

"God first made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made proof-readers."

Mark Twain said it, and I've quoted it often enough for some of you to be tired of hearing it, but it's nonetheless true.

Some proof-readers are idiots in the colloquial sense, and others in the sense intended by the old Greeks when they invented the word (some of which sense is preserved in the word idiosyncrasy). The idiots I work with at the Leader Publishing Company at Northclump are idiots in the nobler sense.

Vic Simmons is the head reader - or phrenologist, as we say in the trade. He's in his sixties and a nice bloke. His father was a printer and a poet; he knew people like Frank Wilmot ("Furnley Maurice") and Bernard O'Dowd, and was a member of the Bread and Cheese Club. In fact, he printed Furnley Maurice's BAY AND PADIE BOOK. I've been at Vic to write a biography of his father, or at least to jot down some of his memories of him and of the people who came visiting him. It's memories like this that will be basic source material for the hordes of people who will be studying Australian literature years from now, and every man who dies without recording some of his recollections leaves our literary heritage just that much poorer. (Every time I pass Bernard O'Dowd's place in Clarke Street, Northcote, I can't help wishing I'd known about him earlier. As it was, he died before I had read a line of his work - I suspect before I'd even heard of him.)

There are three full-time readers besides Vic: Wynne Whiteford, John Cameron and myself. We three are idiots in both senses of the word. What are we doing in a place like this, wasting our valuable time on the illiterate crap that fills suburban newspapers? John is a man who impresses immediately: he has a deep, cultured voice, he is well-read, and I don't think I have met a man as courteous and considerate, and yet so masculine, as he is. The first day I worked at the Leader, John had on his desk a copy of A.S. Neill's SUMMERHILL. He has five children; his interest in education is not academic. John has been an announcer with the ABC... and a lot of other things. He has the intelligence and the presence to do just about anything he wants to. Like myself, he is classified officially as an "assistant reader"; the Union will not recognize anyone as a "reader" who has not done an apprenticeship in the printing trade, or who has had less than five years as an assistant reader. The Leader employs scores of men who have been in the trade for years; presumably they will be regarded as qualified readers when they get too old to punch their keyboards or play with their slugs of type; yet I doubt if one of them knows as much about the English language as John. Or Wynne, who is also officially an assistant. If you have been to an Australian convention you have probably met Wynne Whiteford; if you have read a lot of sf you will have read him. Wynne was the editor of a motoring magazine. He has travelled extensively. His general knowledge is staggering in its range and detail. In his younger days he specialized in competing in quiz shows, on radio and later on television. His subject was geography. Like John Foyster and a couple of other people I've met, he seems to have an almost photographic memory. Geography, words, cars, science in general, science fiction - you ask him, he knows it. Working with a science fiction writer is illuminating. Like Lee Harding, Wynne is an enthusiast. Note that I do not say he is an enthusiast about anything in particular; he is an enthusiast, period. Whatever engages his attention he finds fascinating. Here is the beginning of that sense of wonder everyone talks about. Wynne is a delightful bloke, a man of immense intelligence and awareness, and yet with a seemingly simple approach to life. There are,

however, two things about him which I find difficult to forgive. The first is his wasting his abilities in a fool of a job like proof-reading. But that's none of my business, and very likely my quarrel is with our wasteful society rather than with him. The second is his zeal for work. I am not the most conscientious worker in the world when the work at hand doesn't appeal to my finer sensibilities, though I usually pull my weight (no mean feat, you say). But Wynne's conscientiousness exceeds by a long way what I consider the appropriate amount applicable to this job. Again, none of my business, really - except that we work in pairs in the reading room, and half of the time it certainly is my business. Thursday afternoon, when the pace has slackened off, and all a man wants to do is read a book or quietly go to sleep, Wynne keeps on finding work to do. Well, I've worked with people who were the opposite of zealous, real bludgers, and I suppose Wynne's kind is the lesser of two evils. If someone ever decides to publish an Australian sf magazine, here is the man for the job: he's the kind of person who would leave no stone unturned, no promising author un-encouraged, who would write half the magazine himself if necessary - in short, an Australian John W. Campbell.

Well, what are we doing, John, Wynne and me, working in a dirty, noisy factory, rotting our minds with cricket scores and classified ads?

Someone is said to have asked some workmen labouring on St Paul's Cathedral what they were doing. One answered, "Bangin' this 'ammer on this rock" - another, "Earning a living" - a third, "Helping to build a cathedral". John and Wynne and I are earning a living. An honest living, even if what we are doing is ultimately much more futile than banging hammers on rocks. A moderately intelligent orang-outang could be trained to do either job.

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Have a sample of suburban newspaper prose:

"Bill Lawry, Australia's captain of the Test Cricket team that has just completed their somewhat inglorious tour of India and South Africa, has no illusions as to why they fared so poorly."

Your average fanzine writer might have written something like this:

"Bill Lawry, captain of the Australian Test Cricket team that recently completed its somewhat inglorious tour of India and South Africa, has no illusions about why the team played so poorly."

Your average well-trained orang-outang would have grunted irritably at the first passage, considered that in all likelihood the operator would make a mistake in the re-setting if the passage was altered, and reluctantly passed it. That's just what I did, too.

We are regularly reminded that we are readers, not editors. Incorrect spelling is fair game, sometimes bad grammar, but generally we are not permitted to depart from the copy. Our job is to ensure that what appears in the copy appears on the galley proof. We definitely do not have the authority to rewrite anything; that's the sub-editor's job. (And if he has passed the copy it must be right; after all, he is paid more than we are, and he wears a tie to work.)

Bear these things in mind while reading the following passage. Note, too,

that the editor of the paper in which this passage was to appear has over the years made it abundantly clear to the readers that he will not tolerate their interfering with his copy. Okay? Read on:

"He said that the importance of the Victorian Young Farmer movement to the rural communities to maintain and service groups that would meet the needs of young adults, who would be working and living in the farming community."

No, don't rush on like that; go back and read it again. What would you do with it? Can you see any sense there at all?

When I struck that sentence (if I may call it that), I grunted irritably, yes, but I could not bring myself to let it go. I remembered the editor's instructions to follow copy. I remembered that it was not my job to alter things. I bore in mind that I had no way of deciding exactly what the speaker had said. I considered the possibility of the operator making a mistake in the re-setting - a possibility that increased, the more I altered what he had done. Against these considerations I placed my dedication to clarity in thought and expression. I struck out the first three words and wrote in, "He spoke of". I now had a sentence, where previously there had been a string of words; I had not made the speaker say anything in print which he might not have said in his speech; and I had kept the re-setting down to a minimum.

Fifteen minutes later the operator stormed in, demanding to know what I meant by this foolishness. I quietly explained. He said, more or less, that my alteration rendered the sentence meaningless, and that it could be improved simply by dropping the word "that", making the middle of the sentence read "service groups would meet &c". I tried to explain that this left an abstract noun - "importance" - meeting needs and so on, which was absurd. He became rather hot under the collar. Wynne got into the act, and suggested that the word "was" could be inserted between "communities" and "to maintain". I registered my feeling that this could possibly be correct, and possibly also a distortion of the speaker's original message. The operator stalked off, muttering something about all the years he had been in the trade without striking a bunch of upstart readers so stupid and &c &c. He went into the editorial office, obviously to get someone's agreement with his own inspired amendment. Later that day the paper came out, and Wynne's correction had been adopted. Fair enough.

But before the paper appeared I had the pleasure of reading another piece by the author of the disputed passage. This time even the editor of the paper had been sufficiently disturbed to scrub one "sentence" from the article. It read:

"This is a new venture for the McMillan District Council and that the President Duncan Malcolm, and his committee is ensuing that it will be a successful evening."

From all of this you might get the feeling that Mark Twain was essentially correct. Surely, no-one in his right mind would be a proof-reader. At times I get an almost overwhelming urge to discover the satisfying sense of purpose, the quiet joy and pride and dignity that comes from a knowledge that one is engaged in higher things, that is experienced by your average garbage collector or breaker of rocks.

(26.3.70)

Reflections on the EasterCon

As I write, it is still going on - or at least I assume it is. It is the evening of Easter Monday and I feel bloody awful (probably nothing to do with the events of the past few days) but I have to do something, and writing this is it. I've been feeling depressed and generally debilitated for several days, and at lunchtime today I came home with that here-we-go-I'm-dead-this-time feeling that seems to come over me every few months. I don't think it's entirely a psychological thing - I've probably been doing too much and worrying too much again, and my get-fit plan lapsed while I was working on the Con handbook - but there is the thing that Easter is a particularly depressing time of the year for me. I don't know whether I will ever get over this business of every Easter remembering that Good (!) Friday of 1965, when my father died. If anything, the memory strikes harder at me each year. I'm not a terribly easy person to get on with at any time, but at this time of the year I can be really exasperating. Certainly, I should not go near gatherings of people I am fond of at Easter; I should hide myself away in some remote place and vent my spleen on the rocks and sparrows.

But, as usual, I did go to the Convention. I enjoyed watching BARBARELLA again, I enjoyed meeting and talking briefly to some good friends I hadn't seen for some time, but for a lot of the time my mood was one of quiet infuriation and I annoyed a few people no end.

The EasterCon cost far too much. That kept coming between me and enjoyment of what was going on. What were we getting for the rumoured \$700 Mervyn had spent? An auction, five films and the rest improvised. By God, we'll have to learn something about staging conventions if there's any chance of a WorldCon being held here! You can't rely on having John Foyster and Lee Harding always on hand to whip up a discussion session; you can't always fall back on NASA shorts and clips from KING KONG and discussions about film censorship led by Paul Stevens. The pity of it is that amongst the hundred-odd people who turned up at some stage or other there must be dozens who could contribute something really worthwhile to a convention - but we made no effort to woo them. No, perhaps I shouldn't say that; perhaps even now there are people in at the Club, sipping bheer, talking intelligent talk, and quietly being taken over by the Glorious Vision of Future Fannish Greatness! But I rather doubt it.

In 1966 we had a club in Melbourne, and there was the Australian SF Association and the moribund Futurian Society of Sydney. In 1970? There are sf clubs in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane; the Futurians are active and kindly disposed towards us; there are clubs at Monash, Melbourne and La Trobe universities in Melbourne, and at Macquarie in NSW (well, maybe I'm a bit premature about La Trobe); there are flourishing Star Trek clubs in Sydney and Melbourne; and there are sufficient people in Adelaide and Perth to get something going in the near future; there are groups devoted to Tolkien, ERB and comics; there is this apa; and there are fanzines all over the place. We have a committee to look into bidding for the 1975 WorldCon on our behalf - and there is no lack of talent and support to stop us putting on an excellent WorldCon. All we need is to stop farting about, look around us and see the fantastic resources we have, and use them.

Now I'll go and make some coffee and think about what I'll say about the most scandalous bit of skulduggery to occur during recent Australian fannish history. It happened at the EasterCon. Don't go away...

With the Hugo and Nebula awards we are not always satisfied; we often have the feeling that American fans and pros must be lacking in taste to honour this or that work of fiction, or film, or magazine, or whatever. But at least we do not have cause to doubt that the awards are made as a result of an honest and democratic vote.

The blatant aura of cynicism and dishonesty and mismanagement which surrounds the awarding of the 1970 Ditmars is something which should make every Australian fan ashamed and angry. As a recipient of a previous Ditmar, I almost feel like doing a Lennon and handing mine back. I did not previously have any reason to doubt the legitimacy of the awards made in 1969, but after this year's affair I am wondering if that ballot was not rigged, too.

The 1970 Ditmars were awarded to: COSMICOMICS (by whom? - Italo Calvino? - I can't remember); DANCING GERONTIUS, by Lee Harding; VISION OF TOMORROW; and THE JOURNAL OF OMPHALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY, published by John Foyster.

The ballot rules said nothing about the works nominated being first published between October 1968 and September 1969, so presumably COSMICOMICS was eligible, even though it was first published before that period. But since only two fans to my knowledge even possess the book, it is odd that it should have won the Best International Fiction award.

John Foyster eminently deserves any honour fandom sees fit to bestow on him, but I wonder how he feels about JOE winning the Best Australian Fanzine award? Probably no more than half a dozen voters had even seen JOE. I am one, and I did not vote for it.

VISION OF TOMORROW saw only one issue during the prescribed period. Again, there is no rule saying that a magazine should have published more than one issue to be eligible.

Lee Harding's story was published in an overseas magazine in December 1969. However much it might have deserved the award, it was not eligible.

So you see there is something rather fishy about each one of the 1970 awards. If you argue that VISION is an Australian magazine, and that Lee's story is therefore eligible, then you cast doubt on VISION's eligibility for an award in the International category.

What happened, then? It's an open secret, so I'll tell you. First, the closing date for ballots was 27th March at 5pm, according to the ballot form. At 2pm on the 28th, Bruce Gillespie asked me if I wanted to vote. I did, and I was annoyed with myself that I had missed the deadline, so I filled in my form immediately. Bruce meanwhile had disappeared, and some hours later I heard that a person-who-shall-be-nameless was collecting votes on his behalf. The following day I discovered that this same person had been inviting people to give him blank, signed ballots which he would fill in - presumably because they were not well enough informed to vote intelligently. Bruce knew that this had happened, but did nothing about it. He was pretty furious about the whole business, but he did not do the one obvious thing - declare the ballot void! Why not, Bruce?? You were the organizer, and this mess is ultimately your responsibility.

I invite you, Bruce, to comment on what I have said here - and I don't mean just in Anzapa, because this CROG! will have rather a wider audience than usual. In Australia, I mean; I wouldn't want overseas fans to know how stupid we are.

I want to make the following suggestions about future Australian awards:

1. They should be organized and paid for by the committee conducting the national Australian Convention.
2. They should be called simply the "Australian SF Achievement Awards". If a nickname is required, an alternative to "Ditmar" should be found.
3. The closing date for voting should be at least two weeks before the Convention.
4. A system of nominations and final ballot should be adopted. The final ballot forms should be made available at least four weeks before the Convention.
5. The categories should be made clear. If "International" means "overseas", the latter word should be used. If only works first published during the stipulated period are eligible, then this should be made plain also. If a minimum number of issues of a journal is required to make it eligible, this should be stated.
6. Either the committee or some person appointed by the committee should publish a list of Australian fiction and Australian fanzines eligible for the awards, to be distributed with Convention advertising or nomination forms.

If there were any justice, any intelligent voting, the following people deserved to win the 1970 awards: (having strict regard to time limits)

Best International Fiction: URSULA K. LeGUIN: THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS
Best Australian Fiction: JACK WODHAMS: ANCHOR MAN
Best International Prozine: TED WHITE: AMAZING STORIES
Best Australian Fanzine: BRUCE GILLESPIE: SF COMMENTARY

It won't be too surprising if two of those people win Hugos this year.

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Okay, that's my list. What's yours? I invite everyone reading this to send me his vote in the same categories. Deadline 2nd May, 1970.

Rules:

BEST INTERNATIONAL FICTION: To be eligible, the work must have been first published in English during the period October 1968-September 1969. Any work of fiction, of any length, published anywhere in the world, is eligible.

BEST INTERNATIONAL PROZINE: Same rules, except: any language is eligible; the magazine concerned must have published at least four issues by Sept 1969.

BEST AUSTRALIAN FICTION: Must have been first published in Australia during January-December 1969, or overseas during Oct 68 - Sept 69.

BEST AUSTRALIAN FANZINE: Must have published four issues before December 1969, and at least one issue during 1969. Fanzines printed outside Australia will not be eligible.

The award will be designated "The Scythrop Award for Science Fiction", and will consist of a copy of the Bicentennial edition of SUCH IS LIFE by Joseph Furphy for each of the winners. Voters who wish to help to defray the cost of the awards might care to send me four 5¢ stamps. Results will be announced in CROG! no.7 and NORSTRILIAN NEWS.

A ballot form is enclosed.