



Today I managed to get so depressed that the quality of *Ansible* should shortly improve. For a long while I stared at the blank sheet in the typewriter; in a cunning shift of tactics I stared at a blank sheet in the other typewriter; a final do-or-die effort had me staring at a blank screen over the computer, which after a bit I remembered to switch on but that didn't help either. So to purge my soul with pity and terror I ended up changing the revolting felt pad thing on the duplicator drum, getting ink in all the usual unlikely places such as the lightbulbs, up my nose, in the small of my back... A lot of meths and Swarfega have gone under the bridge since then and it's time to try a stencil, see if we've got rid of the little pale underinked patches shown to the world in all their glory in *Ansible* 35. At least the felt-pad-changing technique has improved since John Harvey and I tried it for the first time at Seacon and people several floors below complained of deviations from the programme in the form of that hitherto obscure film *The Black Slime*.

The depression is for all the usual reasons like money. Trouble is, I didn't write all that many wondrous masterworks in 1982 since we seemed to spend most of the year moving house (extensive process comprising deciding to move house, picking house to move to, scraping up cash to move house, moving house, recovering from having moved house, realizing with a surge of joy and energy the need to carry out huge repairs on house, etc). Income is now scanty and my mother is beginning to show Bad Signs: in 1980, carefully fed with radiation-scare stories, she was dutifully pleased when I left That Terrible Place at Aldermaston, but now, inflamed by little brother Jon's getting of a job in the Public Health Dept of Leeds local government (he does horrific graphics to deter you from smoking and—with more reluctance on his part—drinking and overeating), she's started an intermittent plaint of Don't You Think You Should Get A Real Job? Not while I'm still supported by my faithful props Hazel and Barclaycard, you bet.

To add to the fun, my last three major (meaning major for me, not for James Joyce) efforts have achieved returns on a lesser scale even than the SDP. I did 30,000 words of *The Science in SF*, which in breach of agreement—just try and get a contract enforced when the bloody publishers have got it all sewn up between themselves without telling you—came out with only P.Nicholls's name on the cover. Somewhat unexpectedly, dear old Pete eventually saw reason as regards royalties, and cut me and Brian Stableford in for (percentage omitted to avoid embarrassing the innocent, ie. me), only for evil packagers Roxby Press to decide that the '10% of receipts' in their agreement with Peter could most profitably be interpreted as '10% of net receipts after deducting £46,000 to cover our out-of-pocket expenses such as printing the book'. Hilary Rubinstein spluttered and said this was absurd; so did everyone else; Roxby shyly confessed that, well, they couldn't afford to pay those royalties anyway so it was hardly worth getting in a tizzy; Langford and Stableford continue to starve; Nicholls, looking strangely well-fed as ever, speaks vaguely of solicitors. Just to remind us of our place, the publishers have declined to provide complimentary copies of the paperback to Brian or myself.

I could go on like this for some while and have a terrible feeling that I will. The etiquette of these things demands that one suffer in ever so gentlemanly silence; or reserve the rage and aggro for letters to agents and peccant publishers; or perhaps blow off a very little steam in a bowdlerized account for *The Author*, *The Bookseller* or *Focus* with names carefully not named and details blurred to protect the innocent from the spite of the guilty. (This is beginning to read a bit unfannish, you know; but writing's what I do these days, just as Dave Bridges spends his time smashing up buses, Cath Easthope burning out electron microscopes, John Harvey getting sacked [oops], Greg Pickersgill impeding the dissemination of knowledge...) The next book which failed to raise me to a level of sybaritic ease and luxury was my one and only skiffy novel *The Space Eater*. (Audience yawns and

blocks exits in its frenzied efforts to flee.)

It was only quite a while after publication that it occurred to me that this book may have been doomed right from the start. The cover, you know, the thing which overloads the retinas and bowels of prospective buyers almost simultaneously. Richard Evans, famous Arrow editor and adept at running entire paperback lines from under a table in the nearest pub, abandoned his jaded Welsh cynicism and went so far as to apologize for this cover. (OK, he recanted later when the no doubt blind American editor liked it and demanded to re-use it, but that's another and even more depressing story.) So *The Space Eater* appeared one day in June 1982, disappeared approximately the day after, and that was approximately that. Not long after, my old pal Mike Rohan's skiffy novel also appeared from Arrow, with a pretty good cover, and was all over the place for ages, even the railway-station stalls, and ended up selling more than twice as well. Well, ha ha, you say, such sour grapes, Langford just doesn't appreciate he isn't as saleable a writer as Rohan. Ah, but the people who make decisions about distribution don't *read* books, perish the thought, they look at the cover, read the blurb, check the author's name against a little star-rating table (Asimov: *****. Langford, Rohan, any young British author: $\frac{1}{2}$ * or so) and get deciding. My and Mike's efforts were of about equal modest pretensions: by one of those merry little quirks which make publishing so much fun, he did twice as well by getting a decent cover...

There are times, there are definitely times, when I wish I hadn't been so nice and straightforward—and had (a) broken into the Arrow office by dead of night and burnt the cover original as soon as I'd seen it ("Ugh," I'd said. "Well, sorry, we're stuck with it now," said Richard); (b) suggested, nay, insisted that Arrow work the old cheat of slapping MULTIPLE HUGO NOMINEE on the book in huge red letters. I used to have my pride, but not any more.

Then it was Timescape's turn. Dave Hartwell there had made encouraging noises, asking only for a few little changes in every sentence, and Richard and I had concocted an elaborate system of page-renumbering and crossings-out in heavy felt-pen (with the original bits written in again over the top) which gave the illusion of sufficient change for Pocket/Timescape to accept the thing. As far as I know it's still selling moderately well over there, despite the efforts of Timescape—who kept the godawful cover (well, perhaps Americans like that kind of thing), omitted the biography of Great Langford Achievements and all the ecstatic review quotes I'd carefully garnered at their request (even now I blush at what nice Brian Stableford wrote, and amazingly cheap he came, too), and finally put out a publicity flyer so horrifyingly offputting that Malcolm Edwards rushed me a copy with more than usual glee. OK, I suppose the Jerry Pournelle comparisons are just the sort of thing to sell *The Space Eater* to all those far-right Reaganite Americans like Avedon Carol, but I couldn't help detecting a certain lack of adman's nous in the opening sentence: "Okay, we all know the hardest thing in the world to sell is a first novel by an unknown author..." There is more, but who will have read onward after a broken-backed, apologetic opening like *that*?

(Pause to imagine equally inspiring opening lines from the same pen. "OK, you're probably fed up to the teeth with all these stories Ursula Le Guin keeps churning out, and here's yet another collection of the same, but..." "All right, we know most people would run a mile to avoid reading another novel by Chris Priest, and unfortunately a Priest novel is what we're lumbered with. Look on the bright side, though—" One could look on it as a subtle, terribly *British* underselling.)

It wasn't all these rarefied, artsy-fartsy, literary points which most struck me, as it happened. It was more a certain financial *je ne sais quoi*; a sensation of existential emptiness in the bank account. Where was the Timescape advance? Subtle probings at Arrow ("Tell me all, Faith Brooker, or I pour the rest of this depilatory fluid over the head of your pinioned boyfriend!") revealed that Arrow hadn't sent me any money because they hadn't extracted any from Timescape.

Timescape hadn't been scattering largesse because the contract binding them to do so hadn't actually been finalized—partly because of quibbles between their and Arrow's picky contracts departments, and partly because dear old Richard Evans, euphoric about his imminent escape to Futura, appeared to have spent his final months at Arrow gazing dreamily towards the ceiling and exuding a faint aroma of canned lager, while the famous Langford contract languished in a drawer. Despite my laughably antiquated notion that without a contract Pocket might not part with money but by that same token would be unable to publish the book: they've had the bloody thing in print and selling for eight months, cutting clean through all that fussy red tape about advances on signature, advances on publication, royalties, etc.

This isn't all that bad a reason for being depressed, I submit. Hilary Rubinstein tells me it's all very deplorable. Faith has sent five million telexes and more recently the Arrow managing director to Timescape in New York, without visible effect thanks to the multitudinous reshuffles there. (Lots of other Arrow contracts are seemingly in much the same position.) The SFWA Grievance Committee—you can tell I'm getting desperate—has so far failed to comment. Only my bank manager and credit card companies are increasingly voluble, though in rather a sordid and self-centred fashion. Oh, I shan't starve, but once in a while I think almost fondly of the idyllic Civil Service life where even if you did nothing but stare out of the window all day, picking your nose and thinking vaguely about sex, *you got paid for it.*

Luckily thoughts of this nature are soon dispersed by a few minutes' bracing thought about how horrible and grotty it actually was to work at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, where even as you try to go home you're quite likely to be seized and indefensibly groped by repugnant security policemen in case you've concealed the odd cruise missile in your Y-fronts. (With gritted teeth and other evidences of immense strain the author manages to suppress the Rob Holdstock joke right there at the tips of his fingers.) Any of you who read *New Scientist* may have noticed a mini-article there around March 1982, lambasting this aspect of AWRE, since I thought that now I was Free I might as well make a few quid from the old reminiscences. Cowardice prevailed to the extent of the byline's being 'Roy Tappen': I'd used it before the rise of a certain fanzine from the same primordial slime of Richard Cowper's 'Call My Bluff' definitions.

Later in 1982 I was bluffing furiously in the offices of Frederick Muller Ltd, where Maxim Jakubowski had advised me to take my current book ideas since they were triffically rich and owned by HTV and even if they didn't like the book you got these great expense-account lunches. With effortless ease editor Katie Cohen brushed aside my paltry book outlines, wanting to know if I couldn't dream up a novel; in desperation I started to recite a garbled version of the *NS* article, with lots of supplementary phrases like 'brilliant' and 'hilarious' and 'like Tom Sharpe with nuclear weapon cores instead of the dildoes and vibrators'. As in a dream I found myself agreeing to write a nuclear farce called *The Leaky Establishment*, and only returning to earth at Katie's words "Well, you'll have to clear off now, it's time for my lunch appointment." Jakubowski, I kill you deady.

Further outbreaks of cowardice suggested that this book had better appear under a pseudonym, but after a year of vacillation during which I wrote the thing (and AWRE failed to complain about the *New Sci* article) my vanity got the better of my cowardice and here we are. Meanwhile Muller underwent a reshuffle, most of the editors were purged, and I was given the opportunity to make a Holdstock of myself by congratulating Katie on her survival on the strength as reported in the *Bookseller*.

"The report was wrong," she told me stonily.

Delivery day was about a month ago, and Katie (still freelancing for Muller on 'certain titles', meaning me) insisted on going to lunch and ordering all the most

expensive things on the menu since Muller would be paying. All right, the most expensive pub meal to be had wasn't likely to leave Muller overdrawn, but I felt the great Jakubowski promise had been fulfilled at last.

After this the Langford luck began to run in the usual direction. Surrounded on all sides by hostile bills, I was hoping for a nice cheque on delivery of the bloody thing which had kept me out of circulation for the whole summer of 1983. Instead, Katie instantly went on holiday in Israel, neglecting to take the book with her; the in-house editor, who also got a copy, plunged instantly into orgies of preparation for the Frankfurt Book Fair. So it seems the thing's been delivered for well over a month and nobody's read it yet, much less released vast sums of money as I pathetically hoped. I have a vision of the future wherein a decrepit D.R. Langford lies sprawled on the pavement in the sleaziest quarter of Reading (London Road, let us say), wasted to the point of being unable to press the methylated-spirits bottle one final time to his cracked lips. Staring blankly upward at the hostile sky, his eyes begin slowly to glaze over. A passing chihuahua pees on him.

Suddenly, a lavish Rolls pulls up at the vomit-spattered kerb, and out bounds Hilary Rubinstein! On a silver salver he carries cheques from Frederick Muller Ltd, from Pocket Books, from Roxby Press, amounting to a sum beyond the dreams of avarice! There is even an *Ansible* subscription renewal from Rob Holdstock! With practised fingers the trusty literary agent waves the fanned-out cheques before the author's dimming eyes—but it is too late. Pausing only to roll symbolically into the gutter, Langford has breathed his last.

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Actually (he said, ruining his natural climax merely through the presence of more lines on the stencil) the freelance life isn't that bad and I'm still enjoying it. There may be the terrible, dreadful Class II Social Security Contributions like an ever-present slow puncture in the bank account, but on the other hand I don't have to get up at 7am to catch the gut-rattling AWRE bus with its freight of lung-cancer devotees. I may stare at blank sheets or blank stencils in the typewriter for long blank hours; but at AWRE I was forbidden to use a typewriter, although I loathe writing more than a few lines by hand, as there were complicated union things about 'typing grades' and 'non-typing grades' whose general effect was that if a mere scientist laid finger to keyboard the whole site was liable to grind to a halt. (Yes, yes, John Brunner, a good idea no doubt, but not when you're paying the mortgage on a Civil Service salary.) There I had access to computers of incredible size and power provided I programmed in FORTRAN, which for the non-computing fans out there was mostly abandoned in the later Pleistocene; now I have to make do with piffling little home machines without all the big-computer facilities like day-long system collapses and mile-long user queues.

(Speaking of computers, Hazel confirms all my worst hopes by informing me that the Department of Employment, which as you doubtless know runs the wonderful TOPS training courses, also hires computer staff from time to time but rejects many more on the grounds of insufficient and shoddy qualifications, such as TOPS training courses. Fancy that.)

Meanwhile I have consolations. I do this review column in *White Dwarf*, whose audience appears to consist of 14½-year-old Dungeons & Dragons players, and am immensely entertained by my floods of hate mail from fans indignant at my crass failure to recognize that literature has reached its ultimate, unsurpassable pinnacle in the doorstep productions of Stephen R. Donaldson. Getting these letters makes me feel just like John Brosnan without all the attendant inconveniences of being John Brosnan. Then, again, I now own 25% of Charles Platt and have the heady excitement of being spat on in the street by 25% of Peter Weston. (This is all very complicated, but basically I translated Plattie's anti-microcomputer book into English for the Gollancz edition, it being written in American...) *end*