

MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE

This probably unexpected document comes to you from Eli Cohen, at 2236 Allison Rd., Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1T6, just to prove that I have neither fallen into the ocean nor dissolved in a Vancouver rainstorm. ("And at all times remember that it never rains in Vancouver; it just mists heavily.") Lion's Gate Press Publication #24.

Yes, well, it was this way. I left Saskatchewan on Feb. 28, and promptly plunged into the mad social whirl of Vancouver fandom (actually, into the social whirl of the Susan Wood Hotel and Rest Home for Wayward Fen). It suddenly occurred to me that my mail had fallen off -- this week's lot so far has consisted of a dunning notice for a long-since-paid bill, a Ballantine ad forwarded from Regina, and a Woodward's catalog -- and I looked up, and by gosh it was November 1 and I still hadn't done a KRATOPHANY.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs, but the principal one was that I spent a very depressing summer looking for a job. I didn't expect this to happen when I moved, you understand -- for one thing, the nation-wide time-sharing computer system we were using in Saskatchewan needed its statistical offerings overhauled, and the Vancouver branch manager lived across the street from Susan. But as it turned out, even though said branch manager wanted me for the job, and his boss in head office agreed that I was thoroughly qualified to do it, head office also decreed that the job was to be done out of head office, in Toronto. And apparently also added some rude remarks about the proper place of branch managers in the scheme of things. All the other possibilities I had started with petered out, and I found that the branch plant problem was fairly common. See, statistics tends to go along with research and planning, which tend to be head office functions, which tend not to be located in Vancouver. Lots of them aren't even located in Canada (I had an interesting interview with a frustrated manager at Rayonier Canada, which is a subsidiary of Rayonier, Inc. in New York (which is a subsidiary of IT&T, but who's counting); New York had made a tentative decision to "computerize", but nothing major was to be done and no equipment was to be purchased until further study. The locals were just starting to get their feet wet, and were renting time on a neighbor's computer. This, mind you, is a multi-million dollar lumber, pardon, "forest products" corporation.).

Even the damn provincial government capital is in Victoria, a three-hour ferry ride away! (Besides, preference is given, first, to B.C. residents who have been here a year, and second, to Canadian citizens. Two strikes.)

I discovered that looking for work takes up far more energy than working, and the psychological side effects are not conducive to publishing anything with as blatant a name as KRATOPHANY. It was all I could do to write to my parents.

Not that it was all unrelieved gloom; the weather all summer was gorgeous -- and yes, *it hardly rained at all!* -- and I visited the Bay Area, and Seattle, and Dena Brown taught me how to drive a stick shift, and Susan took me to the UBC Faculty Club, and we went to numerous fancy restaurants and plays and concerts (believe me, after almost three years in Regina, it's nice to be back in civilization, where one can even find bagels if one is persistent), and Rick Mikkelson and I saw *Noye's Fludde*, which up till then had been nothing but a Flanders & Swann joke to me, and, and ... And I collected my unemployment checks and wrote to employers and sent out resumés and went on interviews and was told I was over-qualified or under-qualified or qualified-but-there's-a-Canadian-citizen-ahead-of-you.

Anyway, so as not to keep you in suspense, I did finally get a job, three days before I was due back in New York for a visit, and I started as soon as I returned, on Oct. 11. I am now working as a computer programmer for Vancouver General Hospital. The salary is about 35% less than I made in Regina, but what the hell, it's still triple the fellowship I lived on at Columbia for four years, and the job is absorbing and rather fun. There won't be as many anecdotes produced as were provided by Saskatchewan's jails, but I've already learned how to get my computer terminal to make a rude noise.

Through the miracle of relativity, 3 days stencil-time have just passed while you turned the page over, and it is now Friday, Nov. 4th. I'm thoroughly exhausted after a hard week of rude noises (there is this problem with having a job ... I know what I said on the other side about the gloom of unemployment ... but just between us, the euphoria of getting a job lasted, oh, almost till the day before I had to start) as I was saying, I'm exhausted, but the kittens are busy practicing broken field running with my lap, the avocado tree, and that pile of precariously balanced fanzines over there ... CRASH! (don't mind me -- I adore Susan's Selectric). This is getting a trifle incoherent not to mention beside the point (10 point instead of 12, to be precise) ...

Ahem. Let's get a little organization going here (OK -- you draw up the constitution, you can be acting Acting Secretary ...)

The kittens. Perhaps I should introduce the kittens. Harlequin, the kitten you just pounced on is Samantha. Samantha, the kitten you are trying to disembowel is Harlequin. There. Oh, you mean introduce the kittens to the people out there ... of course. Harlequin is an adorable black and orange and white kitten, mostly called Quin, except when she's being bad. She's here because my friend Jane-who-used-to-jump-out-of-airplanes and her husband Val (who still jumps out of airplanes) took in a stray, and the stray was pregnant, and basically, what can you say when someone drops a six-week-old kitten in your lap? (NO!) Samantha, who is about the same age (6-7 months now), came from the local animal shelter as a companion for Quin, and also because Judy Mitchell made me promise to get my next kitten from a shelter. Collectively, the pair are known as the Flying Karamazov Kittens (No!) (an obscure West Coast joke; don't worry about it).

When they're not killing each other they get along beautifully, and the two of them asleep, curled up next to each other so as to form a perfect furry heart-shape, would make Hallmark a fortune on Valentine's Day.

But why am I telling cat stories? Every fan in the world has cat stories. I should tell you about my HP-67 pocket calculator, which I spent the summer programming when I should have been doing KRAT.

Admittedly, this was not the most productive summer I've ever had, but I did manage simulate ruling a small country on my calculator. The program, which I call "King of Sumer", is now part of the Hewlett-Packard User's Library (along with at least 1500 other user-contributed programs, including assorted moon landers, pong simulators, and something called "Electronic Pinball" which purports to simulate a pinball machine on the calculator). My program is loosely based on a computer game called Sumer; you are the ruler of a country, and get to make decisions on feeding people, buying and selling land, funding research, and planting (subject to assorted constraints), and then you get zapped with plagues, poor harvests, food riots, flooding, and technological catastrophes. It's a lot of fun, really! I only wish it could display snotty messages instead of just numbers (this way, the calculator shows a flashing zero, and you have to visualize the peasants marching on your granaries with torches and pitchforks).

Let me point out that the device in question fits in your hand (it almost fits in my shirt pocket). But it can hold a 224 step program (which can be recorded on or read from little magnetic cards), has 26 memory registers (the data in which can also be recorded on or taken from magnetic cards), subroutines, indirect addressing ... and is totally obsolete *sob*.

The new Texas Instruments calculator can be plugged into a special printer and it can produce snotty messages! (It has something like a 60 character repertoire.) ("Let's see you do Cagney, calculator!") (I mean print characters, dammit.)

I wouldn't be really shocked if in ten years your hand-held calculator could talk to you.

By the way, I also spent the summer writing an article for KRAT on home computers; the article is also obsolete. I never intended to be the first one to break the news about home computer systems, but there have now been similar articles in ANALOG, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, the New York Times, and even a full-page spread in the Vancouver Sun! I expect I'll try to revise it -- no one else has yet mentioned the microprocessor-controlled tombstone.

Should I tell you about the microprocessor-controlled tombstone? Well, why not -- it'll be on the market any day now ...

To begin with, it's powered by solar energy, so it will last for eternity (except perhaps in the Pacific Northwest). An appropriate sensor, voice activated perhaps, turns it on when people approach the deceased's grave, and it then proceeds to play a recording on the life of the deceased. I guess the elaborateness of the show determines the price -- from a simple speech all the way up to a Walt Disney audio-animatron re-enacting key events in the life of the dear departed.

There are all kinds of extras that I can see being added. In particular, I figure it would be relatively easy to have the microprocessor keyed to recognize certain words or phrases, which, in combination with the rotisserie attachment to the coffin, could cause the deceased to turn over in ... yeah.

A funny thing happened on the way to the ellipsis back there. It suddenly occurred to me that the normal next word should be "his", but of course I didn't want to assume that the corpse in question was male; and anything on the order of "his/her" ruins the cliché. There are all kinds of circumlocutions and special phrasings one can use in expressions to avoid the pronoun problem (I also have a list of 26 sets of non-sexist pronouns that have been suggested by assorted people since 1850; I can send you a copy if you're interested), but what does one do in the middle of a cliché, whose familiarity and standard form is the point? People's best friend? This night's not fit for human nor beast? Admittedly, "one person's meat is another person's poison" keeps an alliteration ... (How then, can you presume Pope's lines still scan/When the proper study of humanity is people?)

Well, we can be glad that one cliché has made the transition: instead of "my man Friday", these days it's almost universally "girl Friday" ... oops ...

But seriously, folks. I think to some extent this is the heart of the problem, and the reason I expect English to remain sexist for long after society ceases to be. It's not just a matter of a few nouns being modified (a process which happens all the time anyway -- or has the Dept. of Labor bothered to find an alternate, non-sexist title for "highwayman"?). It's a question of thousands of phrases, probably most of the average person's stock of conversational building blocks, that would have to be changed. Example: Not too long ago, I was sitting amidst a group of ten discussing, ironically, this very matter of pronouns. I got into a heated discussion with Jeff Frane about English grammar and the use of "they"; at the height of my harangue on the real, subconscious rules of grammar that nobody tells you about but everybody obeys (harangue #42B), I became aware that Denys Howard was trying to get my attention, and had been for the past few minutes. "Eli, why do you assume that all schoolchildren are male?" I had, of course, been using "he" and "him" quite unconsciously for the previous five minutes, as soon as I had started concentrating on what I was trying to say, and let my tongue worry about how. I sheepishly shut up and meditated on my sins.

It's a question of dialect. A non-sexist form of English would be a new dialect, with large areas of overlap, to be sure, but as least as different from standard English as, say, Black English. I could follow a conversation in Black English, more or less, though the vocabulary probably has enough unfamiliar nouns to make it difficult (do you people know about "dozens"?). But I couldn't possibly speak it. The grammatical rules are different, you see, and learning a different grammar takes lots of practice and lots of samples to practice with. No way you start with an intellectual rule like "The negative in the sentence is attracted to the first two indefinites" or "Anywhere standard English allows a contraction, Black English allows a deletion of the copula", and apply that rule in fluent speech.

There are people who are very good at picking up languages, or dialects, or accents. But I suspect that even they have to be exposed to a good chunk of examples. This is why all those proposals for "tey" or "per" or "hesh" won't work. You would have to form a community, block off TV and radio, practice like crazy, and then raise a generation of kids who spoke that way naturally. Or maybe I'm wrong -- how is Esperanto doing these days? Are there native born speakers, children of Esperanto enthusiasts? Is it a living language with words for "affirmative action" and

"electronic bugging"? Are there communities of Esperanto speakers with their own slang words (I don't necessarily mean physical communities, though it seems to me that to develop spoken language habits there would have to be quite a bit of face-to-face contact -- or at least phone calls. As an aside, it occurs to me that a fan who never went to conventions and communicated solely via fanzines might never learn to pronounce "loc") (I think there's a leftover question mark that belongs somewhere around here; hazards of extended parenthetical remarks) (those are what you get in extended families, you know)?

Anyway, even if some sort of self-sustaining non-sexist English dialect did develop, there would be an awful lot of translating to be done. Which is what I started to say about clichés. Proverbs, stock phrases, well-known quotations, all would have to be translated or re-created (I mean wherever necessary), and some standard form would have to be accepted before they became recognizable. I mean, if I alluded to Genesis, say in the punchline of a joke, I could hardly use the phrase "When God created Heaven and Earth"; yet this is the opening line of the translation we used in my freshman humanities course at Columbia. When it comes to quoting from the Tao, I would hardly expect someone to recognize a paragraph from a phrase, just because there are so many translations around that none is standard. In English, I mean. (I'm sure that anyone fluent in Chinese could write a Feghoot that depended on some common *Tao te ching* line, and be understood; in English, even the spelling of the title isn't standard.)

This is a matter of shared culture, I suppose. The problem with trying to change the grammatical structure of English (as opposed to merely adding some extra words like "Ms.") is that if you succeeded, to that extent you would be cutting yourself off from the shared culture that English speakers now have in common. Normally, such changes take many generations, and are slow enough that continuity is preserved. I doubt seriously that it would be even possible to construct a working, non-sexist dialect without an immense amount of trial and error and continuous revision. I sympathize with the reasoning behind re-naming job titles and such, but it would be a hell of a lot easier, and more thorough a change, if due to real shifts in the sex balance of jobs, the "-man" in "foreman", "mailman", "doorman", etc. changed its meaning to person (the same way that in Canada, at least, "bush" as in "roughing it in the bush" came to mean any collection of trees, shrubs, and danse undergrowth).

Be that as it may, I see that I'm running out of room, and I have no time to do another two stencils (for one thing, I've gotta go help Susan run off AMOR 15). KRATOPHANY will be out RealSoonNow, honest!

Glancing back through this, I see I have left out almost everything I had intended to talk about, from the clutch falling out while I was driving Lesleigh Luttrell to Hollyburn Ridge to Lynne Dollis setting up a cemetery. Oh well, maybe next time. Cheers.

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