

THE BOOKS IN MY LIFE/page 5/ February 1981

There's no doubt about it - those previous pages are very badly typed. I'll try to patch some of the greater terrors.

The date is now January 10, and there is still no sign of the November mailing. But a quick glance at the August mailing makes it clear that I ought to write some comments on that anyway. And I see that I had a contribution in that mailing! I must be back on the twice-a-year schedule, and perhaps quarterly is not out of the question.

COMMENTS ON THE 173RD MAILING

Irwin Hirsh Irwin, was David Bennett a staff member during your time at ERA? I'm pretty sure he must have been, but things did change very rapidly at the beginning.

Peter Roberts However you may feel about the delays in this report, let one person at least (me) tell you how worth while it is. Apart from its own virtues, it brought back to me memories of earlier episodes. Hmm, and did I get round to telling you I took some 'photos of your old alma mater in Bristol?

Redd Boggs Does Terry Carr's 'actually and literally' mean anything to readers who haven't dabbled in the Ziff-Davis pulps? But COKE cans give the place of, er, canning....

Chuck Hansen While I don't care too much about the fact that I don't vote in the FAPA elections, I'm at a loss to understand my failure to do anything about the Egoboo Poll. I don't recognize myself as having any of the symptoms you describe, but there must be something simple to explain my consistent abstention.

Brian Earl Brown I don't believe that lower membership rates for overseas members of FAPA are justified any longer, if they ever were.

Ed Cox I enjoyed the pieces by Cy Condra and Larry Shaw, especially the latter - I imagine one could now put together a pretty readable collection of articles about the pulp SF editors.

Mike Glyer While I agree with the drift of your article on want-ads, isn't it the case that there are quite a few 'real' ads? My present place of employment, for example, is required to advertise all its vacancies, and the only person who ever walked in looking for a job (got it, as it happened) left pretty soon.

Art Widner Hm, and that T-shirt I promised to send you is still waiting for me to get around to it. Inspirational stuff for a trip-writer, even one who isn't a fan of HGW.

Harry Warner Jr This will become one of the great unread fanzines in my collection, Harry, this issue number 162 with almost thirty pages about Mark Twain. I probably haven't read right through a single one of Mark Twain's works (though I'm not prejudiced about doing something to rectify this in the future), but you seem to be talking about things which interest me. Sometimes with the music pieces (but never with the TV pieces) you do the same thing. In this case I've now got a compendious introduction to Mark Twain, if that's a fair description, and one which I'm likely to turn to precisely because it's been written by someone I've slowly come to know over the last, well several, years.
Thank you.

ON BEING PURGED

At the moment (which happens to be 23 March 1981) I am nearing the last stages in the rather painful process of being purged at my place of employment, about which I have written several times in FAPA before. The process is one which interests me - perhaps even fascinates - and I thought a note or two here might be appropriate.

My general dissatisfaction with my employer has been documented here before, but of the members of FAPA only John Bangsund really has any idea of what the place is all about, and that's a passing acquaintanceship at the most.

The Victorian Institute of Secondary Education was established, after years of dissatisfaction about the organization of senior secondary schooling in the state.

Like any such institution, its governing body has a composition which represents compromise between the various factions wanting to control secondary education in Victoria. Further, as will not surprise you, the balance of opinion on that governing body (the council) is substantially conservative. This doesn't surprise or worry me, as an employee - in every place I've worked I have had to make some accommodation with my employers. But at VISE things have gradually come to be extraordinarily difficult.

One consequence of the faction struggle is that there is bred a conspiratorial mentality, an overwhelming desire to get the numbers or to confuse the opposition by indirection or a similar bureaucratic technique. Staff, such as me, sometimes get embroiled in this. I can give you an example which lies outside my immediate case.

Early in 1980 a particular decision was made by a committee low on the bureaucratic structure which was unpopular at the top. By a 'fortunate' co-incidence, the minutes for the lower committee were in the charge of an employee who (and this is purely coincidental, you understand) sleeps with the sister-in-law of the council's chairman. Somehow or other, and of course we can't know exactly how these things happen, the minutes of the lower committee meeting came out reporting the opposite of the decision that was actually made. As it happens, this oddity was noticed by some people who were on both lower and upper committees, and the appropriate correction was noisily made. (And a member of the council who happened to be sitting next to me in the meeting remarked 'So now we know that the staff are corrupt and incompetent'.) Almost incidentally, people noticed that the secretary who had been instructed to falsify the minutes had resigned in disgust.

In such an environment, life gets unpleasant at times. The staff have been trying to open things up - for example, to be represented at all committee meetings, so that we can watch for the fast ones, and we would also like to have a representation by a union. Each of these moves has been resisted strongly by the most powerful members of the council. There are also some interesting definitions ('confidential' - telling everyone except the affected parties) which have arisen out of the observation of current practices.

Anyway, back in February, the powers that be decided that your humble and modest reporter, sometime head of the Research Section, had to be removed. This was conveyed to me in somewhat blunt terms in early March of '81 by my boss, whose experience of managing staff had begun just 12 months before (some say he still has a lot to learn).

(Note: the third paragraph on the previous page resumed this story on July 18, 1981. The reason for the delay is that I had hoped to be able to report the whole story, but the final chapter has not yet been written. However, if I were to wait for the end I would not be a member of FAPA and able to tell you all about it. We therefore have to endure, both you and I, serial form. NOW READ ON)

I can still recall my response, which was to worry about how to minimise impact on the staff. I've worked in institutions of the VISE kind longer than anyone else in the place, so I knew better than any how disruptive changes like this can be. I am not unpopular at work, despite a certain, shall we say, bluntness, and I felt sure that a them-and-us confrontation could arise quickly. I had been told on the Friday; by Monday I had devised a mechanism whereby I would ask to be relieved of my position. I suggested this to my boss as a 'best solution' to the problem, and left it with him to make a decision on whether that route should be followed. On the Tuesday I recognized the corner into which I had painted myself.

1981 happens to be a crucial year for VISE - we are introducing a new system of enormous and possibly unjustified complexity into secondary schools. I had come to VISE because I was interested in that, and indeed I was prepared to put up with a good deal to make sure that all went well. Now I was, on an incomparably smaller scale, in the position that Kamenev, Bukharin, Zinoviev and others were in the Show Trials of the '30s: the system was more important than the individual, and the system had to be saved at the expense of the individual.

In the long run, things haven't turned out quite that way at all. Removing a section head can't be done without telling anyone, and eventually it got back to a few staff members. My boss had not accepted my offer to ask to be relieved, so there wasn't much possibility, I thought, of preventing some major rumpus. When the Staff Association executive asked me if I wanted them to do anything about it. I headed that off by pointing out that the SA had other problems to handle and that they should keep out of this one. A week or so later, however, someone not on the Staff Association exec came around to my office with an ominous piece of paper in hand. 'I have this petition with seven signatures' he said. And that was the end of it; our SA constitution specifies that anything requested by seven members must be acted upon by the executive calling a meeting. There was nothing I could do to stop my colleagues getting upset, now.

At the following staff meeting the folks voted, 50 to 0 (in my absence) to ask the council to alter the decision. At about the same time the Evil Ones refused me a pay increase, so to increase the pressure I appealed against this decision. Council took the possible out, and said that they wanted to have the result of the appeal before they acted on the other matter.

My appeal was successful, and the written report included a few commendatory remarks.

Council met last Friday, and although my spies haven't yet reported in full, I gather that there was a feeling that the business was now rather confused. The Evil Ones still have a couple of opportunities to screw me, but it is also the case that I haven't yet started fighting them. So the next month or so could be interesting. Meanwhile, I get the pay rise.

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All this would be of no consequence, except that it affects my fanac, quite apart from buggering up my work (example - for a year I had been training a research assistant, who had reached the stage at which she could be given the opportunity to go off and work on her own; under a new head she probably wouldn't, in her estimation, be given that same responsibility, so she wanted out. I was able to find her another job - with a 40% raise - but she left just as our joint project was reaching a peak load, which I now undertake alone - 16 to 20 15 minute interviews a day for a month and that does leave me a little jaded at the end of the day....). Thus I've published almost nothing since March, and written little. I mooch around the house at times....

But most people seem able to put up with it.

Robert Bloch was out here for a convention at Easter, and we had dinner with him one night - pleasant. Then in May Jennifer and I went to New Zealand for 17 days. We did all the touristy things, but finished up at the NZ convention in Auckland. This was enjoyable, though at times tortuous. Imagine, if you will, a fan conjured back from the depths of fifteen or more years ago, with memories unaffected by the passing of time. So Bruce Burn, Fan Guest of Honour, wandered about the convention, talking about Jophan's Quest, and asking things like 'Whatever happened to quotecards?' A jolly time was had by all.

This was just as well, for when we got home we discovered that the house had been flooded during our absence - not much damage to the books, he added bravely - but repairing all that took a bit of time, and it still is, to tell the truth.

But there was no time to worry about that, because Frank Herbert, Joyce Scrivner, Denny Lien, Joseph Nicholas and just under 300 fans were descending upon Adelaide for our national convention in June. It was a big deal, and ran very well. Afterwards we saw all too little of the guests.

Back in Melbourne things are looking up, though. Irwin Hirsh has started a newszine, and the Nova Mob, quiet for a long time, has geared up and now meets monthly, starting off with dinner at a local Hungarian restaurant, the Danube, which has proved so popular that some fans come down here even when there's no meeting. Last time, Damien Broderick, due to speak about Samuel Delany, had to be dragged away from the food to do his thing. He's going off to Denver, and I wonder how he will react to US fandom, and vice versa. Marc

Ortlieb will also be in Denver, having passed through Melbourne this week on his way across; he was forced to eat at the Danube, too, and didn't seem to mind it. Marc was also able to attend Andrew Brown's 21st birthday party. Yes, at last Andrew Brown, the one with the 'I absolutely hate basketball' tee-shirt, has grown up.

Today, at this very moment, all kinds of vast intellects are gathered in Canberra, at the Australian National University, to discuss Science Fiction in divers wonderful and literary ways, no doubt. I don't actually regret not being there, although I wouldn't mind going to Jean Weber's party tonight. Ortlieb has it the right way round - he's going to Canberra, but only for Jean's party.

I hope you'll all be voting for Sydney for the '83 Worldcon - yes Jack C., even you. But Jennifer and I are working on attending a Worldcon before then. If all goes well we'll be in Chicago next year - after attending a music conference in Bristol, England (?) - don't ask me about this: I'm confused but still, despite it all, head of the Research section at VISE.....)