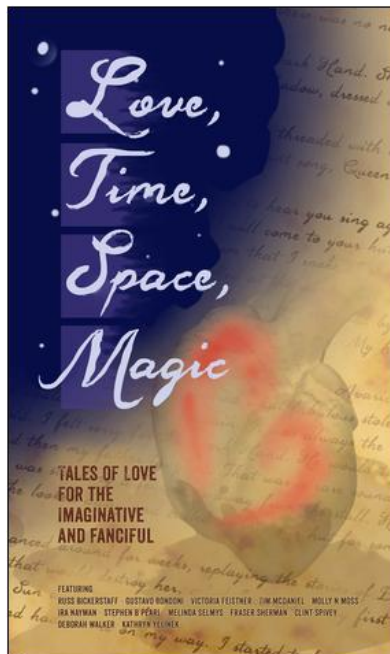
Early Saturday afternoon, my camera battery died, and I wasn’t carrying my spare. The horror!...THE HORROR! So, I had to improvise. This is my depiction of a man in an alien costume. Notice the attention to detail – his jaw really does unhinge, and it’s got flecks of acidic spittle on it! Unless, this is one of the gender-reversed Harley Quinn cosplayers in attendance. It’s hard to tell from this drawing.

I...may have to work on my improvisation skills.

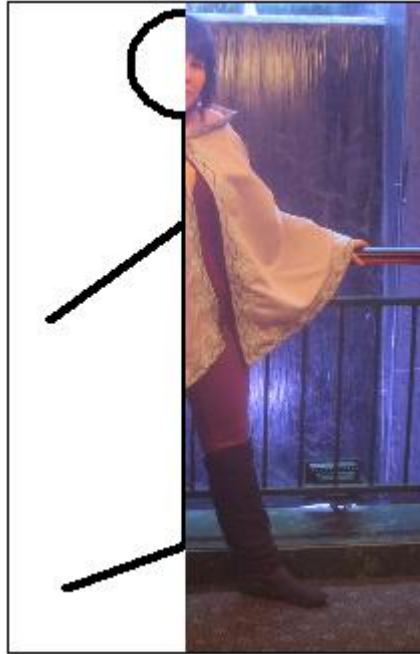


A highlight of the con for me was the Saturday afternoon launch of *Love, Space, Magic, Time*, which, as you can see from the accompanying image, was well attended. Four of us read from our stories in the anthology, and there was a draw for baked goods. It was the largest group I have ever read to, and they laughed in all the right places! (Well, technically, if you write humour, wherever the audience laughs **is** the right place. They seemed to laugh a lot, though, so I can claim that there were a lot of right places.)

And, if that wasn't enough...



Yes! There was cake! The cake had the cover of Magic, Space, Love, Time on it, so it looked like this, only icingier!



On Saturday night, I retrieved the spare battery for my camera from my home, and on Sunday I was good to go again. As the image above indicates, the transition back to photography was a relatively smooth one...

LAST WORD

Preponderance.

The Littlest Klingon

Actually, The People Are Great: Anything Else I Might Say On The Subject Is Purely For Comic Effect

I'm not a joiner. In fact, I have been known to start clubs just so that I could turn down membership in them. When it comes to not joining, Groucho Marx was an amateur in comparison!

Despite this, I am a member of the Klingon Assault Group (KAG), a *Star Trek* fan club. What can I say? Klingons can be very persuasive. Also: the food at KAG Feasts is really tasty (so long as you don't ask what it's actually made of).

KAG had a booth at this year's Fan Expo to promote the group and raise money for the Kid's Help Phone (apparently, some other group had already spoken for the Support the Victims of Romulan Aggression Fund). As a member of KAG, I was invited to join them; I growled in accepted Klingon fashion to say that I would be happy to.

At the time, I only had a gold vest to wear, which I gather is a form of Klingon underwear. Oh, well – we all have to start somewhere, right?

I Know They're Just Messing With My Head...



...but it's working! It's really working!

Too Bad It Hadn't Been A Real Battle **We Could Have Taken Them – Stormtroopers Can't Hit Anything!**

One highlight of Fan Expo was Saturday's march through the Convention Centre that ended in a broad aisle for a photo shoot. There we were, a V-formation of seven Stormtroopers against seven Klingons in a mind-boggling media mash-up!

I had been given the Klingon uniform of somebody who had fallen in battle (to a cold). It came with a gun, which felt good on my hip during the march; unfortunately, just before we got in place for the photo shoot, Krikor, the leader of KAG, asked me to give the weapon to him. Obviously, I would have to pass a Klingon weapons safety course before I would be allowed to use it in simulated battle with characters from a different canon...or, okay, maybe the photos would look better if the leader of the battle group had a weapon rather than me. Klingon leaders don't really need to give reasons.

I did my best to lean forward menacingly and put my right arm to my side as if I was about to draw a weapon. The effect was probably ruined by the fact that the empty holster was clearly visible on my left hip; I figure I looked about as menacing as the Ontario Ghostbusters' six foot tall Stay-Puft marshmallow man (which, being down the aisle from us, mocked me for the rest of the con). I'm pretty sure I could beat the marshmallow man in a fair fight, but...uhh...it would probably be for the best if I took that Klingon weapons safety course first!

It's Not A Pout – It's A Grimace! A...A...A War Grimace!



I could be a Klingon Sure I could! Don't you feel the menace? – and I don't even have the forehead ridges yet! Of course, five seconds after this picture was taken, I had to give the gun back to Alex, not to mention the uniform, which prompted the question: do Klingons pout?

Then, He Bit The Head Off One Just To Drive The Point Home

Web Goddess Gisela McKay, who is also a KAG member, brought Caesar salad on Sunday to feed the hungry...Kid's Help Phone warriors. A member of the 501st Legion, a *Star Wars* fan club that had a booth across the aisle from ours, commented that salad didn't seem like a very Klingony food.

Krikor cast a steely gaze the guy's way and growled, "Anchovies!"

The Inevitable Sequel Will Never Match The Original Costume



I had heard about the costume long before I saw it, but nothing could prepare me for the awesomeness that was...Sharknado!

The Cleaning Staff Were Probably Hungarian – They're Always The Toughest Judges!

I'm not a big fan of bad physical comedy, so I avoid it all costs. No matter how many times I have explained this, friends feel the need to point out when my shoelaces are tied (even though I have never had a shoelace-related BPC incident in my life). However, a golden opportunity came my way at Fan Expo, and I like to think I made the most of it.

Picture it: a wet floor, sneakers with little tread, a man rushing headlong into a tiled bathroom in order to wash the anchovies and dressing out of an otherwise empty salad bowl. Before I knew it, my back was approaching the floor, but I had the good sense to go limp so I wouldn't sustain more damage than necessary.

I lay on my back for a few seconds, getting over the surprise and shock that I was there in the first place; under the circumstances, the ceiling tiles were quite entertaining. When I got to my feet, I was disappointed to learn that the only witnesses to my act of humour were two members of the facility's cleaning staff. Grinning, I asked, "Was it a 10?" Apparently, they didn't think much of my performance, scurrying past me without making eye contact.

Okay, there may have been some residual shock.



My battle with the hostile bathroom floor left me scarred, but they are scars that any Klingon would be proud to bear! (I wonder if I can get a decoration out of the incident for my uniform...?)

Uhh, Yeah – Did I Mention That My Klingon Vocabulary Is....Limited? Highly Limited? Practically Non-existent, If You Want The Truth...

Kreplach!

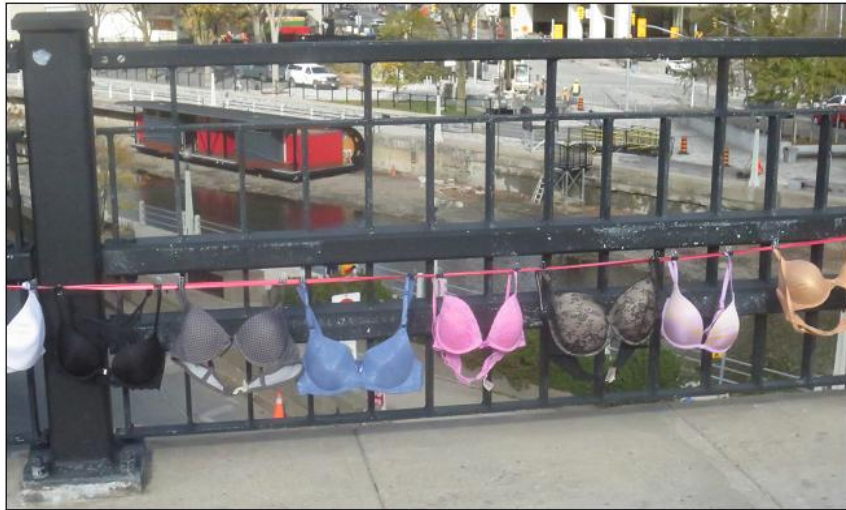
I Like Playing the Long Can*Con

I was in Ottawa recently for a science fiction convention called Can*Con. To celebrate my weekend there, I offer the following grandparents of emoji (which are also known as photographs), with inappropriate comments as warranted.

The City



*The hotel where Can*Con was held was just a stone's throw away from Parliament. Unfortunately, downtown Ottawa is so well looked after that no stones came readily to hand. And I was all set to take Ben Geisler's sage advice on the subject!*



Not that the city is perfect. This bridge over the Rideau River, for example, has to be held up by bras donated by Canadian women who had undergone a sex change and wanted to give something back to the country that had allowed them to freely express their true nature. The fact that they no longer needed the bras was not relevant, although the tax credit that they would receive for their donation had to be a –



Or, umm, it could have been a fundraiser for breast cancer research promoted by a local radio station. Yeah. That's it. A fundraiser. Which is noble in its own way, I guess...



This is a photo of the lovely and scenic Rideau River, or, as Ottawa natives never call it, "Thames, Junior."



I suppose there's something to be said for a municipal government that is up front about the fact that it plans to soak you...



The recent federal election was so rancorous, I half-expected Conservative candidates to complain: “What? You want to build a monument to Confederation that contains fire and water? Seriously? Don’t you know that these are tough economic times? The nation can’t afford two elemental forces in its monuments! But that’s the spendthrift Liberals for you! That’s why you have to vote Conservative – we’re ready to make the hard choices!”



Okay, not all of Ottawa is in great repair. Not to worry: in his first day in office, Prime Minister Trudeau will climb this Parliament building with a trowel in his teeth and single-handedly make all of the necessary repairs!



Ha! The Peace Tower on Parliament Hill is taller than Big Ben – in your face, London! You – what? It's not? Naah! I remember being distinctly underwhelmed by Big Ben when I visited the – you say it's 320 feet tall, and the Peace Tower is only 302 feet tall? I – that can't be right! It – really? Why, no, I don't have tower envy. I...I'm just going to go to a corner of the room and curl up in a fetal position, now. No special reason – I just feel like doing it...

The Con



*Can*Con was held over a holiday weekend. Valentine's Day, actually. I'm sure Morticia and Gomez had a wonderful time...*



*I went to Can*Con in part because I had a story in an anthology called Robotica, which was launched at the convention. In this emoji ancestor, author/publisher Liz Hirst and author Timothy Carter sit at the Pop Seagull table in the dealer's room. Liz is always*

happy to explain where the name of the publishing company came from, but be warned: you will groan. And, you know how some mothers tell their children: “If you keep giving me those dirty looks, one day your eyes will freeze that way!”? Tim is living proof...



This is me doing my best Alfred Hitchcock impression. In, err, a homemade clown costume. Because it was... Valentine's Day. You probably had to be there...



Liz has the coolest parents! Her dad Rick, for instance, grew a beard and moustache just so he could look like his ukelele! How many men do you know who are that dedicated to their music?



Before I could even get the sentence, “Hey – look who I found!” out, Waldo decked me. I never realized how sensitive a game character could be...



*The incomparable Marie Bilodeau: author, Can*Con organizer and much feared judge of the paper airplane contest. I just got lucky and took a photo of her when she was reasonably still (the inset photo is more typical). I swear, the woman must have the metabolism of a hummingbird – I would hate to be Marie's cardiologist!*

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Marie and Derek Kunsken for their warm, welcoming encouragement to return to Can*Con after taking a break from the convention for a couple of years. Thanks to Liz for enthusiastically accepting my short stories, for setting up another great book launch (mmmmm – cake!) and for planning the road trip to Ottawa. Thanks to Vivian and Rick Hirst, Liz' parents, for all of their help in making the trip a success. Thanks to Tim for not only being a great trip companion, but for the good sense to have been born to charming parents willing to have us all over for a wonderful dinner the night we arrived.

The arts being what they are, nobody knows what the future holds in store for any of us, but the present feels pretty damn good.

Klingon for a Day

To promote the premier of the latest series in the *Star Trek* franchise, *Discovery*, Space and CraveTV had people dress up like characters from the previous series and walk up and down Toronto's Queen Street and environs. Their people called the Klingon Assault Group (a fan club of the Star Trek warrior race featuring some of the sweetest people you are ever likely to meet) and asked if we had any members who would be interested in being involved in the promotion. One of our people (our leader, Krikor – **not** his Klingon name, BTW), asked if I would like to participate.

Sometimes, it's just that simple.

I've been a member of KAG for several years, and I still had a starter Klingon costume (a gold vest from the original series – sorry, the Original Series); I didn't even have forehead ridges. So, it was important that we finish my costume before the event. I have a lovely half-finished ambassador's costume, but it has a lot of sheep skin, with a heavy cloak and fur-lined boots; we were going through a hot spell in Toronto, and I was concerned that I would end up a puddle of Klingon goo on the sidewalk. An ignominious end to somebody who is, however tenuously, a member of a warrior race.



Okay, kind of mixing Treks here, with my Original Series starter costume underneath part of my Ambassador's costume (cape not shown). But, you get the idea: man, I'm puddle of gooing up just thinking about it!

So, yeah. Went to Krikor's place the night before I was to start to do some costume adjustments. He commented on the blast furnace nature of my costume. His partner Merle (who fed us delicious chicken wings because she was afraid I might actually fit into my costume) commented on the blast furnace nature of my costume. I had worn most of the costume – I **knew** about its blast furnaceness. I wondered if Klingons have wills.

Then, Krikor had a brilliant idea: why don't I wear **his** costume? Suddenly, the event seemed survivable.

Qapla!



The full costume. Krikor's costume, but it allowed me to avoid the puddle of goo phenomenon. For best effect, replace the camera with a bone gun. In your imagination. Or, a tankard of blood wine. You know, something less selfie-taking. So unKlingon.

For full effect, the promoters of the show brought in a professional make-up artist. He kindly supplied me with forehead ridges and Klingon colouring. Makeup, I learned, isn't smoothly painted on a face. It's dabbed. The makeup artist was a dabber. He dabbed. It's like being repeatedly poked by baby chicks. I spent half an hour in the chair – actors who have to do it for five or six hours a day must be Zen masters to get through it! Or, on drugs. Because, you know, actors. Amazing either way.



I'm ready for my close-up now, Mister Roddenberry...well, except maybe for that expression. Not exactly a fierce, proud warrior expression. Startled, more like. Maybe I just saw a tribble. Yeah. Let's go with that. I just saw a tribble.

After my makeup and costume had been completed, I went to the bathroom (I can neither confirm nor deny that Klingon Birds of Prey are built without bathrooms; all I will say is: why do you think Klingons are so angry all the time?). As I was walking past the cubicles in the GlobeMedia building, I heard one man say, "Man, that scared the **shit** out of me!"

Assuming he was talking about me and not the *Globe and Mail*'s circulation numbers, I thought, **YES! Finally, I am a true Klingon!**

Looking the part, I joined the crew on the street.



Most of the crew of the Starship Promotion...prise. One of these things is not like the other things – one of these things doesn't belong. Can you guess which one? HINT #1: Klingons don't dance. HINT #2: Klingons don't smile. HINT #3: You saw me in the costume a couple of paragraphs ago. Really, people, this question should have been a gimme!

I had had a Klingon name for about a year (Tojwi' vestai – it means “plum pudding”), but I'm having trouble (okay, no, it doesn't – according to the Bing Klingon translator, Tojwi' means... Tojwi' – vestai is an honorific) – as I say, I'm having trouble moving things from short-term to long-term memory. So, I quietly repeated it to myself on the subway home; only a couple of people asked if I was having a seizure.

And, would you believe, having worked so hard on remembering that name, **not a single person asked me what it was? Not even one of the other participants in the promotion?** Man, I should have milked the seizure sympathy for all I could have gotten!

At one point in the day, the woman playing the Orion slave girl (they were more innocent times...and greener) danced across the street from the rest of us. A guy draped himself on a nearby lamppost and complimented her. Then, he asked, “What are you doing tonight?”

“Working,” she answered.

“How about tomorrow?”

“Working.”

“Can I have your phone number?”

“Not while I'm working.”

The shit women put up with in the workplace!

Later in the day, a man approached the group walking a great Danatian (the dog had the body of a great Dane, but the black dots of a dalmatian), and stopped to ask if he could take a picture of us with the dog. Why not? There will be dogs in the future. Probably. As we posed for his photo, we couldn't help but notice that passersby were stopping and taking out their phones. Awesome! More photos.

Unfortunately, they were not of us: people wanted pictures of the dog. Apparently, he has his own Instagram account. I'm not jealous that the dog's page has more followers than my Web site. Jealousy is not the Klingon way. Next year, the company might want to dress up dogs as Star Trek characters to promote the season premiere – the numbers on Instagram alone should more than pay for the doggie treats!

My favourite moment of the day occurred when a random stranger came up to me on the street and said, “Don’t let anybody tell you you’re not beautiful.” Was he serious or cynical? I couldn’t tell. I’ll be taking a poll of readers...whenever I figure out how to do that.

In the end, I spent several hours in fresh air celebrating a new *Star Trek* show (which didn’t suck!) and wasn’t reduced to a Klingon puddle of goo on the sidewalk. Qapla! With sprinkles!

Other

My Imaginary Manhattan

I went to New York for a conference. First time. Here are some impressions.

My trip across the border wasn’t very pleasant. When I went to the US in November, 2001 – only a couple of months after 9/11 – the border guard gave me a thorough grilling about my intentions. That was before I started writing *Les Pages aux Folles*. This time...nothing. They checked my passport, put me through the scanners and sent me on my way.

I was insulted. Isn’t my writing politically offensive enough to get my name on a list somewhere? I mean, hasn’t anybody been paying attention to what I’ve been saying about your government? Come on, people! I don’t necessarily need a full body cavity search and a free trip to Syria – I would have been quite satisfied with a raised eyebrow and an arch comment.

It’s enough to make you lose your faith in burgeoning theocracy.

After I arrived, it took an hour and 11 minutes for me to see my first arrest: a young black woman with her hands cuffed behind her back leaning sullenly on the police cruiser. Fed a steady diet of *Law and Orders* and *CSI: New York*, I was expecting more sardonic police and crusading district attorneys. Lenny Brisco would have been disappointed.

On the other hand, it took over an hour and a half for me to see my first homeless person. Come on, people! In downtown Toronto, you can’t go five minutes without tripping over a homeless person! What do you do, ship them out to the poorer borou – oh. Of course. Sorry.

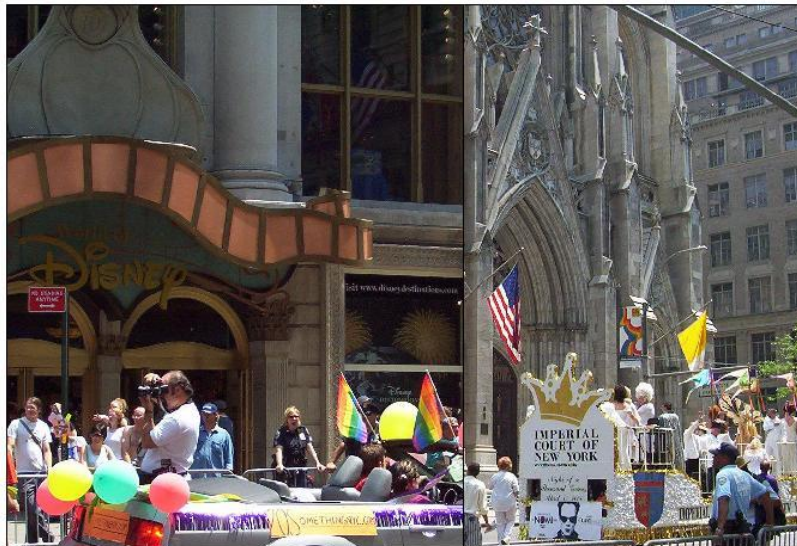
Before I arrived, I thought I knew Manhattan pretty well: some places stand out vividly in our imaginations, even though we have never actually been to them, because we have seen them in movies. So, for example, I knew Central Park (*Manhattan*) was right next to Times Square (*Vanilla Sky*), which was a block away from Grand Central Station (*The Fisher King* and, more recently, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). In the movies you never see the streets actually connecting these landmarks...

The movies lie. After a day playing tourist, my sore feet told me just how poorly my imaginary Manhattan corresponded to the real thing.

I went to the United Nations, but for security reasons I couldn't get very close to it. Worse, all of the flags were down. Fortunately, the flags had migrated to the window of the Nations Café ("Discovered: 1992 AD") right across the street. So, in the name of international goodwill, I went over and had a pastrami sandwich. Nobody can say I haven't done my bit for world peace!

As you might expect, there were a lot of cars with diplomatic licence plates around the UN. Seeing them, I thought, "Oh, don't hide behind that diplomatic immunity crap! I know you're guilty of...something..." I expected a police officer to come storming onto the street, muttering obscenities about international rules of diplomacy.

Once again, the movies led me astray...



New York's Gay Pride Day parade thumbs its nose at the city's temples.

On my wanderings, I found myself standing outside the New York headquarters of News Corporation, and I thought, "This is the closest Rupert Murdoch is going to get to having me as a viewer!" Later, I noticed that there were several electronic tickers around Manhattan with the latest news updates. I couldn't help but wonder why, with so much information around them, so many New Yorkers seemed unaware of international events. Then, I realized the information on the tickers came from Fox News, and it all made sense.

The day I arrived in New York, it was raining. I thought the city was sad to see me come. It was hot and humid throughout my stay, and it rained the day I left. This confused me. Could the city be sad that I was leaving?

Some fallacies are truly pathetic.

On my last day in New York, I went to the Museum of Modern Art. I arrived a few minutes before it opened, and had to stand in line with dozens of other people, but I was okay with that because it was **A REAL NEW YORK LINEUP **! Lineups in New York are somehow more vibrant, more alive than lineups in other cities. While I was standing in line, for the first time in my life, I was shit on by a bird. Hit me right on the arm. My first reaction was anger, but then I was honoured because I had been hit with ** AUTHENTIC NEW YORK BIRD SHIT **!

At that point, I realized I was delirious, and that it was probably time to go home.



In New York, the cabs travel in packs. But, who is the prey?

The truth is, I had a great time in New York; the Americans I met were terrific people. In fact, the trip reminded me that I have never met an American I didn't personally like. Of course, those who cannot make the distinction between the government and the people will dismiss this observation (anti-American statements = 3,124, pro-American statements = 1, ergo Ira = an idiot). I like to think my readers are more appreciative of nuance than that.

Especially the ones who live in New York.

Banff Bumpf

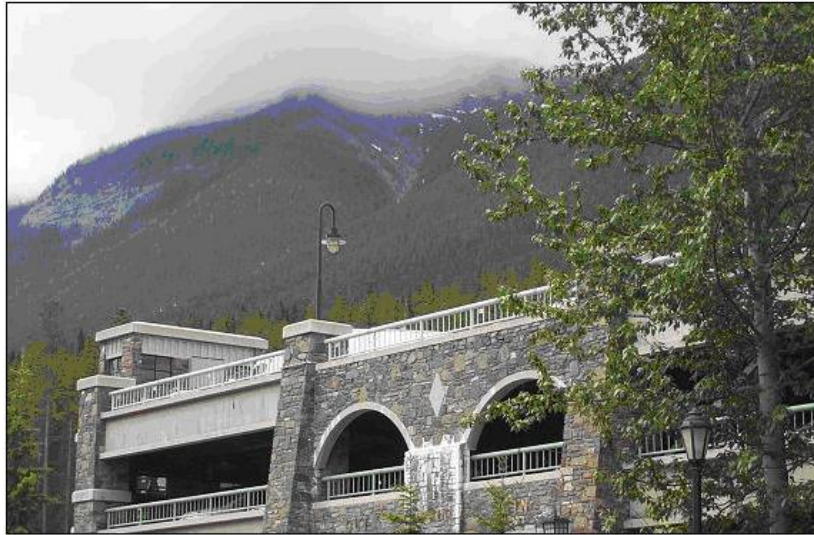
A couple of days ago, I returned from the Banff World Television Festival, where I was pursuing my futile quest to become rich and famous while retaining my artistic integrity. Such as it is. What follows are some of my observations of the event.

It Is Better To Travel Hopefully Than To Arrive

While standing in line to check my baggage at the airport, I transferred some videos that I hoped to use to sell one of my television series from a plastic bag to one of my suitcases. Somebody behind me said, "I hope he's taking the bomb out of his bag." Which brings up an interesting question: if the men with big guns had taken one of us away to their happy place, would it have been him or me?

Amateurs! If I had even thought of telling a joke like that, you just know that I would have been whisked away and searched in the most painful cavities of my anatomy.

Even The Parking Lots In Banff Are Gorgeous



Aren't they?

Why Do my Best Metaphors Always Seem To Revolve Around Fear?

I was told that there were only six writers in attendance at Banff (although this number was disputed). Being one of the only writers in a room with over a thousand producers was an odd feeling, like being a minnow in a bathtub full of sharks.

Pecking Order Etiquette, Take One

Because the television industry works on relationships, newcomers to Banff were encouraged to walk up to people and strike up conversations. It was like high school with millions of dollars at stake. Since delegates were given tags to wear with our names and pictures on them, we could easily identify each other; in fact, outside of strip joints, this was the only place I have ever been where we were actively encouraged to look at each others' chests.

Some delegates thwarted the process by covering their tags with their lapels, or putting a piece of paper over their names. This was their way of saying: "I'm so important, I don't need or have any desire to speak to you." I wanted to get an orange magic marker and create a pattern of ovals and semi-circles on my name tag. This would be like saying: "Look, I'm just a lone writer out of his depth who is not trying to bother anybody but would really like a break, so please treat me with respect and civility." I suspect, however, that the producers in attendance probably don't speak my language

Pop Quiz, Hotshot

NETWORK EXECUTIVE ONE: “Content is king.” NETWORK EXECUTIVE TWO: “We’re looking for great stories with memorable characters.” NETWORK EXECUTIVE THREE: “We’re looking for great stories with memorable characters, because everybody knows that content is king. NETWORK EXECUTIVE FOUR: “You know, I don’t ordinarily take pitches from **writers**...” Describe what’s wrong with this sequence of statements heard at Banff in 50,000 words or less.

You Can’t Make Stuff Like This Up

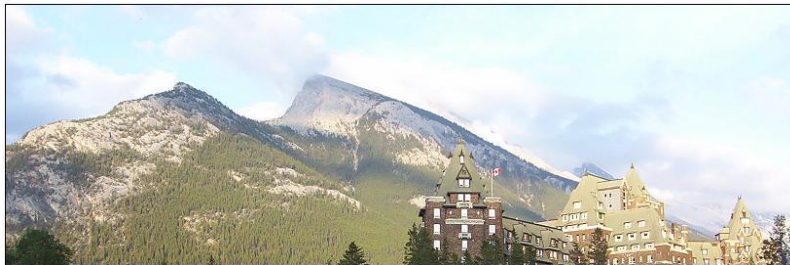
Cellphone conversation overheard coming out of the hotel: “I’m at the front door, bonehead! I’m looking right at you!”

Pecking Order Etiquette, Take Two

Most of my meetings were arranged before the festival actually started (although I did make connections with a couple of people just by starting conversations in lines – now I know what it feels like to be a starlet at Schwab’s...not that I’ve ever been curious...). Most often, people would meet by the mailboxes in the delegate lounge. You could always tell who had requested the meeting: the person with the lesser power would be waiting at the mailbox of the person with the greater power.

I’m not going to say how many of my meetings were at my request; let’s just say that I got to know the layout of the mailboxes pretty well during my stay. Pretty well, indeed...

Could This Be Where Just For Laughs Got Its Mascot Design?



I’m only asking.

Does This Make Me A Master Baiter?

Paul Haggis and David Shore were in Banff to give “Master Classes,” where they basically got to joke around about the fabulousness of being who they were. I’m not knocking it: my goal in life is to give my own Master Class at Banff. Preferably when television people are actually there.

Haggis (*Crash*) told the story of how when he was asked to write some of his most famous works, he demurred, saying he didn’t have enough talent. Shore (*House*)

explained that he quit his law firm to run off to Hollywood, arriving having never actually written a script.

As somebody who has been working on his writing for over 20 years and is trying to get people in the industry to recognize how good he is, I hate them. I hate them both with a passion undying.

Shore went on to explain the difference between the Canadian and American television systems. In the United States, the writer/creators of shows have a tremendous amount of power over how they are produced. In Canada, by way of contrast, producers have all of the power. Shore argued that this didn't make sense, that writers in Canada should have more control over their work.

Okay, I love him again. I still don't know about this Haggis fellow, though...

It Is Better To Arrive Hopefully Than To Travel

The Calgary airport has a Spaceport exhibit, with flight simulations and various other hands on exhibits about space travel. At the entrance to Spaceport is a cowboy with a space helmet sitting astride a circling rocket. I suppose it was meant to link the Spaceport to a rodeo bronco buster, but it reminded me of Slim Pickens' fateful rocket ride towards the end of Dr. Strangelove.

Not exactly the kind of image you want tourists to have in their heads while flying.

While the plane back to Toronto was in the air, the pilot kept us informed of the score in the Stanley Cup final game between the Oilers and the Hurricanes. When the Oilers won, staving off elimination, there was a cheer and high fives throughout the plane. I haven't watched hockey for years, but I was glad.

I don't want to know what would have happened if the Oilers had lost.

From now on, I plan not to be in the air when major sporting events are taking place.

Four Days And Still Not Jaded



I still prefer the beauty of the real mountains.

Conclusion

I am so not giving up my day job.

Fools and Heroes

I don't think that the 60s and 70s were an especially strange time for a young boy to be growing up. On the other hand, I was a pretty strange young boy, so my memory of the time may not be very accurate.

While other boys were burning off energy playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians, I was pretending to be the film stars I most admired: the great comedians. I have a vague recollection of waddling around with an imaginary cane when I was much younger, an odd response to a Chaplin film festival on the CBC.

By the time I was 11, I had seen all of the Marx Brothers' films (well, all the important ones) at least four or five times on television. Children are great mimics, so it was only natural that I would begin to act like Groucho, even as other children my age were beginning to act like, say, Humphrey Bogart or Audie Murphy.

Needless to say (but I'll say it anyway), this led to many embarrassing situations. I can remember playing in the schoolyard with one of my friends when I was at the height of what I now affectionately refer to as my Groucho Period. The other boy had two guns, and offered me one.

"Let's play cops and robbers," he said, pushing the gun in my general direction.

Immediately, my back stooped in anticipation of the game. I stuck a pencil in my mouth, took it out again and replied, "Can't we play cops and shysters, instead? It seems a lot safer, not to mention more lucrative..."

If the other kid recognized the speeded-up pace of my voice, or its higher pitch, he didn't acknowledge it. "Here," he said, shoving the gun into my free hand. "I'll be the robber, you be the cop."

I looked dubiously at the weapon. I was about to say something especially clever when my friend shouted at the top of his lungs: "BANG! BANG!"

I dropped the gun and started running around in circles with what should have been an unmistakable gait. "I'm hit! I'm hit!" I cried. "Is there a doctor in the yard? Oh, mon dieu! Mon dieu! J'ai mal aux dents!"

No, I wasn't an especially popular child when I was growing up. Why do you ask?

Eventually, I got tired of Groucho. (It wasn't until much later that I became aware of how debauched the man was even as I emulated him. If I had known, I may have become a law clerk instead of...well, nobody's really sure what.) I spent some time after that playing W. C. Fields.

Children certainly can be fickle.

Not coincidentally, I discovered Fields at around the time that a retrospective of his films was being shown at a local repertory film theatre. This was to be a unique experience for a 14 year-old.

Typically, about half the seats were filled. There would be a large block of university students in the middle of the theatre. They were always exactly in the center, as if the seating arrangements had been part of a geometry assignment.

There were always between half a dozen and a dozen couples in various seats around the students, sharing varying degrees of intimacy. There was also a scattering of individuals, usually men between the ages of 20 and 30. Many of them wrote in tiny grey or brown notebooks.

Once there was an old man in a trenchcoat sitting in the back row of seats. He stayed for the first 10 minutes of the film, then left. I didn't understand his behaviour at the time, although the wisdom of age has suggested to me that he was expecting a very different kind of film.

(In hindsight, I am also amazed at my interest in W. C. Fields, who never hid the fact that he loathed children. I should have been terribly put off by this attitude, but I wasn't. I'm still not. Hmm...this column is turning out to be more revealing than I had intended...)

Of course, everybody in the theatre was at least four years older than I was, but that never seemed to matter. I saw eight films in three weeks, and talked like Fields for six months.

After that, I drifted for a while. I was fascinated by the intricate routines of Abbot and Costello, but I could never really do the pair justice because I couldn't interest anybody else in them. I tried to recapture the magic of Chaplin, but it just wasn't the same.

I guess I was growing up.

The last comedy hero of my youth was Woody Allen, who was just coming into his own when I was 15. Although I was getting too old to actually pretend to be him, his sense of the absurd remains a part of my writing style.

We cannot regain the past, and I am living too much in the dull, boring present to play the games of my youth. Still, every so often, from I don't know where, a little voice with a bushy black moustache goes off in my mind: "I'd rather go around with a cute blond than a bushy black moustache."

Hmm...perhaps we never entirely leave the things of our youth behind.

A Life Apart

I've never attended a hot air balloon festival.

Just what goes on at a hot air balloon festival that I'm not supposed to know about? Can flying through the air in a flimsy looking crate beneath an undependable piece of rubber inflated by a gas that would probably rather be somewhere else be as much fun as it looks on television?

I'll never know. I'm not ever likely to attend a hot air balloon festival.

I've never been attracted to taxicab drivers – of either sex – in my entire life. You might think that this is because I have never taken a taxi, my income being geared more towards a public means of transportation.

You would be wrong.

It is really because I don't drink alcohol.

Not at all.

Ever.

Now, I'm not suggesting that if I were, for any reason, to start drinking alcohol, that I would fall in love with a cabbie or ride in hot air balloons. I don't, for a minute, believe

that Sir John Gielgud will start serving wine at my parties; it is equally unlikely that I will ever meet famous sports figures. I'm not naïve enough to suggest that there is a direct correlation between alcohol consumption and the adoption of the lifestyles depicted in alcohol commercials on television. Oh, no. I wouldn't dream of making such a suggestion – I'm not even sure I understand it.

However, as I get older, it becomes increasingly obvious to me that I really am an outsider in this society, that I am something of an outcast. As far as I can figure, it logically follows that, as a member of a very small minority, I miss a lot of social events that most others take for granted.

Just because I don't drink.

How often has a surprise birthday party been thrown for you in your local bar? Happens all the time, right? And, don't you get a rush when they pretend to hand you the bill? Well, I will never feel that rush.

Or, how about the time the four guys get together to help the old lady get her car started, or her old furniture stripped, or some other act of macho charity? Old ladies don't ask me to give them assistance; they usually beg me not to hit them over the head or take their purses, which are invariably heirlooms which have been in their families for 16 generations.

And, what about the four guys who go up to the cottage for a weekend? (I always wondered about those guys, but that's probably material for a whole other column.) Sure, there was no food, the cabin didn't appear to have any means of heating and the woods looked like the stunt double for the woods in *Deliverance*, but the four guys were prepared for the worst because they had all remembered to bring their beer.

Admittedly, I have chosen to forego all of this camaraderie and good-natured fun by choosing not to drink alcohol. I can blame no one but myself. Yet, sometimes, I wonder what a lifestyle commercial geared to my life would be like...

"Ira and the boys, and girls, have been awake for 36 hours, pasting up a newspaper and generally horsing around. And, now, it's soft drink time..."

Let's forget, for the moment, that Ira isn't the classical macho kind of name that appeals to the average male television viewer. I like the name, and I'm not about to change it.

The truth of the matter is that my experience is either so far removed from that of the average person, or so mundane (I go to a lot of movies, for instance, and like listening to music – commercialize that!), that it cannot be used to sell drinks.

Of course, not being part of the mainstream does have its advantages; I've never had the pleasure of fighting bulls in Spain, and I honestly can't remember the last time I was

invited to join an expedition to scale Mount Everest. If the truth be known, there are many “manly” activities that I would rather not try.

And yet, it would be nice if, just once, the call came: “Hey, Ira! We’re taking the shuttle up for a little spin this weekend, and there’ll be plenty of liquid refreshments, if you know what I mean! Wanna come?”

Me and the Crue

Now, you must appreciate that I rate heavy metal music only slightly higher than the creation of Spam on my list of the greatest achievements of the human race. Thus, it is with a certain amount of chagrin, if not outright embarrassment, that I set out to describe my involvement (minimal, good reader, I assure you) with the band Motley Crue.

It began, as I recall, on a Friday evening. I had just finished watching *Television* (not the medium, the programme about the medium – that is, I was watching the show on the medium on the medium – I mean, well, you know what I mean), when somebody bounded up the stairs and rushed into my brother’s room.

“Ira,” my mother, obviously excited, shouted, “Come and take the phone. Quick!”

On my way downstairs to the phone, I gathered we had won two tickets to the Motley Crue concert. I, apparently, was chosen for this unique and wondrous honour because I was the youngest person in the house at the time. I was touched.

“Congratulations!” the woman on the phone screamed hysterically. “You’ve just won two tickets to see Motley Crue from Q107!”

“Gee,” I said, adopting a coy attitude, “how did I do that?” (For those who would make a career of winning tickets through such promotions, apparently coy does not play well on the radio. But, I digress...)

The woman, ignoring my question, lowered her voice to take down my vital statistics, adding, when she was done: “We’ll mail those tickets to you first thing. Oh, by the way, do you mind being on the air?”

I said I didn’t. What the heck? I wasn’t going to let the woman’s high-pitched enthusiasm suck me into making a screaming fool of myself on the air. I was going to be cool.

“Well,” the woman went back to yelling, “We have our latest Motley Crue ticket winner, Iran, on the line!” I winced. “Would you like to dedicate a song to somebody?”

Oops! “No, thank you,” I politely replied. If I had had a couple of hours notice, I might have done some research on the station’s playlist (I prefer listening to CFNY and CHUM-FM, if truth be known, and have only listened to Q107 when somebody changed the channel on the radio when I wasn’t paying attention), but I was totally unprepared for

the call. I got the sinking feeling that I sounded more fool than cool, a feeling that was confirmed in subsequent conversations with friends in the days to come.

“What’s your favourite radio station?”

“Q107...?” I tentatively guessed. The woman raised her voice in a shriek of joy (she may have shouted, “Alright!” or she may have been practicing a loon call – tough to say), and the line clicked dead. Was that all there was to it? As I listened to the telephone’s hiss, the whole episode left me with a strangely impersonal feeling.

I sought out my parents, thrilled that I had won something, but vaguely uneasy about becoming a goof just like all the others for free tickets to a concert I wasn’t even interested in seeing. My parents and their friends were thrilled, too (quite possibly because they had no clue about the music in question). All I could think to say was, “Does anybody want any Motley Crue tickets?”

It was a question that I would ask repeatedly in the days to come. The general feeling among those to whom I offered the tickets was that they would rather eat live worms. Easy for them to say; they hadn’t been burdened with the winning tickets in the first place, had they?

Time passed, as it has a nasty habit of doing. A week later, it occurred to me as I was eating spaghetti that the tickets hadn’t come. I had mixed feelings: I didn’t want to go to the concert, but I didn’t want to be gypped out of **my** tickets.

“Anything come in the mail for me today?” I asked my mother the next morning.

“No,” she answered. “Were you expecting something?”

“Not really,” I said, and skulked off. Where could those tickets be? The concert was only...three days away! I mean, I wouldn’t have much time to give the tickets away at this rate.

The next morning, I was up at six o’clock in the morning, even though the mail isn’t usually delivered before nine. I gloomily sat around the kitchen, throwing handfuls of dry Captain Crunch into my mouth every so often and keeping an eye on the front door. “What are you doing up?” my sister asked, on her way out to go to school.

“Just...sitting,” I replied, smiling a ghastly grin. Soon after, the mail came, but the tickets weren’t there.

What to do? What to do? What to do? I thought about calling up the radio station. Maybe...maybe they had gotten the address wrong...maybe the tickets had been sent to somebody else! Chances were they had found their way into the hands of somebody who might actually appreciate the music, but that wasn’t important any more: I was the one who had won them. Me! I had won the tickets fair and square, and I wanted them...

I was crushed when we didn't receive any mail the next day. "What do you mean, there's nothing there?" I cried. "What about my tickets? I want my free concert tickets!" Sobbing, I rushed to my room and didn't come out for a week.

That was a while ago, thank goodness, and I'm much better now. Much better. I've learned to deal with life's little disappointments, and I can go weeks, sometimes months, without thinking about heavy metal music. All in all, I think everything has been for the best.

I just dread the day that somebody tries to give me free tickets to Vyper...

No Fun in the Fun Room

If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not talk about the cake disaster.

Over the weekend, I attended I Can Pitch, a place where people with a screenplay or television series can get the complete and undivided attention from four industry professionals for five minutes. Assuming the person before you actually leaves when they're supposed to. And, the person you're supposed to pitch to doesn't have to go to the bathroom, which is a real undivided attention killer. And, assuming you can actually pitch.

That's where my experience fell down. I Can Pitch? I Can Sux, more like. But, I think this is better expressed in a LOLCat:



Yes, I know it's more of a LOLSquirrel, but there were no cats in the area. And, isn't that just like cats not to be around when you need them!

Since part of the event revolved around meeting other writers, I met some other writers. There was the comedy writer from Newfoundland who mentioned her screenplay about flatulence. I don't mean to be mean by mentioning this: I love east coast humour, and if anybody can make flatulence funny, a Newfoundland comedy writer can.

There was the woman who had come with her illustrator and a couple of mentors. It was amazing! She was an entourage looking for a career in film! She told me that she was hoping to have Steven Spielberg direct her film...as we rode the streetcar to the event. I thought her expectations might be a bit high, but I didn't say anything because why would I alienate **my** only hope of connecting to Spielberg?

Besides, their pitches undoubtedly went – no, really, I don't want to talk about the cake disaster. Their pitches undoubtedly went better than mine. I had to show up at 9:45 (meaning I had to be up at 8:00 – yes! – in the morning! – I had to be awoken with defibrillators – you know, the paddles doctors use to revive cardiac arrest patients – come on, you've watched *House*, I know you know what I'm talking a – okay, forget it) to negotiate who I would pitch to even though it turned out that my first pitch wasn't until 2:15. This guaranteed that I was mental pond scum when I needed to be at my best.

At the best of times, five minutes isn't a lot of time to communicate your brilliance to another person; in my first pitch, I spoke faster than Alvin (of Chipmunks fame). Because he was loosely booked, I actually got 10 minutes with my second pitch, which allowed me to slow down a bit. I knew that one wasn't going well when the man I was pitching to said, "I understand the concept very clearly, but how is it funny?"

Ouch.

Because I spent more time with my second pitch person, I was late for my third pitch and ended up with only three and a half minutes or so. I thought that this was a problem until my final pitch, which was at 4:10. I was told things were running late, so I didn't have to worry, but when I went down to enquire about exactly when I would be pitching, I was told that my time had already started. I had just enough time to get my name and the name of my project out before the gong went and my time was up.

No excuses. I really suck at this. Didn't the LOLSquirrel give it away?

On the second floor, away from the pitching area, was the fun room. We knew it was a fun room because the signs pointing to it said: "Fun Room." It had some comfortable chairs, a computer set up to show videos and a pool table; despite this, nobody seemed to be having much fun.

Early in the pitch sessions, the best way to describe the atmosphere in the room would be staring. People were either staring at pieces of paper, some mouthing words to themselves like silent prayers, or staring at an imaginary point in the middle distance, the

point, perhaps, where the limousine comes to take them to sign their three picture deal with Dreamworks.

Writers are dreamers. What are you gonna do?

Later in the afternoon, the packed fun room started to thin out as people completed their rounds of pitching and left. Those who remained had the glassy stare of the walking wounded, responding to any question with, “It went well. It...went...well...” We joked that as long as they didn’t scream that we should go back to scrubbing toilets because that’s all we were good for, the pitch was a success. As if the professionals we were pitching to would ever raise their voices...

Writing for film and television is a uniquely schizophrenic experience. On the one hand, writing is a lonely, solitary occupation. However, selling your writing to the industry requires vast reservoirs of gregariousness. It’s no wonder that – you just won’t let the cake disaster go, will you? Fine. If I was to sum it up simply, it would look something like the following equation:

$$\frac{\text{cake} + \text{water} + \text{coat} + \text{knapsack}}{\text{hands} \times 2 + \text{gravity}} = \text{cake disaster}$$

I wish I could report that it was a memorable film comedy moment, but it wasn’t. When gravity did its inevitable dirty work, the cake didn’t fly in a graceful arc across the room to land in an inconvenient spot in front of the person I had waited for a month to pitch to. It simply slid off the paper plate and plopped onto the floor. As I knelt to pick it up, I looked around to see if anybody had noticed, but nobody appeared to be looking in my direction.

As I got a replacement piece, I should have been grateful for small mercies. But, I was furious. It may not have been classic, but I had just had a comic moment AND NOBODY APPEARED TO BE LOOKING IN MY DIRECTION. It was the story of my life, really.

The cake was good, though.

What I Did on My Summer Vacation – June, 2010

Saturday, June 19, 2010

When I got to the Small Press Book Fair early (too early!) that morning (as in morning!), I found that I was assigned a table in a far corner of the hall, partially obscured by the stage. Okay. We work with what we are given. Five minutes after the doors opened, one of the organizers pointed out that a couple of the tables in the middle of the hall were empty and asked if I would like to move to one of them. Oh, go ahead and twist my arm.

I couldn't help but wonder, though, what happened to the presses that bought the space but didn't show up. Could they have gotten a better offer from a Medium Press Book Fair, or possibly a Small Press Book Fantastic?

I ended up being at a table opposite the literary magazine *Descant*. And, I thought, "Well, that's just the kind of pessimistic attitude that drives people to despair and inaction. If they wanted to make the world a better place, they probably should have called the magazine *Descan*!"

Ahem.

One of the first people to stop at my table was an older gentleman who looked my books over and asked if I was Jewish. When I answered that I was, he launched into a story of his youth in the Ukraine. He had grown up on a farm, you see, and he wanted me to know that Ukrainian farmers had nothing against Jews. The anti-Jewish pogroms in his country? They were led by the folks who lived in Ukrainian cities. Oh. Okay. Umm...I thanked him for correcting the record for me.

I'm becoming such a whore. Or, maybe it was Canadian politeness. But, I'm pretty sure it was emerging whorishness.

I have taken to describing my *Alternate Reality News Service* books as "comic science fiction journalism." While I get lots of interest at science fiction conventions, at the Small Press Book Fair the most common reaction was a blasé, "Oh." Oh. It was like they are exposed to comic science fiction journalism all the time. "Sure," I could see them thinking, "but what have you got for me that's **different**!"

For the last 90 minutes of the Small Press Book Fair I had to pee. I was tempted to use the water bottle that I had recently emptied, the water bottle that had been the cause of my problem in the first place. Unfortunately, it brought to mind bad 1970s wilderness survival movies, so I suppressed the urge. Well, that and the fact that the tables didn't have cloths that entirely covered them in front. As tempting as it was, I may want to be asked back again.

That night, I travelled to my next event. I was exhausted, so I went straight to my motel room, although it would take me hours to get to sleep. It was hotter'n'a sauna in there. I hate the heat. If I'm going to wake up in a pool of sweat, I might as well sleep in the bathtub. So, I turned on the air conditioning. But, of course, I am allergic to air conditioning (or, perhaps, the dust that it stirs up); it made my nose run faster than Usain Bolt.

I swear, my body was created by the same committee that designed the camel.

Sunday, June 20, 2010

Faery Fest is an annual medieval fair held in Guelph. Not the most obvious place for me to read, given that I write primarily science fiction, but I'm like Jim Carrey in that movie – you know, the one where he can't say no to anything? Right. *Being John Malkovich*.

When I got to the site, I asked if the writers were billed above the puppet show. Oh, I'm so clever. I was told that the organizers had been extremely busy and, as a result, had neglected to give the writers billing at all. By my calculations, this makes me lower than Spinal Tap. Yep, I'm definitely in the pre-Tap phase of my writing career.

I wanted to get some photographs of a joust that took place at Faery Fest. You know: joust for laughs. Apparently, there were people on horses knocking each other about with lances and shields. Unfortunately, it was all over within minutes. "Surely, you joust!" I thought when I realized that it had ended before I had an opportunity to get a picture. Sadly, it was true. I am undaunted, however. Some day, I know, I will get such a photo. Joust you wait and see if I don't!

There was – yes, actually, I could have continued with the jousting puns indefinitely. I thought I would save us both the embarrassment, but do I get any credit?

As I was saying, there was a guy at Faery Fest who sold pickles on a stick. He rolled a barrel through the grounds and sold his wares. Jessica, my contact at the event and the other person who read on the day I was there, and I had a good laugh about that.

"I'm sure I don't want to see that man's pickle," I smirked.

"Oh, his pickles are long and thick," Jessica laughed.

A couple of hours later, much to my dismay, I heard him talking to potential customers. Why dismay? 1) His double entendres were actually filthier than anything Jessica or I imagined. 2) He was saying them to women who seemed quite young.

Eww! Get a grip, dude! Sometimes a pickle is just a pickle, you know?

I was in our booth for the better part of five hours. One woman asked if my books were about the history of the Irish. When I tried to explain about the whole science fiction journalism thing, she put the book she was holding down and stated with finality, "I was looking for something about the history of the Irish."

It almost made me nostalgic for the reactions of the people at the Small Press Book Fair.

Then, there was the guy who walked up to us and asked, "Do you have anything about 2012? You know, prophecies and mysticism?" We went back and forth about alien encounters and the end of the world for a couple of minutes before Jessica cut in, saying, "He writes fiction. Ira's books are fiction." The man nodded once to himself and left.

That was my weekend. I would have been discouraged if I hadn't had so much fun.

I'm Not Civilized Yet...

And, the question on everybody's mind is: should a 50+ (and counting) year-old man have a pony tail?

As the hair on my head generally thins, my pony tail is, admittedly, becoming sparser and sparser. I can, in fact, begin to see a time when, like a cartoon character, people will be able to count its individual strands.

My sister, fulfilling her contractual obligation to be my ambulatory reality check, periodically tells me that I should cut the pony tail off because it looks ridiculous. *The pony tail looks ridiculous? I think. Of course the pony tail is ridiculous. I'm ridiculous! Do you not know what I do?*

I'll make you a deal. If I overhear somebody say, "Look at that poor man. He must have Alzheimer's – he forgot to go to the barber – for at least a decade!" I will get the pony tail removed. Unless I forget...

* * *

The other day, I watched a five and a half hour opera. And, get this: it **wasn't** by Wagner! I know, right? I didn't think such a thing was possible, either. But, I was there...for most of it...in spirit, and I can tell you that it really did happen.

It was called *Les Troyens*; the composer was Hector Berlioz. *Ah*, I thought after it started, *it's in French. That explains it: as a matter of national pride, Berlioz wanted to write a longer opera than a...German!* The opera community can be weirdly competitive that way.

Walking to the theatre from the subway, I fell in behind a young man and woman who sported backpacks and were dragging small suitcases on wheels behind them. And, I thought, *They're prepared!* Unfortunately, they walked right past the theatre, killing that observation dead in its tracks.

Les Troyens is based on Virgil's *Aeneid*. The first act is made up almost entirely of Cassandra whining that nobody listens to her – typical arrested teenagehood. The second act is about the sacking of Troy, which comes as a great surprise to the Trojans, even though one of them noticed that the horse the Greeks had left them was big enough to hold a battalion, and several heard the clanking of metal from inside. History is unkind to those who don't pay attention.

The third act starts with the citizens of Carthage singing about how wonderful it is to live in such an enlightened and peaceful city. You would have thought they would have learned from the Trojans, who began the first act by singing about how wonderful it was

to live in such an enlightened, peaceful city. Forget unkind – history can be downright mean to those who don't pay attention.

Act four was just Berlioz showing off his musical chops.

Act five had Dido (an acronym for “deliciousness in, deliciousness out”), the Queen of Carthage, swear eternal vengeance against Aeneas, who abandoned her because the gods foretold that he would die founding an empire in Rome. Given her competition in the cursing Aeneas sweepstakes, you would have thought she would have saved her breath. In the end, Dido killed herself. In opera, this is known as a “happy ending.”

In act six, everybody staggered out of the theatre and gasped for fresh air.

My friends believe that going to opera will somehow make me more cultured. Clearly, I'm not civilized yet. But, it's only been three years and I started late, so there's still hope...

* * *

A couple of nights later, I was on the way home when I walked into a Coke commercial. A dozen people were clapping their hands, dancing, smiling and laughing while a Toronto Transit Commission approved musician was playing Bob Marley's “No Woman, No Cry.” Okay, it was an odd song to be clapping hands, dancing, smiling and etc.ing to, but sometimes you just have to seize the moment, no matter how awkwardly it rests in your hands.

Don't believe me? Hey, the bulge in my breast pocket by the camera I always carry with me isn't there because I'm happy to see you. Of course, I'm happy to see! That's not the point! The – seriously – don't – but – chitlins! – oh, check this out if you don't believe me:



This wasn't a shoot for a commercial, as awesome as some people might find that. It was an actual act of spontaneous joy. You know how I know this? At one time or another, at least half of the people there had taken out their cellphones and were recording the event:



That's not something you're likely to see in no commercial for no sodie pop!

Who Wouldn't Love Being Me?
You Don't Need To Ans – No, Really, It – It Was a Rhetorical Question

Get Phillip Glass To Do The Music And You'll Have An Instant Modern Classic!

You know how you've always wanted to see a performance of the opera *Rigoletto* set in 1960s Las Vegas? Neither have I. However, in their on-going effort to enculturate me, some friends and I went to see just that.

About halfway through the first act, I expected *Rigoletto* to dangle another major character out of the window and gasp, "Duke, I am your father." Of course, that would have made it a very different production, and opera lovers can only take so much change at one time.

Can you imagine the reaction of the actor who got the part Gilda to the new approach to *Rigoletto*? "The good news is that I have a major singing role in an opera at the Met. The bad news is that I have to spend most of the third act in the trunk of a car!"

Not that the original opera is without flaws. The ending, for example, does allow for some closure (*Rigoletto*'s drive for revenge leads to tragedy), but it leaves open several questions, such as "Will the Duke die of a disfiguring STD?" or "Will the murderer Sparafucile be jailed for trying to claim knife sharpening as a business expense?"

Clearly, *Rigoletto* needs a sequel. I'm thinking *Rigoletto II: Who's the Clown, Now?* Or, possibly *Rigoletto 2: Clown Harder*. Or, perhaps *Episode Five: The Rigoletto Strikes Back!*

I mean, if we're going to re-imagine the classics...

Because Confusing Potential Reviewers Is A Great Way Of Raising Your Public Profile

I managed to pull off a great joke recently – well, one that would likely only amuse me, but it amused me a hell of a lot.

You probably know fantasy writer Charles de Lint – he reviews books for *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine. He gave my first two Alternate Reality News Service books very positive reviews. I've wanted to thank him, but he lives in Ottawa and doesn't get to Toronto all that often. Well, he gave a reading and answered questions at the awesomely named Academy of the Impossible, so I knew I had to go. While they were setting up, he was sitting in the back of the room, so I took the opportunity to walk up to him and say, "Hello, Mister de Lint. You're my biggest fan."

The look of confusion on his face was priceless!



And, then, de Lint recovered from the attempt at humour because he is a consummate literary professional.

Well...In 1,237 Years, Maybe...

When I started heart rehab, I was given several tests and weighed. At the three month point, I was given the tests and weighed again to see if I had improved. And, I had! I had lost a pound, maybe a pound and a half! If I keep this up, I'll be a scarecrow in no time!



A boy writer can dream, can't he? Hmm...maybe I should put some clothes on. Wouldn't want to catch a cold...

Distance: Killer Of Great Comic Possibilities

It's the sort of thing I always respond to by saying, "If you saw this on TV, you'd be laughing your ass off. In real life, not so much."

I booked an appointment with my heart specialist six months in advance. I booked an appointment with my dentist three months in advance. What are the odds that they ended up being on the same day? For a normal person, very small. For a bad comedy magnet like me, inevitable.

Remember those cheesy sitcoms from the 1970s where a guy (it was always a guy) made a date with two women at the same time, and ran from one restaurant to the other (or, sometimes, one table to another in the same restaurant) trying to keep up the pretense of separate dates? I felt sort of like that. In the middle of get scaling done, I imagined I would hold up a hand and ask to go to the bathroom. Then, I would run to my cardiologist's office and have an EEG done. As I fumbled for an explanation for why I was wearing a blood-stained bib, hilarity would ensue.

Unfortunately, the offices are on opposite sides of the city, making them too far away from each other to make it work...

My Imaginary London

The first time I was in New York, I discovered that landmarks weren't as close together as I had imagined from movies and TV. When I planned my first trip to London, I expected to spend a lot of time on the subway, getting from one famous place to another. Silly rabbit. I discovered that the landmarks were closer than I had imagined; look down any London street and you'll find *H*IS*T*O*R*Y*.

Europe confuses me.

Among Other Things, Friend, Among Other Things

I planned on spending an extra couple of days in London after Eastercon. My publishers, Peter and Allison Buck, were kind enough to offer to drive me to Kent, which was a short train ride to London.

Did you know that the main highway through England has long straight patches that follow the road put down by Romans thousands of years ago? And, you thought the Gardiner Expressway was old!

"You see that stand of trees on your left?" Peter off-handedly commented halfway through the ride. "That's Sherwood Forest." *Sherwood Forest?* I thought. *Fantastic! That's where Men in Tights took place!*

This May Seem Silly, But English Cows Just Seem More...Cowy For Some Reason

On our drive through England, I checked off a list in my head of sights:

- ✓ English cows
- ✓ English horses
- ✓ a large mound of English manure
- ✓ nuclear power plants

The journey was quite the eye opener!

Man Plans, God Does Track Maintenance

To make things easier for me, Peter gave me instructions on which subway line to take to get me directly to my hotel. It was a good plan, a fine plan. However, it being a holiday Monday, some parts of the underground were closed. As a result, I had to take a detour through 27 different London tube lines and, I'm pretty sure, at least nine different dimensions.

At The Point Where I Noticed Tourists Were Taking Pictures Of Other Tourists, I Started Having Doubts About The Wisdom Of My Itinerary



At any given moment, 9 million people live in London, and there are 12 million tourists. Judging by how many of us had cameras out, I suspect that no citizens were actually anywhere near the older core of the city; Parliament actually met in the basement of a non-descript building on the outskirts of London and the royal family was filmed on sets in Kent.

London Has Nothing On Sauron!

On the train into London, I saw the infamous Shard; I was disappointed that nobody was motorcycling up its side. Now, that would be quite the tourist attraction!

I also saw the big Ferris wheel known as The Eye. I was disappointed that it's still a big Ferris wheel. I was indifferent to the fact that it was still called The Eye.

You Knew There Had To Be A Python Reference In Here Somewhere...

Walking from the subway to my hotel in London, my suitcase made click clacking sounds on the stone pavement. No, not click clacking – clip clopping. Clip clop. Clip clop.

Clip clop. The sound was very familiar to me. Clip clop. Clip clop. I knew I had heard it before – clip clop clip clop clip clop – but where?

After a while, it finally hit me: two coconuts being banged together to simulate the sound of a trotting horse!

It's A Cosmopolitan City, Sure, But There Are Limits!

As I wandered about the city, I heard a variety of different languages: Russian, Polish, Italian, French, Alpha Centauri, Arabic, Ventrosian Squiggle. Okay, I may be exaggerating a bit. I didn't hear any French.

Biggish Ben At Best



Woo hoo! The British Parliament as seen from across the Thames. And, next to it, is that...Big Ben? Humph. I thought it would be...taller. It's more like Modest Ben, you ask me...

Which Is Impressive Considering She Hadn't Died Yet

In Hyde Park, I watched as a bird picked a piece of bread off a path and flew to the branch of a tree, where it put the bread down and ate it at a leisurely pace. And, I thought, *the spirit of Margaret Thatcher lives on in this country!*

Next Stop: The Moon!

The initial layout of the hotel in which I stayed in London was almost exactly the same as the one in which I had stayed in Bradford. If I squinted, I could believe that the hotel was the same, that it had somehow dematerialized in one city and appeared in the other. And, I thought, *Anything is possible in the land of Doctor Who!*

You Can Take The Boy Out Of The City, But You Can't Take City Politics Out Of The Boy (Unfortunately!)

There was a subway to Heathrow Airport – Rob Ford take note. Heathrow has a white piano that anybody can sit down at and play – Rob Ford, get some culture, even if it is just “chopsticks!” London has pay toilets – Rob Ford, don’t get any ideas! Schiphol Airport actually contains a casino – Rob Ford, stop drooling...

A Tourist Has To Have Some Dignity, After All

Ad in Heathrow Airport: “What will you do when your YOUNG CHILD ASKS why you didn’t invest in eastern Poland?” I will answer: “I wasn’t about to be bullied by an ad in Heathrow Airport!”

What, After All, Could Zen Air Travel Teach You If You Ended Up In Wabash?

My boarding pass had no gate; I wondered if this meant that we could get on any plane we wanted to. Random world travel – how Zen! You wanted to go to Toronto, but you actually ended up in Zagreb – have a nice flight! But, no, the gate the plane would take off from was announced about an hour before boarding.

I Don’t Know Art, But I Know What My Seatmate On The Plane Likes...

On the plane back to Toronto, I sat next to a big, elderly German man whose grasp of English seemed uncertain. And, when I say big, I mean he was really big. He literally overflowed his seat; his elbows were a particular menace to my rib cage. Seeing that attempts at communication would likely be futile, I resolved to accept seven hours of scrunching in my seat with as much good grace as I could muster.

An hour into the flight, the man took out a pencil and a pad of paper and drew an exquisite image of flowers. Over the course of the flight, he drew a couple of pictures of other passengers, more flowers and an image of two bodies coming together.

By the end of the flight, my joints ached, but I did have a better appreciation of grace.

(Top Of The) Pop(s) Quiz, Asshole



- 1) What Japanese product is this photo shoot for?
 - a) tampons
 - b) Hello Kitty flavoured tampons (which taste of strawberry and aloofness)
 - c) Kirin Beer...flavoured tampons (gotta keep the theme alive)
 - d) other



- 2) What did Oliver Cromwell do behind this window?
 - a) piddle on King Charles I's death warrant
 - b) declare war on pomegranates
 - c) watch every episode of Yes, Minister...on iTunes
- 3) How quickly would I get jaded by the city's history if I actually lived in London?
 - a) 10 minutes

- b) 10 hours
- c) 10 days
- d) if you can imagine the question, you can probably imagine the answer...

I Have Two Words for Chutzpah!

The raccoons stared at me. I stared at the raccoons. Although there was a porch between us, their disdain for me was palpable. After a couple of seconds, one of the raccoons said to itself, “Aww, screw this action. I’m going to find an establishment where I’m more welcome!” and turned and walked down the porch steps. The other raccoon, stuck between its desire to eat at its first choice and be with its companion glowered at me for several more seconds before finally turning and following. It stopped and glared at me for a few more seconds from the driveway just to make sure that its displeasure at my presence was fully appreciated, then waddled off.

The raccoon sliding down the trunk of the tree in the front yard momentarily took me by surprise. But, what the hell. If you’re going to have a picnic, you may as well let the children play.

It was a little after midnight. I was waiting for a taxi. I saw headlights down the street; when I walked to the end of the driveway, I saw that they did, indeed, belong to a cab. It stopped four doors down. After a couple of seconds, it crept up the street and started going into the driveway of that house. No problem. I wasn’t in nearly as much pain as I had been earlier in the afternoon. However... At this point, I waved my arms, in the time-honoured tradition of animals on the veldt making themselves appear bigger than they are to scare away potential predators. Fortunately, it got the cabbie’s attention (and probably had the side benefit of scaring the raccoons further away from the house for a few...minutes).

I had been having stabbing pains in my side for a day and a half. I have a complex relationship with pain. On the one hand, my father will go to the emergency department of the hospital for a hangnail. On the other hand, my mother will avoid doctors for anything less than a limb falling off. Being a good Canadian, I’ll live with pain for a couple of days hoping that it will go away on its own, but, given an incentive, I’ll go see a doctor. A friend of mine wrote me an email that said, “If it wasn’t so late, I would phone and yell at you for not going to emergency.”

This is how my friends show they care.

Being psychically yelled at was incentive enough.

After being processed at North York General (why has there never been a medical show on TV about the lab technician who has to conduct the tests on people’s blood and urine? Oh, yeah – YUCK!), I sat down to wait for results.

There were many things to occupy my attention while I waited. There was the television on the wall of one side of the room in the Yellow Zone, which competed for attention with the television on the wall on the opposite side of the room in the Yellow Zone. There were old magazines (with titles like *Horse & Buggy Monthly* and *Scientific Thirteen Colonies*); unfortunately, I knew where they had been, and wasn't moved to read them. Or, even pick them up.

Fortunately, I had brought a book. I had a feeling.

Also for our entertainment, a baby was screaming behind the curtains of one of the examining rooms, a necessary part of the early morning ambience of emergency rooms in hospitals. I'm sure that they have an MP3 of a child screaming that they play on slow nights. Although, come to think of it, I don't remember seeing a child while I was there... After a few minutes, somebody in the examination room started running water, which grabbed the baby's attention and quieted it down. Of course, I didn't see the water, either...

As I sat there, the pain, which had peaked that afternoon, slowly abated. This always happens to me: the moment I decide to seek medical help, my symptoms start to go away. This is more proof, as if more proof was needed, that my brain is not always my friend; it also strongly indicates that my body willingly colludes with that stubborn grey matter.

The blood and urine tests proved inconclusive, so, at 4:00 in the morning, the doctor suggested that I get an ultrasound. Visuals get my attention, so I agreed. Alas, the ultrasound department didn't open until 8:30, so I would have to wait until at least then. I say at least, because in-patients get precedence over emergency patients; I would be given an ultrasound whenever a spot became available. Umm, okay. A few minutes later, a nurse suggested that I could make an appointment to have an ultrasound; I figured this could give me a chance to go home and get some sleep, so I said I would consider it. Unfortunately, the only slot they had available to give me was 10:10 in the morning; factoring in travel time, this would give me about 37 seconds of sleep before I had to return. I asked if I could take the time slot and stay in emergency, but was told that it didn't work that way (if I left, I would be an out-patient, which would make it okay). I asked if I could just sit outside the front doors of the emergency wing of the hospital, but, apparently, this was not in the spirit of the ultrasound department. And, hospital administrators are really cranky in the middle of the night.

I decided to take my chances, and was escorted to the ultrasound waiting area at 9:15; the test started around 9:40. Ha! Take that, arcane hospital rules!

The urgency that others felt on my behalf was that my pain may have had something to do with my appendix, the ugly stepchild of internal medicine. The ultrasound showed that this was not the case – I actually have gall stones. Woo hoo!

But, then, you already knew that from the title of this article, didn't you?

I Should Have Left My Image Well Enough Alone...

As a * SERIOUS WRITER *, I have to do a lot of behi – no, wait. I could never be accused of being a * SERIOUS WRITER *. * SERIOUS WRITER *s drink champagne at book launches and make catty remarks about former lovers. * SERIOUS WRITER *s write hilariously bitchy reviews for literary journals of books written by people who gave their books not nearly so entertainingly bitchy reviews. * SERIOUS WRITER *s know how to properly spell mendacity.

Perhaps it would be better to describe myself as a * WRITER WHO IS SERIOUS ABOUT HIS CRAFT AND CAREER *. That sounds closer to the truth. So, as a * WWiSAHC&C *, I have to do a lot of behind the scenes work. EXAMPLE: I have to have a supply of publicity photos on hand for, well, publicity.

Unfortunately, the portrait I have been using was over a decade old; I'm afraid it would give people the wrong impression (for instance, that I still have hair on my head). And, in any case, I seem to have lost the remaining copies. To fill this void, I prevailed upon my Web Goddess to take photographs of me.

I'm not big on photographs of myself. Below you'll find some compelling reasons why:



My future's so bright, I gotta stand in shade.

Oh, and is that a pipe in my hand or – you know what? There is no good way to finish that question. Forget I said anything.



Rule number one of headshots: never let yourself be upstaged by fruit. Think Rene Magritte started this way?



Squirrel!

(By the way, the pipe is not mine, since I don't smoke. The beret is mine, since I do get sunstroke when I spend too much time outdoors with my head exposed. The sideburns used to belong to Isaac Asimov, but I seriously doubt he'll be needing them any more.)



Well, now, that is an interesting point, you make. A very interesting point, indeed. I shall need some time to give that point, which, as I say, is very interesting, all of the attention it deserves. One wouldn't want to just slough off a very interesting point with a couple of ill-considered words, no matter how clever or – dare I say it? interesting – they may be. Interesting points deserve careful consideration, especially ones that are very. Ask me again in a week or two; by that time, I should have totally forgotten this very interesting point that you make. But, fear not! The very interesting point shall be a part of me for all of my years, if not beyond...

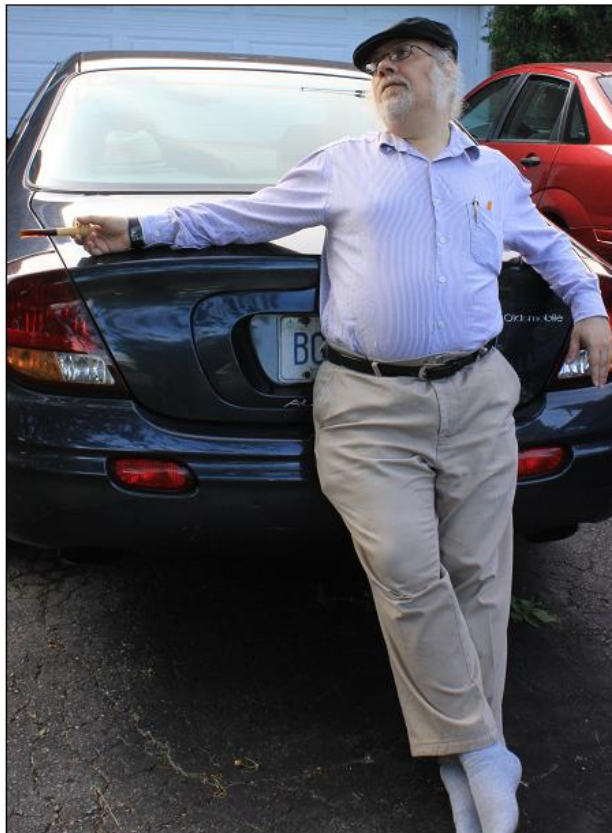


Do you wonder why I don't smile in more of my photos? EXHIBIT A. I could probably use this photo to audition if they ever make another Alvin and the Chipmunks movie, but other than that...

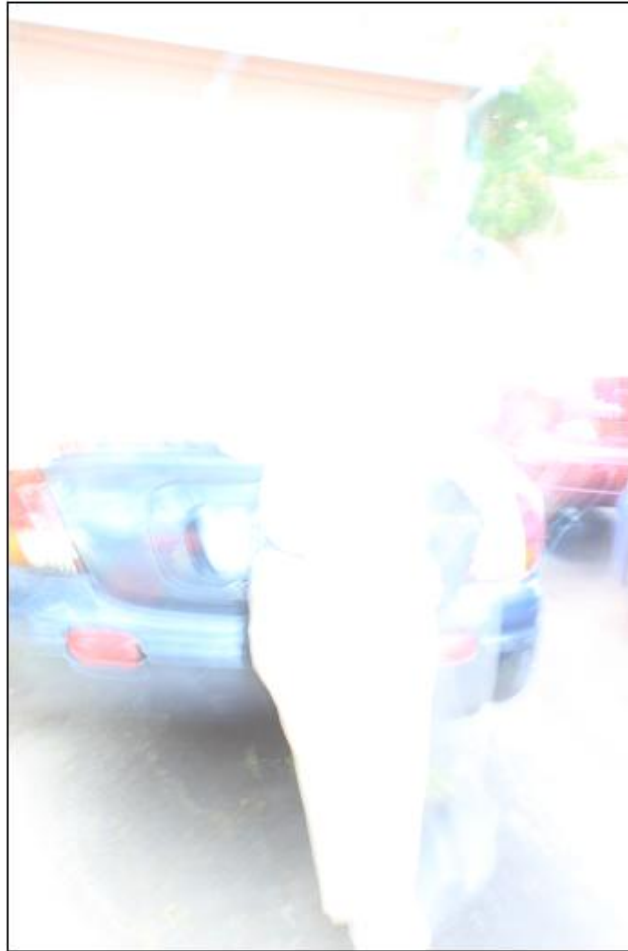
Oh, and is that...is that pipe making a rude gesture? Let me get back to you after I've tried to submit **this** photo to the Web site running my next interview!



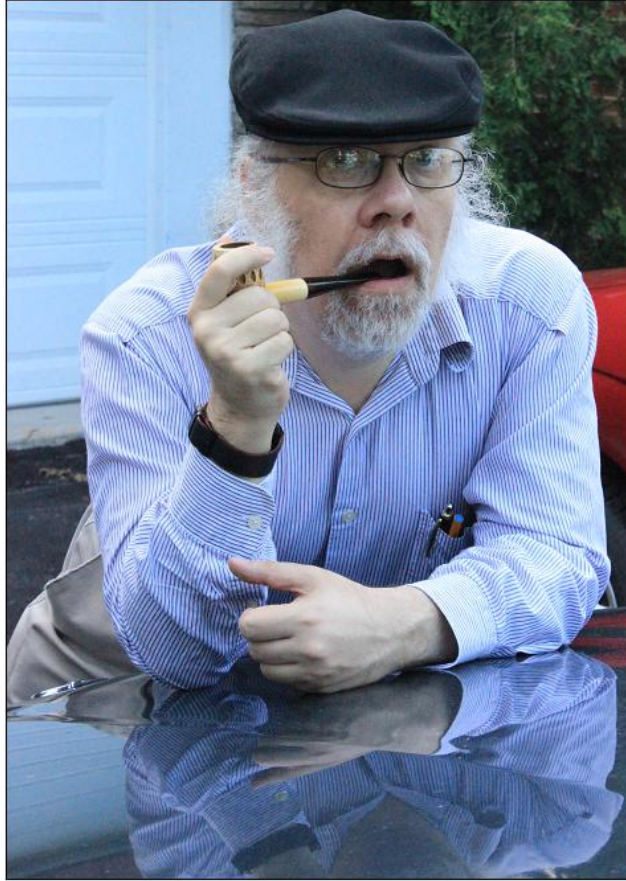
Oh! That's interesting. I – just interesting, unlike the point you made earlier, which was very interesting, indeed. I...I seem to be holding a hummingbird! How did that happen? And, more importantly, WHAT DO I DO WITH IT NOW?



Okay, you may not think much of this pose, but have you ever arched your back against the trunk of a car? Holy crap! They had to rush me to a chiropractor after this series of shots was complete! I will never make fun of fashion models again! At least, not before my spine has been straightened!



For those of you who have never indulged, this is what the world (or, at least, the previous picture) looks like on LSD. Now, you don't have to try it. No, no need to thank me – your not mugging me while high is thanks enough!



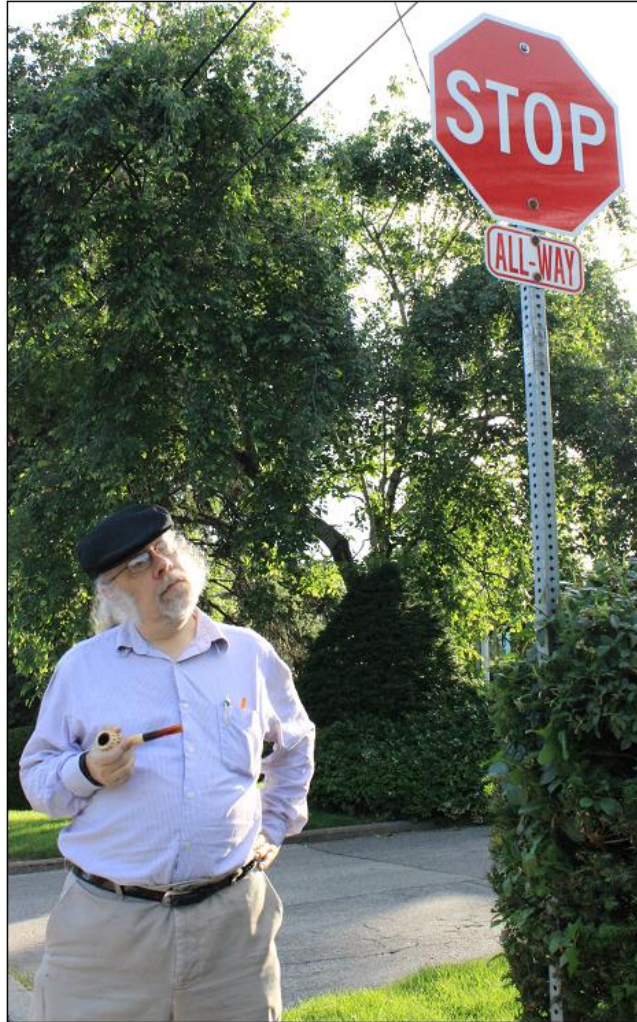
Oh, the horror! THE HORROR! And, I'm not talking about the tobacco in the pipe that I'm not smoking! If I was living in a Hitchcock movie, the camera would probably zoom in on the black hole that is my mouth. And, then...out my ear or something. Obviously, I'm no Hitchcock...



Sorry. I haven't got a clue. Obviously. If I knew what I was doing, would I be posing in front of a suburban garage?



In this photo, I'm using my pipe to turn a screw in an imaginary Rube Goldberg device that will either create world peace or forever erase Nickelback from history. Which, in its own way, could go a long way to creating world peace. As you might be able to tell from the expression on my face, turning imaginary screws is hard work.



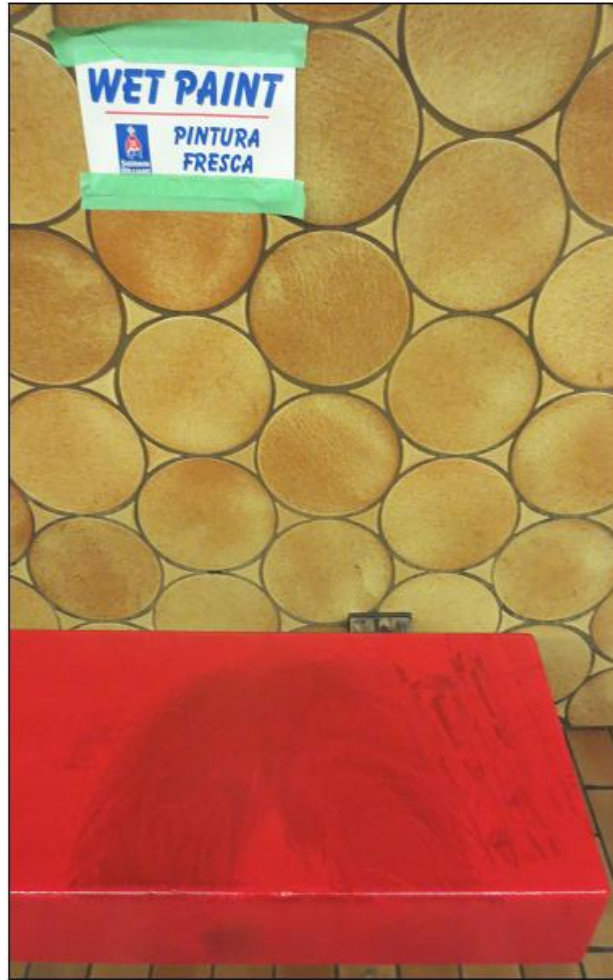
I could keep going, but something tells me I shouldn't...

I've Made a Lasting Impression on the City

Somewhere There is a Subway Bench With...

You know how you sometimes sit on a bench in a subway funny? You know, there is something about the way your ass sticks to the bench a little instead of sliding easily when you move? And, when you put your hand down to steady yourself as you sit, it encounters an unexpectedly viscous surface? Have you ever had the feeling of suddenly knowing you have just lived the goofiest of physical comedy tropes even before you look up and see the writing on the wall?

I didn't know what that experience was like either...until last night.



That's right: somewhere on a bench in a subway station in Toronto is the imprint of my ass.

Now, you might wonder why subway benches are painted while the subway was still running; I know I did. But, this is uncharitable. If subway benches were painted after people were no longer allowed on the platform, where would the potential for bad physical comedy be?



Granted, nobody ever looks at my butt, so my impression of a red assed baboon would likely go unnoticed for months, if not years. Still, I can only send the comedy out in the world; how people perceive it is their business!

If I Was Any More Awkward, I Would be an Olympic Gold Medalist!

I've started attending Nerd Mafia meetings in Toronto because everybody deserves to be with like-minded people, so why not have some fun? Early in a recent meet-up, one of the original organizers of the group mentioned that his wife would be coming to celebrate her 30th birthday. Cool – the more, the merrier. When she arrived, I thought that she looked familiar, but, my memory being what it is these days, I couldn't place where.

The evening progressed. A woman I wanted to talk to was listening to a story the organizer's wife was telling about having sex at an orgy. Okay. Wasn't expecting that. But, I listened politely while waiting for a moment to pull the woman I wanted to talk to

away. In the course of the story, I learned two things: the woman telling it was interested in stand-up comedy and had been involved with *The Naked News*. That last one should have sparked my memory (not for the reason you're thinking!), but I still had nothing.

IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE

I was in the subway station where the whole wet paint thing occurred a few days later and, sure enough, **my assprint was still on the bench! Oh, yeah!** My ass has staying power, baby!

We now return you to your regularly scheduled column.

A few minutes later, her story over, the organizer's wife was standing on her own, so I thought I would go over and talk to her about stand-up comedy. I had spent some time in a club when I was younger and found it to be a brutal way to enter the comedy world. When she told me that she had already started doing stand-up, I froze. Would it really be a good idea to talk about how horrible stand-up comedy was to somebody who had already started down that path? On her birthday, no less? I may be a nerd, but I'm not entirely unaware of the existence of other people.

So, we awkwardly talked around the subject for a couple of minutes. I asked her if she found it hard, as a woman, to break into such a male-dominated scene. She answered that she had spent a lot of time at science fiction conventions, which weren't always welcoming to women, so she wasn't worried. That was another clue to where I knew her from, but, again, I wasn't able to put it together.

IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE

Oh, no! The enamel paint has started flaking off my pants! It's only a matter of time before the pattern is completely gone! Then, they'll just be...pants.

Does anybody know where the next TTC bench painting will take place?

It finally hit me as I was on my way home: she had interviewed me at a con (probably Polaris) a couple of years ago for *The Naked News*. She told me she would let me know when the segment aired, but I never heard back from her and assumed that it hadn't. Which was fine by me: it was only my second convention, and I was still developing my ability to talk about my work in a way that would make it at least mildly interesting to those unfamiliar with it.

In the end, it was probably just as well that I hadn't remembered who she was, because it meant I wasn't able to bring up a subject that could have made the conversation even more awkward!

IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE IRA ASSPRINT UPDATE

Good news! Sort of! I took the pants into the cleaners, figuring that if the paint was flaking off, I may as well get it off completely. But, when I went to pick up the pants, the paint was still there. The woman at the cleaners said that the man I left the pants with told her that the stain had actually been part of the pants when I bought them and that I wanted it to remain – the very opposite of what I actually told him! Even better: the dry cleaning really baked the paint into the pants – it won't be flaking off any time soon!

I'm ready to start my fashion revolution now...

Oh! – I Seem to Have Blacked Out, There – Did I Miss Anything?

The first time, the lights flickering out for a couple of seconds caused my computer to turn off. Taking the 10 minutes to boot it back up was annoying.

The second time, the lights were out for a couple of minutes. When they came back on, taking the 10 minutes to boot my computer back up was very angrifying.

The third time, I was expecting the lights to go out, and I wasn't disappointed. Or, actually, I was disappointed. The language isn't entirely adequate on this point. Either way, I angrily thought to myself: *Oh, I am getting sick of this – make up your damn mind, already!* And, obviously, somebody heard me, because the electricity in my neighbourhood was out for two days.

Yes, I know where I was at the start of the Not So Great Toronto Blackout of 2013.

If a tree falls in the city and nobody can see it because it took out the power lines when it fell, causing a massive blackout, did it really, umm, do...whatever a parody of the famous aphorism would need it to do to be complete?



A random photograph of ice hanging off of trees because it isn't a true ice storm without images of ice hanging off of things. No need to thank me; it's all part of the service...

Of course, there's only so much reading by candlelight one can do before one's eyes protest (it's a high-pitched squealing sound – if you haven't heard it, consider yourself lucky), so I did what anybody in my position would do: slept a lot. (My position being single. What anybody who is not single would do in this position will be revealed in approximately nine months.) This required a bit of adjustment, since my ordinary hours are spent mostly in the dark, which would defeat the whole purpose. Still, you would be surprised how easy it is to coax your body to sleep when you're running a sleep deficit.

Of course, I'm not recommending that others who have problems sleeping hope for a storm which leaves hundreds of thousands of people in five provinces without electricity. That would be cruel. And, more than a little self-obsessed. I'm just saying that if the opportunity arises...

Staying with my parents is always fun, but during the Not So Great Toronto Blackout of 2013 it was more so.

ME: I'm going to take a shower.

DAD: Wait a second. We may not have any hot water. (Goes to sink and runs water for a couple of seconds.)

ME: That's really not nec –

DAD: See? There's no hot water.

ME: That may be, but I still have to –

MOM: You don't know that. You didn't run the water long enough to see if it will get hot or not. (Goes to sink and runs water for over a minute, long enough for steam to rise out of it.)

ME: No, don't bother to –

MOM: There. You see? We do have hot water!

ME: (muttering) Think there'll be any left for me...?



Gloomy, isn't it?

It's interesting how an emergency can unite people. For a brief time, every Torontonians' favourite three words were: "Electricity's back on!"

Westerners may have been a little smug about us eastern bastards freezing in the dark, although some may have been disappointed that they weren't directly responsible. You would think that, now that Calgary is the centre of the universe, they could afford to be more magnanimous. I guess some people are really good at holding a grudge...

To pass the time, my father started reading Al Gore's book *The Future*. Looking at the cover, I thought, I have seen it.



Does your grandfather, in his ongoing attempts to make you feel, deep down in your bones, how much better you have things than people did when he was your age, complain about dryers, saying that when he was a kid they had to dry their socks by an open fire in the middle of the room? Mine doesn't either. However, I'm sure somebody's grandfather somewhere says things like that. This image is for him: eat your heart out, grandpa!

It should come as no surprise that ice storms happen in cold weather, which makes not freezing to death more than an academic exercise or the plot of a Hollywood blockbuster about men with too much testosterone climbing every mountain because, you know, they can. One solution to this problem? Shopping malls. And, the best part? So many people will be there doing last minute Christmas shopping, that nobody need know that you're there to avoid freezing to death as more than part of an academic exercise or etc. etc.!

Still, next time somebody decides to have an ice storm that destroys multitudes of trees and cuts power to major metropolitan areas for days, would it be too much to ask for it to be in May?

Adventures in Education

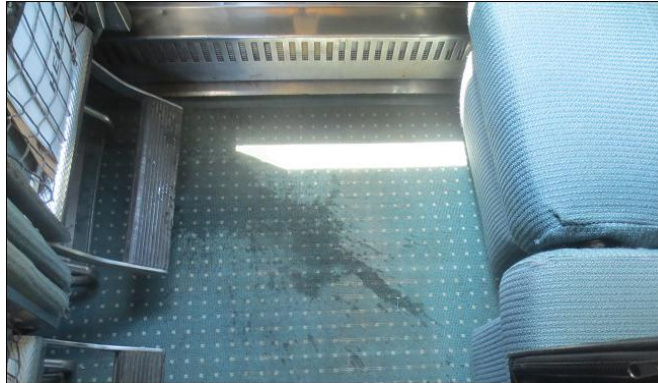
A few months ago, my cousin Sharon asked Su Sokol and I to speak to her classes about writing in general and science fiction specifically. Fortunately, we both write science fiction, so there was no repeat of the incident where my cousin Aaron asked me to come and speak to his class about Latin American interpretive dance (the good news is that the lawyers are fairly certain that it can be settled out of court).

My day started in confusion. The alarm clock woke me up on time, but when I turned off the radio that had been turned to the end of the dial (the white noise helps me sleep), I could still hear static. I turned the clock radio (yes, I have two noise-making devices by my bed – how decadent!) off and on again, but the noise persisted. It took me over a minute to realize that my alarm must have drifted from the radio station I usually have it tuned to and ended up on static.

Boy, if anybody realized how confused I was, it would be embarrassing!

On the trip to Montreal, I was reminded that trains are the perfect venue for bad physical comedy. I was trying to rehearse my notes for the class, but, owing to the motion of the train, pages kept slipping out of the file folder and onto the floor. Then, when I decided to put the folder back in the suitcase that was lying on the floor, I knocked the remaining sheets off the tray.

And, I don't even like the three stooges!



Nine out of 10 forensic scientists agree that despite my protestations to the contrary, the splatter pattern of the liquid in front of my train seat conclusively proves that I am the master of bad physical comedy. (The 10th is related to me, so her opinion could be biased.)

Sharon teaches at a school for the children of Europeans who, probably through a fault of their own, lived in Montreal. Many of the students were German. Naturally, they (not to mention most of the teachers) spoke German to each other. Not being a big fan of the language, I pretended they were speaking Klingon to make the experience more comfortable for myself.

The first class started at 8:20. In the morning. More proof, as if more proof was needed, that you should read the fine print before you agree to anything.

When we arrived at the school, we had to sign in and were given badges: Su was given "Visitor 10," I was given "Visitor 3." I thought that that was harsh: I should have been given a "Visitor 6" or "Visitor 7" just for showing up at that ungobliny hour! I mean, honestly, she's great, but was Su really three times the Visitor that I was? I don't think so!

Probably. Maybe. Okay, okay, I'm obviously going to have to work on my Visiting skills so that maybe, one day, I, too, will merit a Visitor 10. As I didn't tell the students, in life, it's good to have a goal.

Between classes, we were ushered into the teachers' lounge. Sharon gave me some water in a chipped light blue mug with a message that read: "Do what you like. Like what you do," on the front. I must admit that even though I taught part-time at a university for five years, I never felt more like a teacher than I did drinking from that mug in that place!



This is not a picture of the teacher's lounge – it's actually a "quiet room" where teacher's could go between classes to work (or, in my case, sleep – did I mention the whole 8:20 in the morning class thing?). It just goes to show you how times have changed: when I was in grade school, the quiet room was what teachers called "home."



This is the sky above the café where Sharon, Sue and I shared sweet potato fries before I returned home. I don't remember Montreal being quite this fluffy, but, then again, I had never spent any time in Sainte-Anne de-Bellevue. You live in a place for three years and you think you know it...!

On the train ride back to Toronto, a kid who couldn't have been more than five or six poked his head up over the seat in front of me and started shooting at me with his finger. "What did I ever do to you?" I asked. "I love guns," he told me. "Guns are cool!" And, I thought, *Really? Only a couple of days after Orlando? Some day, you're gonna make a great Republican politician!*

<Obligatory Sincere Paragraph (OSP)>: The first class we addressed was 90 minutes long, so after Sue and I read and talked a little bit about ourselves, the students were given a writing prompt and asked to write a short story, which many of them then read to the class. One of the students had obviously been taken with my passage, because she used a comic device that I had employed in her story. It was quite charming. In fact, the whole day was quite charming. Looking back on the experience, it occurs to me that one thing that can connect young and old is imagination. **</OSP>**

If nothing else, my trip to Montreal taught me a valuable lesson: never pee standing up on a train. It's not a challenge to your masculinity, it's a sanitary nightmare!

Wherein I Make Sport of My Exhibitionism

You may not know it to look at me, but I'm part Klingon. On weekends. And, at special events.

Special events such as the Canadian National Exhibition (aka: the CNE; aka: The Ex; aka: the annual family obligation that is so much more commercial than when I used to go as a kid, but that we somehow manage to enjoy anyway), where Klingons were invited on the opening weekend to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the release of the first episode of Star Trek. (I know, I know: Chris Pine doesn't look a day over 30! If you're confused, ask your parents.)

Since many of the Klingons (who weren't me) had elaborate costumes (I have a gold vest – a beginner's costume; I can't wait until the training wheels come off!), we needed a place to change. We were given space in the green room where the CNE mascots get into their costumes. Now, I know Klingons are a warrior race who are supposed to be battle hardened and all, but those oversized animal heads creeped the shit out of me!



Do Klingons have nightmares? If this doesn't give them to me, I'll need to see a psychiatrist for years! Do Klingons have neuroses? Wouldn't you?

In addition to welcoming people to the anniversary exhibit, Klingons were asked to be part of the parade around the fairgrounds. We were put on a Viking themed float (because sense of humour?); we had to share it with representatives of different regions in Ontario who seemed to have been chosen for their sparkling personalities and conversational skills.

Okay, no. They were more likely chosen for having won local beauty contests; the sparkling personalities and conversational skills were just a pleasant bonus. Still, talk about beauties and the beasts! If only Andrew Lloyd Webber had been there, he would have had enough material for a dozen musicals.

Okay, probably just as well that he wasn't.

Most of us walked behind the float.

We were followed by the Windsor Optimist Youth Band. What were they optimistic about? That we wouldn't kill any of them? Considering the classical band music that they were playing, that was highly...hopeful of them.



Having the Klingons be followed by the Optimist Youth Band was the sheerest act of...wishful thinking. Still, no limbs were lost, so it could be argued that the tactic was successful.

As always, it was great to see the Klingons. Next year, in the Food Building!



Klingons Fierce. Proud. Strangely cuddly. I am delighted to be among their ranks.

* * *

Speaking of which...

While I was at the CNE, I ate a bug. Several, actually. They came with a sauce – I'm not three years old any more.

I had read that the Food Building at The Ex had a booth that incorporated insects into its dishes. One of the great things about The Ex is that it gives you the opportunity to do things you don't usually do for the rest of the year...or, ever. This seemed like one of those things.

It helped to know that our current beef culture is ecologically unsustainable, and the amount of insect protein in the world is huge. I figured this was the perfect opportunity to get an early start on the future that's going to await most of us (the wealthy will always be able to have herds of cows on the roofs of their mansions) anyway.



Don't panic, young lady. The future always seems scary. Besides, would you rather have bugs in your tummy, or bugs crawling all over your body? Because that may be the choice in the future...in which case, perhaps alarm would be the most rational response. Okay – panic away.

The Bug Bistro offered a limited number of dishes – probably for the best (although I am curious to know what a t-bug steak would have tasted like). I started with a hot dog that incorporated insects, as well as being liberally topped with them. I probably would have

lost it if the top layer of insects was crunchy, but they were soft and went down smooth. The hot dog itself tasted like...a hot dog. No problems, there.



It wasn't on a dare. It wasn't because of a schoolyard taunt aimed at the heart of my masculinity. Insect edibles are the way of the future, and I wanted to get there first!

Emboldened by the non-ickiness of this experience, I decided to try a couple of insect rolls. They came with a spicy red sauce that was...spicy. And, red.

All in all, my experience of insect food was: meh. It didn't taste all that different from traditional food (probably a good thing), and it didn't have a different texture (what is sometimes referred to as – I am not making this up – “mouth feel”). At least it didn't taste like chicken...

If they're around next year, I'm going to try a bug smoothie!

* * *



As a parting gift, the CNE gave me a bust of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made out of butter. Honestly, people, the jokes write themselves!

The Jury is Still Out

“Hi! Welcome to your wonderful journey through Canada’s world renowned justice system! If you have phoned this number, that means you have been selected for jury duty! Congratulations! Please allow me to explain all of the amazing things that you have to look forward to...”

Okay, I will admit that I was not feeling the joy of participating in the Canadian justice system. To be honest, I had called the number on the summons to explain that I had a heart condition and that a trial would likely be injurious to my health and could I please please please be let go? What did I get for my effort? A five minute message outlining what I had already read in the letter containing my summons to jury duty that ended with two option: listening to the phone message again or hanging up.

Apparently, getting out of jury duty was not going to be so easy. I spent the time between my call and answering the call rehearsing what I planned to tell the judge: I have a heart condition and a trial would likely be injurious to my health and could I please please please be let go?

The empanelled jurors congregated on the sixth floor of the courthouse on University Avenue. Empanelling was something I was more comfortable with in rec rooms, but we cannot always choose how our verbs are interpreted. The sign on the sixth floor wall was missing the letters “x” and “o;” not being a Star Wars fan, I chose not to see this as an omen.



What den of murder, mayhem and other depravity could this be? Oh. The courthouse on University Avenue in Toronto. Carry on...

We gathered in the hallway, 40 or 50 people in an area with about a dozen seats. About 45 minutes before festivities (loosely defined) were to start, we were told to form two lines based on the initial of our last name. Or, something like that. It was hard to tell at the back of the room, so mostly we just milled about and slowly moved forward. Hitchcock was right: potential jurors are cattle.

The lines ended at a desk where two women were checking names off of a list and circling our panel number on our letter with a neon pink highlighter; either we had just won a free latte, or this was our proof that we had attended. (I don't drink coffee, so it was a matter of indifference to me.) I considered telling the woman how I had a heart condition and that a trial would likely be injurious to my health and could I please please please be let go?, but, while she was making an effort to be engaged, I could tell that her main concern was getting all of the jury pool into the room before the judge showed up, so I refrained from saying anything.

In the courtroom, a young man who reminded me of the intern on *Thirty Rock* told us: “Try not to leave any empty spaces – we’re expecting a full house.” It was like Star Wars all over again! (Hey – I may not have been a fan, but that doesn't mean that I didn't see it!) By the time we were told to “All rise” for the judge, all of the 100 or more seats in the

courtroom had been filled, and some potential jurors had to sit on other's heads. (Out of propriety, they stood instead.)

The judge told us that Canada was the best country to live in; aside from the existence of Anne Murray, a major reason was that we had free and fair trials, of which jurors were a vital part. That out of the way, he told us what we really wanted to know: that we had been assembled as potential jurors for a murder trial, but that the matter had been settled, so we were free to go (except for TTC workers; I'm not sure what that was about, but the subway was still working, so I didn't question it too closely).

When we heard the news, the assembled jurors let out a cheer like their favourite sports team had just won the final game of the final series, they had been given a raise and had their work halved, and they had just had the best sex of their lives. Admittedly, this lack of commitment to civic duty was a tad unseemly, but that was the most energy I had experienced in a closed space since the third time I saw *Star Wars* (hey – I may not have been a fan, but...you know the drill). So, there's that.

I realized with some dismay that I wasn't going to tell anybody in the justice system that I had a heart condition and that a trial would likely be injurious to my health and could I please please please be let go? Such a waste of a good reason to get out of something! So, as I made my way to the subway home, I said it to one of the homeless men who sleep on the concrete benches outside the courthouse. "You are dismissed," he graciously told me when I was done.

Finally, I could go home satisfied with my encounter with the court. After all, when it comes to the legal system, we all just want our stories to be heard.

Canada Day, Eh?

On July 1, Canada turned 150. There had never been such a magnitudinous celebration of the country's...countriness! Well, not since 1967, when Canada turned 100. But since, according to a Statscan study that will be published 50 years from now, less than three per cent of the country's current population had been alive for that event, the federal department of Ignoring Inconvenient History conveniently ignored it.

Me? I spent the day looking for a peak Canadian experience, something that leapt out at me from behind a maple tree and shouted, "This is what being Canadian is all about!" in a rumbley voice that resembled a moose call.



On the big day, I went down to Harbourfront, figuring that the best place to truly appreciate Canada would be across the lake from the United States. (Oh, cut me some slack; I'm new to this whole celebrating 150 years of countryhood thing!) When I arrived, I found Torontonians going about their business, blissfully unaware that a celebration lurked very close to where they were businesssing. Okay, the trees are clearly not maple. But you could almost hear a rumibly voice whisper, "Canada is just a short swim away."

What? You've never heard a moose whisper? Pfft – call yourself a Canadian!



As I approached my peak Canadian experience, I realized that it was very...yellow. Very yellow. Like the Canadian flag!

Umm, okay, so the Canadian flag is actually red and white. But, I'll bet it looks yellow if you've drunk enough Molson Canadian! Umm...no other beer, just Canadian. Because 150. And, okay, maybe your eyes wouldn't work that way – as somebody who doesn't drink alcohol, I'm just guessing, here. But, if you drank enough of it, the whites of your eyes would turn yellow, and isn't that a small price to pay to celebrate your country's significant birthday?

All of the people walking towards the yellow symbol of Canada's Canadianness obviously thought so.



And, big. As befits a country that has so much land our population is only slightly more dense than the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Compare that yellow symbol of Canadianness to the mere mortals walking around it – it’s gotta be at least four times their height! So, take the pride an average Canadian feels in their country and multiply it by four – that’s a lot of pride to be contained in a single symbol!

And...coy? As befits a country that...umm...would take five minutes to get around to asking a cute young country for a date and wouldn’t even hold hands “until we get to know each other a little better.” A country that would prefer to take you home to meet its parents before it French kissed you. A country, in short, that acted like a 15 year-old stuck between hormones and social convention. How could anybody resist that?

The moose grinned, unaffected by the symbol’s coyness. Cynical bastard.



I turned a corner and came face to face with Canada. It turned out that Canada was...a big rubber duck? **That** is what I invested all that national pride in?

I heard the sound of a moose laughing its ass off. Or, possibly choking on an undercooked French fry in its poutine. Or, It may just have been trouble in one of the engines of a plane taking off from the island airport. But I preferred to think it was a

symbol of Canadianness with a digestion issue, prompting the question: how do you perform the Heimlich manoeuvre on a moose?

Asking questions like that is just my way of being patriotic.



Nearby, the ship Toronto was allowing people limited access to celebrate Canada Day. Because nothing speaks more to a country's commitment to keeping the peace than showing off its weapons of war. I might have been more impressed if the guns had been trained on the big rubber duck...

Of course, the moose sat up and took notice. In the animal kingdom, moose are staunch Conservatives, second only to blue jays in their right wing views. Doing my best to ignore it, I started to think that my quest for Canadianness on the country's 150th birthday was going to be in vain.

Then, later that evening...



What could be more Canadian than watching fireworks stream off the CN Tower while enjoying a double double at a Tim Hortons? Okay, discussing the appropriate level of federal funding for provincial health care plans while watching fireworks stream off the CN Tower while enjoying a double double at a Tim Hortons. I guess I'm not the best Canadian, then, because that is a policy too far. Still, however lacking, I had found my Canadian moment.

Somewhere in the country, a moose laughed its ass off. How do I know it was laughter? This moose had a heart condition and had been put on a low cholesterol diet...

Things The Literature on Alzheimer's Doesn't Prepare You For

At the age of 86, my father, Bernard (Bernie to many of us, Berns to a particularly cheeky friend) is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease. Because my mother's father died of Alzheimer's, we thought we knew what to expect.

What can I say? We were younger then.

At six in the morning, my dad comes down from his bedroom to the kitchen to have breakfast: toast with butter and jam (cut in two pieces), two eggs and coffee with flavoured creamer. Then, he goes back to his room. Around noon, he comes down from his bedroom to have breakfast (eggs, toast and coffee), then goes back to his room. At about six in the evening, he comes down to the kitchen to have eggs, toast and coffee.

This makes it sound like my father has a routine, but he does not. He is just as likely to come down to the kitchen at two in the morning and hope somebody who is awake will

make him breakfast. Fortunately for him, owing to the sleep patterns of various people in the house, the diner is open 24/7. True, the diner only serves one meal; fortunately, it's really popular with the clientele!

Dad always has the same meal because, no matter what time of day it is, it is always morning. He is enjoying the eternal breakfast of the spotless mind.

Every two or three days, my brother, who does the shopping for the family, has to go out to replenish the breakfast food. For some reason, the diner never seems to be able to keep jumbo eggs in stock for very long.

Alzheimer's involves the development of plaque in the brain which interferes with the signals between neurons. You slowly start to lose your short term memory. Then, you more quickly start to lose your speech processing ability. As the disease accelerates, you forget to do things like dress or wash yourself. In the end, your brain stops sending commands to your autonomic nervous system: your body forgets how to breath or to keep your heart pumping.

Welcome to the machine.

Sometimes, my father would come downstairs from his bedroom in underwear and an undershirt. My brother would hustle him back to his room and help him get properly dressed, because pants. Pants are pretty self-explanatory to those of us who do not have Alzheimer's; to my dad, they can be something of a mystery.

While people with Alzheimer's still have some capacity for thought, they are aware that something is happening to them, but they aren't clear what, so they find their own explanations. My father took to hiding his wallet (from the thieves in his imagination), forgetting where he left it and accusing the people he lived with (in other words: us) of stealing it from him. And, I gotta tell you, he hid it in some very creative places (such as under piles of clothes or in shoe boxes): it often took us hours scouring his bedroom to find it so we could return it to him.

We traced dad's decline by his use of language. At first, he groped for words. "Where is my...my...my..."

"Cane?"

"No. My...you know...my..."

"Coffee cup?"

"That's not it! You know! My..."

"Chiropractor?"

“Toothbrush. That’s it. Where is my toothbrush?”

Then, he started substituting random sounds for words he couldn’t remember: “Where is my flurble?”

“Toothbrush?”

“Flurble!”

“I’ll get your toothbrush.”

Eventually, his speech came to be dominated by random sounds with only the occasional English word. “Am I geebler fooble bobbie?”

“Umm...toothbrush?”

Occasionally, he would come downstairs from his bedroom in the middle of the night only in an undershirt. Aiieeee! My brother would quickly hustle him up to his room to get him dressed. Because, let’s be honest: nobody wants to see an 86 year-old man naked from the waist down. Not even 86 year-old women.

The most memorable thing caused by my dad’s deteriorating mental condition happened in the early evening, when my mother and I were watching television. I thought I heard the sound of whooshing water, but that would be absurd. Water doesn’t whoosh indoors. At first, I ignored it. However, the sound was insistent, so, after a few minutes, I was forced to investigate.

In the barroom next to where we were watching television, water was pouring in a fountain from the ceiling. It was like an indoor Niagara Falls...without the Maid of the Mist and Madame Tussaud’s. My father, whose bedroom is above the barroom, had run the water in his private bathroom with the plug in the sink and forgot to turn it off. Cue the waterworks.

To be fair, the bar hadn’t been cleaned in years. Still. We had to use just about all of the towels in the house and the application of space heaters for many hours to dry the room out.

My brother, who is the most practical person in the house (which makes him the cleverest), disabled the plug in my dad’s sink to ensure that the rain clouds didn’t return to the barroom.

More of us are living longer, being the clever apes that we are, which means that dementia and mental decline are on the rise. At some point in your life, you may have to take care of somebody with Alzheimer’s or a similar condition. If so, keep in mind that, while the progression of the disease has common elements, the way it manifests will be unique to the person you’re dealing with.

The deterioration of the human mind can be just as creative as its growth. Who knew?

More Things The Literature on Alzheimer's Doesn't Prepare You For

Lately, I've been thinking we should hang a "___ days without _____" board in our kitchen to keep track of my father's increasingly erratic behaviour. Today, for instance, the message could be "27 days without a bite being taken out of a tomato."

Gisela, the Web Goddess who is living with my family, grows tomatoes in our backyard. Much of this summer's harvest lies on counters in the kitchen waiting to be added to salads or made into sauce. One morning, she noticed that overnight a bite had been taken out of one of her tomatoes. A single bite. One bite was all whoever did it needed to discover that they really didn't want to eat a whole tomato. By process of elimination (the bite was too big to have been made by one of Gisela's cats, who, in any case, had never been on any of the tables or counters in the kitchen), the midnight tomato biter (who will be a character in a future comic, although I haven't decided if they'll be a hero or a villain) turned out to be dad.

We lost several good tomatoes that week. Their loss will be mourned. Then, my father's attention apparently turned to other matters. Like pants.

17 days without walking around the house without clothes

Although we were mortified by it when it first started happening, my father coming downstairs without pants would turn out to be relatively benign. Coming downstairs without pants and underwear – a progression that we should have anticipated, but didn't – was a lot more awkward.

The first person he encountered would hustle him back to his room and encourage him to put on the absent garments. (Sometimes, to shake things up, he would come down without a shirt. Those were good days.) I thought we might add our names and how often we had to help my dad to the message board; it wasn't a competition, of course, just to...keep track. Out of curiosity. But my brother Philip would have won hands down (to better pull up somebody else's pants), so there didn't seem to be a point.

In an earlier phase of the Alzheimer's, we had difficulty convincing my father that the clothes in his room were his. (I'm still not sure whom he thought the clothes belonged to, or why anybody would substitute them for his clothes. Some conspiracy theories really aren't worth the effort needed to debunk them.) This could have been that. Or, it could have been my father forgetting the social contract that people shouldn't subject others to views of their private bits. Impossible to know.

You don't think about the social niceties until other people forget them.

Then, there were the...wet patches on the carpet in the upstairs hallway. Again, probably not the cats, who seemed pathologically enamoured of their litter box. But, if not the cats, then who would – no. It couldn't be...could it?

3 days without dropping his adult diaper and peeing on the carpet

It could. Oh, it very much could.

Picture the scene. It is four in the morning. An 86 year-old man walks down the stairs. He walks through the kitchen – could he be hungry? His eating has been erratic – it's possible. But no, he stops on the other side of dining room door, exposes himself and waters the carpet.

Now, to be fair, it was early in the morning, and my dad was groggy and incoherent; he clearly did not know what he was doing. Still, nobody in the house knows how to get pee out of carpet (for some reason, my suggestion that we sprinkle it with kitty litter did not go over well). Advice is appreciated.

When you have Alzheimer's, dignity (that little voice in your head that advises you to take pride in your life, to respect yourself) loses all meaning. When you watch the deterioration of somebody you love who has Alzheimer's, when you see how easy it is to suppress the little voice in your head that advises you to take pride in your life, to respect yourself, it makes you wonder how fragile the social construction known as dignity really is.

0 days without finding shit smeared on the toilet seat

Oh, yeah. Dignity? Definitely overblown.

The Universe of Things The Literature on Alzheimer's Doesn't Prepare You For Is Constantly Growing

The human mind is infinitely creative. The infinitely creative human mind of a person with Alzheimer's is infinitely stressful for those around him. It's some kind of universal law – you can't argue with math.

Take Bernard, my father.

It's 2:30 in the morning. He is shirtless. He is standing in front of the sink in the kitchen. He turns the water on, watching it flow for a couple of seconds. He bats the water with his hand, like a cat batting a piece of string that sparks an ancestral memory of hunting in the jungle. He turns the water off (like the jungle cat that didn't catch its prey). He looks at the sink for a couple of seconds. Then, he repeats the process (like a jungle cat that hasn't learned its lesson).

After watching him go through this two or three times, it occurs to me that the water might be too hot for him to wash his hands with. So, I turn the handle towards cold. Sure enough, the next time he runs the water, my father finds it to his liking and rubs his hands under it for a couple of seconds. Then, he turns the tap off and stares at the sink, unsure what to do next.

I reach under the sink, pull out a towel and hand it to him. How Victorian! I half expect a tip for my service, or at least the doffing of a top hat in recognition.

Ordinarily, one could expect that to be the end of it. In my dad's case, nyuh uh. After handing the towel back to me, he stares at the sink for a couple of seconds, then begins running his thumbs over his other fingers, not unlike a crab flexing its pincers. Then, he washes his hands again.

And again.

And again.

Either my father has become a germophobe, or he immediately forgets that he has already washed his hands, or he doesn't like the feel of partially dry hands and thinks that washing them will rid him of it; Alzheimer's offers many creative possibilities for the otherwise unoccupied mind.

I decide the best course of action is to draw him away from the sink. So, I tell him, "Come with me," something I have been doing a lot lately. Gisela, never one to miss a classic movie reference, adds, "...if you want to live." Something she's been saying a lot lately. I just want to get him the four steps from the sink to the chair by the table; it's not exactly Sarah Connor's journey, but every action is epic to somebody in the advanced stages of dementia.

Gisela dealt with my dad's water obsession with her usual good cheer, surprising considering what he had put her through the early morning before.

This summer, Gisela became interested in growing mushrooms. A little obsessed, maybe. Okay, a lot obsessed. But in a good way. She was using a steamer to sterilize jars of water that she would use in the first stage of growing her mushrooms. At three in the morning, because that had to be a safe time to sterilize jars of water to grow mushrooms, right?

Web Goddess plans, man laughs.

My dad sat at the kitchen table, fascinated with the cords from the steamer and the toaster oven that were plugged into adjacent sockets. Occasionally, he reached out to touch one of them. Gisela, concerned that he might accidentally pull out the cord for the steamer, or even intentionally pull out the cord for the steamer, causing her to have to start the process all over again, with increasing urgency, shouted, "No!" at him. She swatted his

hand away from the cords more than once. I tried to distract him by taking out the plug for the toaster oven, telling him he could do whatever he wanted with it; I have no idea if he understood what I told him, because his fascination for the other plug did not abate.

You're probably wondering what the big whup is. There is a common misconception that drama requires huge stakes: if you're not saving the entire world from evil robots, your struggle is not consequential enough to be of interest. In fact, dramatic tension arises when obstacles are put in the way of somebody who wants to accomplish something. What the person wants to accomplish is relatively unimportant; the real issue is how badly they want it.

Gisella wanted those jars of water sterilized really, really, really, really, really badly. The five reallys rule should tell you how tense the situation became as the steamer's clock wound down towards zero, and the sense of relief everybody in the neighbourhood had when time finally ran out.

Taking the jars out of the steamer created a different problem: how to keep curious Bernard from trying to open one and burning himself. We had done our best to dad-proof the house ever since the indoor waterfall incident; if this is what it's like to be the parent of a toddler, I'm glad I never had children, although dealing with my father might be the universe's way of laughing at my presumption in this area. Gisela put the jars in the oven to cool down.

Satisfied that the situation had been resolved, Gisela left the kitchen. I watched my father for a couple of minutes, then decided that it would be best if I took him to his room for the evening. "Come with me..." I suggested, offering my hand. "...if you want to live," a muffled voice said from a distant part of the house.

Sometimes, you have to laugh.

Les Pages aux Folles: The Back Story

A Nayman family legend has it that I decided to devote my life to writing comedy/humour when I was eight years old. Most boys that age wanted to be hockey players or astronauts (or, so I have been told) – why comedy? Through my thirties and forties, it was important to me to understand why I developed the way I did (after a couple of decades filled with unanswerable questions, I decided to stop wondering and accept myself the way I was), so I gave this question considerable thought. Unfortunately, the best I could come up with was a cliché.

I grew up in an emotionally abusive household (as did many funny people). I realized early on in my life that laughing made me feel better; I figure my first impulse to write humour was to help ease myself through a tough childhood. I also suspect that I thought that if I could make my parents laugh, they might not fight so much, but that turned out

not to be the case (intense therapy succeeded where my youthful ambitions failed, but the ambitions remained).

Honestly, if my early life had been any more of a cliché, I would have started this piece with: “It was a dark and stormy night...”

COMEDY HISTORY ASIDE: Years later, I was watching a terrific series called *The Green Room*. Comedian Eddie Izzard was telling the story of how he first met his idol, Richard Pryor. After a few minutes of small talk, they found that they had something in common: they both knew that they wanted to be stand-up comedians when they were four years old. You know how I thought I was precocious because I knew I wanted to be a humourist when I was eight? I was actually already half a lifetime behind the curve!

My original inspiration in my early teens was Art Buchwald. If he is remembered at all these days, it is for being the person who sued Paramount Pictures for stealing his original idea for what would become Eddie Murphy’s *Coming to America*. And, winning. This case exposed the arcane Hollywood bookkeeping that allowed studios to claim films that had grossed a billion dollars never made a profit, and introduced the world to the term “monkey points.” But I remember him as the preeminent newspaper satirist who, in his prime, wrote creative and biting (and very funny) political commentary.

Not a bad role model if that’s what you’re into.

Between 1984 and 1987, I wrote 300 articles for a satirical newspaper column (enough for three books). I called the project *Les Pages aux Folles*, playing off the name of the then popular film *La Cage aux Folles*. I thought the title translated as “cage of crazies,” which would have made my version “page of crazies.” This tickled me. When the English version was released as *The Bird Cage*, I thought, Bird Pages? Okay, *I can make this work*.

Three years into the project, I was no closer to becoming the preeminent newspaper political satirist of the 1980s than when I had started. Years later, I would realize that one wasn’t given a newspaper humour column because one was actually, you know, funny (although some naturally are and others grow into it); they usually went to people who had proven their service to the newspaper in other departments. In defense of my naivete: teenager.

I moved on to scripts and university, but the satirical bug never quite left me. Between 1987 and 2002, I kept coming back to the form, writing over 100 new articles (enough for a fourth collection). Then, a number of pieces of my life came together to drive me to the internet.

At university, I studied emerging technologies and the arts. My Masters thesis (from the New School for Social Research) was on the challenges interactivity posed for fiction writers. My PhD dissertation was on fiction writers who posted their work to the World Wide Web. I know, I know. Today, that’s a big duh! But, in 1999, when I wrote the bulk

of the dissertation (I was awarded my PhD in 2000), it was still relatively – ahem – novel. ACADEMIC ASIDE: the problems I identified in 1999 have scaled up nicely, with few changes over the years. Was I prophetic? Naah – I was just paying attention.

When I returned to Toronto after three years living in Montreal (a residency requirement of McGill University, where I studied), I volunteered for a public interest web page developer called The Electronic Commons; it was championed by a woman named Liss Jeffrey. The project was run out of a building called Chelsea Mews, deep in the heart of the University of Toronto; that is where I met the woman who would become my Web Goddess, Gisela McKay.

As we got to know each other, Gisela pointed out something odd about my life that hadn't occurred to me: I wrote fiction, and I had studied people who post fiction on the internet, but I hadn't posted any of my own fiction on the internet. While I agreed that that was a bit strange, I demurred; although my Masters degree was done entirely online, I didn't know the first thing about creating or maintaining a web page. Gisela, who, among her many talents, is a professional web developer, offered to design a page and walk me through how to keep it going. To ensure that I couldn't refuse, she offered me free space on her server.

I couldn't refuse.

But, what would I write? Reviving *Les Pages aux Folles* as an online project was the most logical way to proceed. When I started it as a print project, I aimed for each article to be around 700 words (in the mistaken belief that this was standard newspaper column length; depending upon the newspaper and the column, it could actually be anywhere from 400 to 600 words); this relative shortness turned out to be a good length for the internet, where long stories require a lot of scrolling and can give some readers eye fatigue. You don't want to give readers eye fatigue.

So, I immediately started posting fiction to the web? Slow down, speed racer. I took the summer of 2002 to build a stockpile of articles. This wasn't meant to supplant weekly writing (since much of the writing would be topical, it would be best to post pieces soon after they were written, something the internet easily facilitates); it was meant as a safeguard against weeks when I was unable to write an update, whether through life circumstances or lack of inspiration. The wisdom of this choice is most vividly illustrated by my experience in 2005, when I had to have triple bypass heart surgery: I prepared four weeks of updates from my stockpile and posted them a couple of days before going under the knife. (As it happened, although I was advised to give recovery at least a month, I was eager to get back to writing after about two and half weeks). My stockpile started with 40 articles; it has fluctuated between 10 and 50 (but mostly closer to 10) ever since.

By the first week in September, 2002, I felt comfortable enough with the cushion that I had produced that I took the plunge and went live with *Les Pages aux Folles*. Years of writing had given me the confidence that I could pull it off (although, like most people who start a project like this, I had no idea how much work I was letting myself in for). It

had also given me four complete books that I could place in an archive on the site, which helped me avoid the problem that many web sites have when starting out: a paucity of content. There was enough writing on the web site from day one that anybody interested could stay a while, or be encouraged to keep coming back.

The first three books had been written on a manual typewriter; the fourth on an electric typewriter and a computer. Because of this, I had to type the articles into my computer before I could post them. This forced me to reconsider the material I had previously written, which proved salutary. I gather many writers are highly critical of their own work, but I found that I really enjoyed becoming reacquainted with mine. (Having had to read through the entire project to collect stories for these special anniversary issues, I feel more or less the same way.) The worst that I will say about my past writing is: "I wouldn't write exactly that, or in that way now."

PEDANTIC ASIDE: Is *Les Pages aux Folles* a blog? On one hand, it is a regular publication (every week, without fail; by the 20th anniversary, that will entail 1,040 consecutive weeks) written by a single person. On the other hand, blogs automate the process of posting to the internet (with tools such as WordPress), but I code my text by hand and upload it and any images I may create using tools Gisela taught me. Also, blogs tend to be a single page of text with newer posts higher up (occasionally breaking into an archive page or two), while each piece I post is on its own separate page. It may be a moot point, but I am reluctant to call *Les Pages aux Folles* a blog.

Except...

In trying to explain what an achievement 20 years of *Les Pages aux Folles* is, one of the facts I point out is that, depending upon the year they were started, between 80 and 90 per cent of blogs are abandoned within the first six months of their existence (I assume that the numbers for personal web pages are roughly the same, but I'm not aware of that research). Writers can be exhausted by the commitment (I often refer to my web site as "the insatiable maw;" no sooner do I finish one update than I have to immediately start working on the next). Writers can run out of inspiration. Other life priorities can leave writers without time. Lack of a readership can cause writers to quit out of despair (because I was emotionally driven by a need to write, the lack of readers was never a disincentive for me, although lately I do despair of ever finding an audience, if for no other reason than I know there must be a lot of people out there who would enjoy my writing...if they knew that it existed). Some people might lose their internet access. Twenty years on the internet is a looooooong time is what I'm saying.

By the 20th anniversary, I will have written 38 books of prose and produced nine books of cartoons for *Les Pages aux Folles*. The project will contain over 3,500 pieces of writing, and somewhere between two and a quarter and two and a half million words.

Nor has this been my only writing project. In 2010, I decided to write my first novel. Blame Terry Pratchett. I had never wanted to be a novelist; I was happy writing my short articles. But, in 2010 I learned of a contest for first humorous science fiction novels that

was sponsored and would be partially judged by Pratchett. This seemed like a great opportunity for me to do what I do best: be goofy. The only problem with entering a novel writing contest, though, is that you have to write a novel to do it. So, I sat down to write what would become *Welcome to the Multiverse**.

I don't usually talk about this, but since we're all friends here, I feel I can state the truth: my first novel took two months to write. Starting from nothing but the desire to write a novel, the first week involved developing the ideas; the next six weeks involved the actual writing; the final week involved rewriting and polishing. This was a stupid short amount of time in which to write 80,000 words (the nine novels I have written since have taken anywhere from six months to a year to produce), but there were extenuating circumstances, your honour. For one thing, by that time I had been writing for 40 years, so unlike many first time novelists, I had already developed my voice and knew my way around a story. More importantly for this essay, many aspects of worldbuilding that contributed to the novel (for instance, the Transdimensional Authority and the Alternate Reality News Service) had been introduced on *Les Pages aux Folles*, so I wasn't exactly starting from nothing.

Perhaps most important: working on the web site taught me how to quickly turn ideas into prose. When you have a weekly deadline, you have to write fast. Under these conditions, there are two ways writers can go. Like a nuclear explosion, they can burn themselves out. Or, like a nuclear chain reaction, their creativity can feed off itself, allowing them to constantly write new material. I was fortunate that my writing took the latter path.

What's next? I have no idea. I know I have a need to write; if life forces me to go a couple of days with writing even a little, I start to get antsy. Humour is not something that a writer can turn on and off: it is a way of looking at and interacting with the world that becomes a constant in your life. At least, it has become that for me. It does help if it has an outlet, though, so I foresee writing as long as I have the words. (Both my father and my grandfather on my mother's side had Alzheimer's, so there is no guarantee that I will always have the words, or for how long.) Regardless of what happens in the future, I already have a creative legacy (including novels, short stories and unproduced screenplays – so many unproduced screenplays!) that I can be proud of.

I hope you enjoy 12 from 20.

* *Sorry for the Inconvenience*

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