

TENNESSEE TRASH # 50

A ZINE BY GARY R. ROBE FOR MAILING NUMBER 230 OF
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This Will Not Be Fancy or Pretty:

OK, I admit it. I am a lazy bum who procrastinates to the very last minute before starting to do most everything. I really intended to get started writing this several weeks ago, but it just didn't happen. In between weekends absorbed with scouting activities, a bout with the flu and other really good excuses for being lazy, here I am at the very last minute putting together a string-saver zine just to save face. I am, at least, in a pretty interesting place doing it. I am in the airport Marriott Hotel in Sao Paulo waiting for my flight back home.

I've been here for three whole days in order to give a presentation at a paint industry meeting on advances in adhesion promoter technology for applying paint to plastics. The big technological advance that I was explaining was the introduction of two new products from my company. OK, enough about that. It is a bit unusual for me to travel all the way to Brazil for only two days of work, but that is how long the meeting lasted and tomorrow is the day before Thanksgiving, so I didn't want to hang around.

I am currently very glad to be within sight of the airport. It has been raining hard for the last two days and this morning the river that runs through Sao Paulo was threatening to flood. If that had happened while I was on the wrong side of town then I would not have made it out tonight and I might have been eating cold turkey sandwiches for Thanksgiving Dinner. Now, assuming that the flight connections hold between Brazil, Miami, Atlanta, and Tri-Cities, I should make it home in time.

One interesting thing here has been a lesson in Third World civil engineering. The hotel sets

about 100 yards off the main highway connecting the airport to the city. For many years there has been a particularly bad exit off the highway to the hotel. For the last two years they have been building a new cloverleaf to improve the access to the hotel and surrounding industrial area. Two weeks ago they opened part of this new road and the effect on traffic is amazing. Not only is it harder to get to the hotel now—you have to double back on the side road halfway to the airport and then take a U-turn to get there—they have blocked off the old exit ramp that allowed you to get back on the highway from the hotel before they have even started to build the new connector from the hotel to the highway! It is like they are planning the road layout as they go.

Jumping in a plane and heading off to Brazil for three days just seems to fit right in with the pace of the last two months. I just wish I had more to show for it. Most of my spare time had been taken up with scouting events. I am now a fully trained Cub Scout Leader, and I have the badge to prove it. I had to spend an entire Saturday at the regional Scout Camp to learn the proper way to take Cub Scouts on an outdoor outing. Well, duh! I could have never figured that out for myself. The rules are, however, that at least one adult leader had to have gone through this training program before any group of Cubs can be taken to an outdoor event. This is an offshoot to the military one-size-fits-all mindset of the Scouting program. I suppose that there are some scout leaders in New Jersey who have never lit a campfire in their lives and need to be shown how to do it. I found it a bit insulting to my intelligence, but I now have the certificate that proves I've Been Trained.

The next outing was quite a bit more exciting and one that we had been looking forward to for

over a year. We traveled en masse to Charleston, SC to spend a weekend on the aircraft carrier *Yorktown*. We had visited the ships of display at Patriot's Point in Charleston Harbor twice before and were aware that there was a program for scouts to stay on board. When Pack 387 decided to make the trip this year, Corlis was the first to write the check to sign up.

The scouts get to sleep in the crew's quarters. That was definitely an experience in military efficiency since the bunks were stuffed into the berthing area in stacks of four. Imagine 200 Boy Scouts and 25 adult leaders packed into a single large bunkhouse. The most surprising thing was that when the lights went out for the night they actually quieted down quickly. It was a combination of exhaustion since we had been climbing all over the ship all day and confinement. There is only so much squirreling around you can do in a stack of bunks.

Corlis, of course, did not get to sleep with the boys. She got put up in junior officer's quarters. While the size of her berth may not have been much more spacious than ours, she did at least get a private room.

It was rather entertaining to see what the kids did with military style rations. The food was perfectly adequate and edible for adults although we could have done with larger portions. The kids, however, acted as if spaghetti and green beans were some kind of torture. Their reaction to grits for breakfast was predictable.

Far and away the boy's favorite parts of the ship were the guns. There were several AA machine guns in place that they could climb on. The tracking mechanisms were still working so they could swivel the guns around and move the barrels up and down. On the destroyer *Laffey* one of the four-inch gun turrets was open to explore, and I believe that hunger was the only thing that got Isaac to leave. He was quite prepared to pitch his sleeping bag in the turret for the night. When I suggested that he could consider joining the Navy and getting to learn to really operate one of those guns he became quite mad at me. I had forgotten about his heart murmur and the fact that he is probably excluded from military service for health reasons. The next weekend was Nick's Boy Scout Troop's annual shooting fair. Since Isaac is now a Webelos, he was finally invited to this event. The group takes advantages of the shooting ranges at

the local Scout Camp and offers archery, BB gun, .22 rifle, .22 pistol, and shotgun shooting. Isaac was not allowed to shoot any of the firearms, but he had a ball shooting his bow and target practice with the BB gun. Nick had never shot a gun before, and I was quite proud of his performance. On the rifle range he was able to score 38 out of 50 with the .22 at 50 feet. The target he was aiming at was only 2 inches in diameter so I was impressed by his accuracy for the first time out. He didn't do so well with the shotgun. He is simply too small to hold the gun properly, and was not able to shoulder the stock. He tried to brace the gun against his upper arm, but only succeeded in bruising himself when the gun fired. I was, however, proud of him when he at least tried two rounds with the gun before deciding that he was not up to shooting it.

The next week was Halloween, which is always a big event for The Robe Experience. I have been reading Terry Pratchett Discworld books to the boys as bedtime stories for the last several months. One of their favorite characters is Death. Both boys wanted to be Death for Halloween, but they wanted to be different Deaths. Nick won the toss and got to be The Death Of Man. For Isaac I took a death costume and glued a white stripe down the back and attached a bicycle tire to his scythe. I thought The Death of Skunks was a perfectly logical and fitting variation on your Basic Death.

We had found Halloween collection bags at a store that I thought were cute. They were plastic shopping bags with gradations on the side that ran Getting Started, Not Yet, Looking Good, and Hoo Ha! What a Haul! They boys were determined to make it to the Hoo Ha! Line until they realized just how heavy the bag would be if they were filled to that point. They settled for something between Not Yet and Looking Good. Their haul was short lived because of our tradition to put all byt 12 of the best treats out on the back porch for the Halloween Witch to take and replace with school supplies, small toys, and winter clothes. The Halloween Witch then takes the candy (after scanning for Reece's Cups, Butterfinger Bars and Tootsie Rolls) and puts it in the ETSU math graduate student bullpen. At this point the candy magically disappears.

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Last year's premiere of *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* was one of the most anticipated

film releases ever in the history of The Robe Experience. This year's release of *HP&T Chamber of Secrets* was also eagerly awaited, but not such a big deal. We did not bother dressing in costumes or even buying advance tickets to make sure we would have seats on opening day. It also seemed that Warner Brother's was more complacent about this film's opening since the fever-pitch hype that accompanied *HP&T Sorcerer's Stone* seemed to be completely missing. In fact I don't think I saw a single ad for the new movie except for Coke and Toys 'R Us tie-ins. Without the hype, however, I must say that I was much happier with the finished product this time around.

I didn't help the filmmakers that *HP&T Chamber of Secrets* is by far the weakest of the four books in the series. They were, however, helped by the fact that the introduction of the characters and the Wizarding World was made in the first installment, so they were able to jump right into the story this time. Harry makes his escape from the horrible Dursleys in about five minutes and is whisked right into the whimsical and charming Borrow of the Weasley Family. Two of the best new characters are also introduced early: the scenery-chewing Gilderoy Lockhart played with obvious enthusiasm by Kenneth Branagh and Lucius Malfoy, the malevolent father of Harry's school nemesis, Draco Malfoy.

The one bit that didn't work well for me was the encounter of the Weasley's flying car and the Whomping Willow. Although The Willow is a character in the story in its own right, taking an important role in Part 3, I could almost hear the hydraulics hissing in the mechanical monstrosity constructed here. This is where a gutsier filmmaker would have found another more technically feasible menace to replace the willow here. I hope Peter Jackson does better with the equally imposing Ents in *The Two Towers*.

Overall this film is much funnier, mostly due to the scene-stealing Brannagh and the very mom-like appearances of Mrs. Weasley. It is also scarier with the appearance of the petrified students, giant spiders, and the climactic battle between Harry and the basilisk. It was fun watching Isaac sneaking peaks of these last two horrors through the slits in his fingers. There was also an interesting addition in the final confrontation between Harry and Lucius Malfoy. While the book does not go into detail, Potter

buffs will recognize the spell the Malfoy nearly throws at Harry in the final scene was the dread *avada kadavra* death curse. Indeed this moment is more potent because at this point in his education Harry has not even heard of the death curse and doesn't even know what mortal danger he is in when Dobby blocks the spell.

I have heard several critics griping about the length of the film at over two hours and predicting that young viewers will be bored before the action kicks into high gear when the Chamber is finally exposed. Well, I've sat through it twice in full theaters and the only ones that started fidgeting were young siblings who couldn't sit still through a Barney tape. In fact, this installment seemed to go by more quickly than Part 1 although the sub-plot involving the use of a shape-changing potion was as clunky and slow-moving as in the book. Once again, I think that a little less reverence to the source material could have produced a more interesting way to move the story along.

It is interesting that Chris Columbus has stepped away from directing *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* in favor of a near novice director whose most notable project to date had been the sexy latin film *Y Tu Mama También*. In my opinion *HP&T Prisoner of Azkaban* is the best of the Potter series to date. It is much less of a special effects demo and more of a personal story. It also teaches a lesson that not all battles can be won outright. Parts 3 and 4 together form the Harry Potter equivalent of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Indeed in order for good to triumph over evil, first The Dark Side has to be strong enough to be truly threatening. In Parts 1 and 2 the evil of Voldemort is concentrated on Harry only. In Parts 3, 4, and presumably 5 the evil genie escapes from the bottle and the threat moves from one boy to the whole world.

Two By Pratchett: *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* and *Night Watch*

For many years Terry Pratchett has been the most consistent practitioner of humorous fantasy writing. When he is on target there is no writer I know of that can make me break out in uncontrolled laughter like Pratchett. In the last year two Pratchett Discworld have been published, certainly some cause for celebration. The first of these is *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*. This book is a step outside the established Discworld plotlines to explore a

little what-if digression. None of the usual suspects of the Pratchett cannon are here except, of course, for Death and His rodent assistant The Death of Rats. Indeed in this story rats take the center stage after being omnipresent background characters throughout the Discworld cannon. Of course these are not ordinary rats.

This colony of rats has spent generations eating the garbage from the Unseen University, and has been noted before, this exposure to low-level background magic over the years Does Things. In this case the Thing in particular is to raise the rats to intelligence. This was a gradual process, and the intelligence that developed may be human inspired but with a certain rodent twist. For example the rats take their names from the labels of the garbage that sustains them, so they end up with names like Dangerous Beans and Two for One. Since the rats concentrate the magic like residual DDT in the food chain, it is not surprising that their abilities are passed up the food chain to a particularly clever predator named Maurice.

Naturally Maurice sees a retirement plan in his situation. He takes charge of the rats and leads them from town-to-town with the help of a stupid-looking boy recruited to be the spokesman for the scam. Maurice directs the rats into plaguing each town and then the boy comes forward with an offer to charm the rats out of town with his magic flute. The rats go along with the plan because they do get plenty of food, learn to cope with the human world, and are saving up to buy some real estate in order to found a rat nation on a tropical island.

This scheme works fine until Maurice and his troupe plan for their grand finale in a town with an apparent big rat problem. What they find is that some rats walk on two legs and that not all rat traps have springs and jaws. Together with the help of the only resident prepared to believe that rats can be intelligent, the rats manage to save the town from the rat catchers.

It is interesting to compare this book with *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* because the two books share many of the same themes. I re-read *The Rats of NIMH* two years ago when Nick's fourth-grade class was studying the book. I was surprised to realize that the book is actually a sermon on the evils of animal experimentation. The Rats of NIMH recognize that in order to be a viable society they must overcome their

scavenger past and become self-supporting. One of the book's weaknesses is that all of the animals are actually intelligent, only the Rats have managed to learn to read and plan ahead.

Pratchett's rats also feel uncomfortable about mooching off the humans, but don't have a problem with using their talents to trick people out of food and cash. Also, only the magically uplifted rats are intelligent. They look down on the plain rats as "kee-kees" and have developed their own rat alphabet. In the end the Discworld rats manage to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement with humanity. The rat society learns to live alongside people while both cultures retain their distinctiveness.

As in most of his work Terry Pratchett manages to raise important moral and philosophical issues and explore the logic of an extrapolated premise as does the best of SF while being screamingly funny in some places, tense in others, and brilliantly written throughout.

The other offering from Terry Pratchett is *Night Watch*, which fits squarely in the sequence of the main Discworld books. This book explores the beginnings of two of Pratchett's most durable characters: Sam Vimes, the formidable chief of the Ankh-Morpork city guards and Lord Vetinari, the seemingly omniscient Patrician of the city. While pursuing a tough criminal, Vimes is struck by lightning while climbing on the roof of the Unseen University Library. The intersection of energy and magic propels Vimes back 30 years in time to when he had just joined the city guards.

All is not well in Ankh-Morpork as a mad Patrician rules the city with a paranoid gang of secret police sniffing out conspiracies. Of course the Patrician is doomed because a young assassin named Vetinari has just graduated from the Assassin's Guild School. Ridding the city of the Patrician is all in a day's work for Vetinari, but shutting down the secret police is a bit trickier. Sam has only four days to set his younger self on the path of virtue while organizing the resistance movement that will end the reign of terror. Soon the battle cry of Freedom, Justice, Reasonably Priced Love, and a Hard Boiled Egg rings through the city as Vimes desperately tries to repair the damage to the past so that he can return to the future. This is not the best of the Discworld books, but it is still full of Pratchett humor and language that makes it worth the price of admission.