
CLOUD CHAMBER 26 :: Dave Langford :: written too late for FRANK'S APA

A funny thing happened the other day; I nearly got a job. For a long while I'd been fighting the creeping thought that after a year as freelance one is stamped UNEMPLOYABLE... There was this ad in a local paper, phrased with a literacy seldom seen in our freebie advert thing, and since the business was to do with computers (this being Silicon Valley UK) I shot off a letter suggesting that although I liked being freelance really, they would be hard put to do without my aid in putting together nice user-friendly manuals etc. This was on the rebound from long struggles with an impenetrable Commodore microcomputer manual whose shoddiness is beyond belief (I specially liked the clever proof-reading whereby a demonstration program is designed to overwrite itself and generally self-destruct, leaving the sucker wondering what happened to the hundreds of lines he/she spent an hour typing in); having re-written the thing in the margins of all the pages, I rather thought it would be nice to get paid for the next time I did this.

Amazingly, the computer folk in question demanded that I pop up to London and visit them, which I did since it was an sf meeting day anyway. Showered me with praise, they did. "The only literate job application we've had," they effused, brushing aside my pathetic reminders that I'd only wanted freelance morsels, not your actual nine-to-five *employment*. For fillers-in of application forms: the semicolons worked like a charm but what really tickled the firm (I got to see the directors, no puny personnel officer) was where on their little form, against the embarrassing "what's your present income?" query, Muggins had scribbled "undulating". People are strange. They sat there for most of an afternoon, the two directors, selling me to each other while I hung round being sort of strong and silent, concealing increasing terror as they elaborated on all the wonderful things I could do for their new micro-ventures. Basically I could be flexible, they explained, and write all their manuals, and all the publicity, and edit the internal newsletters, and help explain systems to new customers, and do some programming, and run vast seminars for salesmen, customers, newly-hired programmers and such, and... It was a bit like one of those stock comedy situations, since the more they elaborated the more nervous I got, and they appeared to interpret the Langford caginess as some species of *Playing Hard To Get*, and were selling themselves to me rather than vice-versa, with increasing offers of Actual Money. What an invigorating experience.

Unfortunately, quite apart from the fifty deadlines I wouldn't be able to meet if I signed up, I found the freelance life too addictive. An open plan office? At the back of a computer retail outlet? Wearing a tie? And having to talk half the time to members of the... *general public*? (That last, after the wonderful world of publishing, would be as if I were an emigré from Harry Harrison's *Deathworld* trying to cope with Disneyland: all the wrong reflexes.) They dangled the riches of the world before me and heroically I said No. I must be stupid.

Oh, a further point for interviewees. The firm (quite an well established one, but new to micros) was suitably boggled by my massive acumen when I asked whether they planned to use IBM personal computers as the basis of their operation. "Gosh, well, er, that's *terribly secret*, I don't know how you deduced that that was our choice, etc." I hasn't the heart to mention that I'd seen a heap of cardboard boxes with IBM on, standing in a corner of the reception room. Business is tough.

Mailing comments? Oh, I'm sure I'd have lots, but as usual this is being typed at the last moment and there is no time. I've been busy. Specifically, I reckoned I could spend yesterday (today is Thursday of the February Tun, and I've got to see Frederick Muller's publicity department at lunchtime, followed by a visit to Sphere) lovingly crafting a FRANK'S contribution of such incredible splendour as to make you all reel, even Paul Kincaid, with the unsurpassable wonder of it, and lay down your typewriters forever in despair of ever attaining such heights. Instead I was vulgar, sordid and commercial, and spent a whole day in the Café Royal sucking up to the minions of the Sunday Express magazine... they were doing a feature on Educational Software, and had hordes of Spectrums and BBC Micros set up with naff 'educational' programs to be assessed by kids and a panel of experts including for some reason me. God, you wouldn't believe the awfulness of the programs in those nice packages they flog to unsuspecting schools. I particularly liked the Literacy-Stifler Program: unfortunate kids were asked to type in the names of unrecognizable graphics on the screen, thus improving their powers of spelling, recognition and clairvoyance. One scene featured a castle and a (for once) recognizable portcullis. What was that? "Portcullis", typed a precocious 8-year-old and was told to piss off. No such word. 'Gate' was the only acceptable answer. Well, that's another potential literary rival discouraged at an early age... Naturally all this was in hope of a free plug for the Platt/Langford *Micromania*, a copy of which I think I manoeuvred into every photograph taken during the day: watch for suspicious retouchings in the Express mag, a month or so hence.

New Year Resolution: I will not talk any more about computers in fanzines. Even in apazines, which D. West tells me are still ideologically unsound even if approved by the once-great Pickersgill.

Mailing comments... That obvious Powellite Paul Kincaid really put me in my place last mailing. In mailing 2 I described the woe and anguish and poverty and squalor of a moneyless year, of being screwed by every publisher under the sun, of a soul in torment and all that stuff. OK, I put in a few jokes to make you buggers read it all the way through without going off for light relief such as Dostoyevsky. And now Paul tells me I was just smooth and slick (bugger that, it was straight onto stencil and full of infelicities---where's your famous literary-critical ability, Paul?). Next thing they'll be telling me that I make up all the financial horrors that happen to me, and shape my life to provide nice slick fanzine articles.

If I had my leg amputated I would no doubt try to crack a few brave jokes just the same. Nevertheless I would rather expect sensitive Frankers to understand that it hurts. Likewise it was, actually, quite painful to be in the lucky position of making a large interest-free loan to Pocket Books (ie. Simon & Schuster, ie. Gulf & Western) for nearly all of 1983. Silly me, I expect you to understand this... Latest is that Pocket have *paid up*, but the cheque has only been seen by Arrow's NYC agents, who are said to have forwarded it to head office, whence a mutilated remnant will go to Hilary Rubinstein, who can then strip the last morsels from the bones and forward me a withered husk. Don't hold your breath. Keep smiling.

As usual we here at *Cloud Chamber* support ROB HANSEN FOR TAFF (this reminds me of the fun phone call of the week, Terry Hill asking whether I thought D. West would embezzle the TAFF fund and blight its reputation forever. Oh, surely not...?) and BRITAIN FOR THE 87 WORLDCON (rush your presupporting quid to me or Malcolm Edwards right now). 2-2-84.