

WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

Tales of Middle-aged Australia

Told to members of FAPA and a few others by John Fovster, 21 Shakespeare Grove, St Kilda, Victoria, Australia 3102 in February of 1966.

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The most recent LIFE IN SHAKESPEARE GROVE went into details of the life and death of my son James in more detail than I want to remember, and the same probably goes for you. I omitted then, but cannot forebear now, to go over with you a few details of my own life (Woody Allen reference intended).

From December 1984 through September 1985 I was on various courses of mild anti-depressants (for one short period, not so mild) and for the first half of that time I was consuming sleeping tablets on a regular basis; none of this had been called for at any stage earlier in my life. In January 1985 a duodenal ulcer announced itself but this, thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, proved to be a minor problem, easily dealt with by the middle of the year. All of these things, as you might expect, sprang from the problems of the last few months of James's life.

One of my strategies for surviving during this period was to throw myself into as much work as possible, from whatever source. Most of this was related to school, and it was as a result of my manic meeting attendance that, in July, I came down with pleurisy. Came down - how well I now understand how that phrase came into existence! It was almost twenty years since I had been so physically stricken, and I had to take a week off from work. After that, it was a matter of being inside and warm by sundown, almost like an eripnav. This meant I didn't see many visitors in August.

But I also obtained work outside my school activities; since June I have been working on a study of mathematics in the workplace and in August, just after Aussiecon, this led me north to Sydney for a week. Although I had visited Sydney often in the previous twenty-five years, I had never managed to see it as anything other than a large city to visit. This short week, made more glorious, as it were, by a burst of sunlight such as I had not seen for months, changed my mind wholly about Sydney, and for the first time I could see why people would choose to live there. I went to the Opera House, to the beach, bought second-hand books, I visited John Baxter. I even ate with Bruce Beresford, director of that recent answer to HEAVEN'S GATE, KING DAVID.

Two weeks later, on the same project, I was in Adelaide for a week. Here, too, I found enchantment of one kind or another - perhaps the kind more easily appreciated by members of FAPA.

Public Libraries in South Australia are centrally managed (as opposed to the pattern in Victoria, where they operate relatively independently), and one consequence of the introduction of computer management is that the system monitors much more closely the borrowing pattern for each book. And since space is limited, books which are not being used are seen as being surplus to requirements. (How barbaric! But who would ever think of librarians as having a feeling for books?) Two or three times a year the Public Library system has a sale. 40 000 books, dumped on shelves and floor in random patterns, @ 30¢ for fiction and \$2 for fiction. By chance I happened to be in Adelaide on one of those days. It was a mad scramble, but I emerged with a pile of books so small I could carry it. (Three months later, on a later trip, I managed to buy a pile of books I could only just carry, costing all of \$10 - say \$7US. My ambition, as you will by now have guessed, is one day to buy so many that I can't carry them all!)

There is more to Adelaide than buying books, but that experience was certainly a new one. Nevertheless, exciting as bookbuying can be, I won't go now into all the fine details of how I managed to acquire almost all of the Caryl Brahms & S J Simon novels, or the Cambridge Modern History (original edition) for \$200.

Perhaps it would be sporting to say something about the project which is funding all this enjoyment. Well, it's fun, too. It took me up to Mookba, in Central Australia, the centre of a large oil and gas field, to watch mathematics at the start of the pipeline, for example. But I am still working on it.

Another strand of my life came alive at around the same time. Race Mathews had asked me to help a little with his Aussiecon II opening address, which means I saw some of his slightly snide remarks before anyone else. But Race did more than that - he arranged for me to be asked to review George Turner's autobiographical work IN THE HEART OR IN THE HEAD. This I managed to do without too many fumbles and the result found its way into Australian Book Review. I had not done any reviewing for a couple of years, and this cheered me immensely. So perhaps there was some writing in me yet.

A couple of months before I had been working on adapting a couple of SF short stories for radio, as a sort of therapeutic exercise. I sent these off to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, where they languish still, although the watchful eye and arm of John Baxter are each moving in a mysterious way. I did feel better about writing.

So when, on one of my trips to Adelaide, I was asked to do a quick and dirty report on some aspect of education, I took the opportunity; there was yet another chance to try my hand at writing. (Now, with the job only half-complete, I'm not so sure this was a good idea.)

Back in April 1985, at a science fiction convention in Adelaide, I had begun talking to Russell Blackford about starting a fanzine - or yet another fanzine, as one might less delicately put it.

I move pretty slowly nowadays (see above, in any case) so not much came of this until late 1985. But now I am sure that Australian Science Fiction Review (second series) will shortly begin to appear at bimonthly intervals. It isn't just that the general fanzine scene in Australia is pretty dead; the impending departure of Geis's admirable SFR means there isn't much in the way of an avenue for steady but not dull writing about science fiction anywhere obvious. Plainly I hope that ASFR might fill the gap which is about to be created.

One of the worst things about a fanzine is that someone has to write for it, and plainly in the case of this thing I had to be a prime suspect. And so I am. I'm busily writing away at something which I hope my co-editors will find acceptable. (My co-editors form, with me, the Science Fiction Collective, and this means I have only a small role in the production. I hope. Computers and word-processing are involved, I'm told.)

This has proved convenient. I am still intermittently depressed (~~xxx~~ ~~xxxxxx/xxxx/xx/xxxx~~) and work has proved to be a good counter. I now have ample work, and indeed have had to regiment myself a little. From the beginning of 1986 I am keeping a work diary and log and so far I am managing to average over 2000 words a day (forget the quality, feel the width...). This certainly proves a spur - especially after a day of zero production.

But I have not put my mind to PAPA at all, and this is something to which I can now direct some energy. In May, therefore, a copy of ASFR for you.

John Foyster, 12 January 1986