



PERSPEX PARROT



ONE

It's a weird thing, but suddenly I feel quite nervous. I've published millions and millions of words as a science fiction writer, as a journalist, and as a farzine contributor — but this is the first time I've ever sat down to compose an editorial for a farzine of my very own. The responsibility is daunting. What am I supposed to say?

This is probably the penalty for having dithered around for a some time before taking the plunge into publishing. Some people in fandom have commented that it can be hard to get me moving on any project, and I will confess to having been a bit slow off the mark on occasion. Looking back on it, I do think that stalling for forty years before pubbing my ish was probably being a little sluggish. Still, there's no harm in testing the water before you dive in. Let the shipwrecks of others be your sea marks, I always say. To lead is to be blind to the necessity of following, I always say. Well, I can't always say it, because sometimes I'm saying the bit about the shipwrecks, and in between times I have to use my mouth for other purposes such as drinking beer and cursing That Woman, but you know what I mean, and also I have to get out of this paragraph before total incoherence sets in...

Phew, this editing business is no joke! Now I know how Defoe, Hearst, Beaverbrook, and people like that must have felt. I know what to do next — Explanation of Intriguing Odd-ball Title! That's always good for 200 words or so.

Just before WW2 the citizens of Belfast were astonished when the government of the day plucked a thriving aircraft factory out of its comfortable habitat on the south coast of England and plonked it down next door to the local shipyard, Harland & Wolff. [Digression: I'm reminded of one of the least successful jokes I ever delivered at a convention. Harlan Ellison, I said, and Gene Wolfe have abandoned their plan to collaborate on a novel, because nobody would buy a book produced by Harlan & Wolfe. Even the Ulster people in the audience failed to raise a titter. Perhaps the joke was not smutty enough for them. I know they all laughed their heads off a few minutes later when I did a similar fake news item about

Cunard and Air Lingus having dropped their plans to merge because of disagreements over the new company's trading name.]

Anyway, the highly skilled workforce of Belfast suddenly found itself presented with a unique opportunity to move into the forefront of technology, and also to spearhead the drive against Hitler. The aforementioned workforce responded magnificently with a dedicated, whole-hearted, patriotic production drive -- of cigarette lighters.

Looking back on the period with the cool analytical eye of a Toynbee or a Gibbon, I suspect that the good burgers of places like Ballymacarrett and Glengormley -- being notorious Woodbine addicts -- must have had an in-built urge to produce a handy means of igniting the weed for many decades. The snag was that suitable tools and materials simply were not available. It is quite possible that generations of unsung folk heroes laboured amid the mighty forges of the shipyard -- using 10-ton billets of iron and ground-shaking drop-hammers -- in their best efforts to produce a cigarette lighter which would slip neatly into the waistcoat pocket or lady's purse.

One can visualise them wearily trudging home, bent double under the weight of their latest creations, coat pockets sagging to the ground and bumping over the cobbles -- only to be greeted with derision by dissatisfied prospective customers.

And then -- at the blackest hour -- a bunch of politicians in far-off London stepped in and, for no reason that anybody can understand, delivered a huge factory filled with machines which could work to .001 inches with materials like aluminium and brass!

Backed by the prayers and blessings of half-a-million nicotine addicts, the artisans of Ulster flocked to the aircraft factory and began an orgy of production never equalled in modern history. This was what a lifetime of inhaling Park Drive fumes had honed and shaped them to do; this was their destiny. Cigarette lighters poured out of that factory on Queen's Island in a glittering flood, the individual components of which were cunningly machined to resemble Guinness bottles,

rifle bullets or lipstick tubes. Or, quite often, when inspiration had failed, they simply looked like cigarette lighters.

At the time of which I speak, the Shorts aircraft plant was always in common parlance referred to as the "lighter factory". That may sound like a joke, but not so long afterwards the whole place had to be reorganised because a War Ministry study showed that, for the building of a bomber, the number of man-hours in Belfast was three times greater than at any factory on the mainland.

I was an eight-year-old schoolboy when all this started, so tobacco and the means to set fire to it were of little concern to me; but perspex parrots were a different matter.

As part of the aviation technology which Shorts brought to Belfast was an incredible new material which looked like glass but was light, unbreakable and easy to fashion into any desired shape. I was an incipient science fiction fan, and to me this wonderful material represented nothing less than the future.

For some inexplicable reason, when the lighter-makers of Ulster were challenged by this new substance they reacted in only one way. They produced parrots. These birds always had long droopy tails, curving in under the body, which lowered the centre of gravity so much that the creature would sit happily on a perch and rock about a little in response to air currents with no danger of falling off.

The district through which I went to school was deprived in today's sense of the word; but the people who lived there didn't see things that way. They cared passionately for their little rented houses; they looked out for the neighbourhood and each other; and the result was something special, something which is difficult to explain in the social climate of 1990. Everybody knew everybody else's business -- something which would be resented today -- but it meant that there was a local consciousness which was genuinely life enhancing. People who had rarely read a book, who had never even heard of Faulkner or Orwell, partook of an incredibly rich theatre of life.

In those times, parents who suddenly found themselves in need of a light bulb or a stomach powder could send a seven-year-old child out in the dark to buy what was needed without the slightest qualm about that child's safety. I can remember going on night-time journeys to the opposite side of the city so that my mother and her sister

could swap library books -- a trip which involved four separate trams -- and as a 12-year-old feeling warm, safe and protected all the way.

(Looking at that last sentence, I have to admit that nostalgia and sentimentality got the upper hand. I didn't feel warm and safe and protected. To do that I would have needed to be aware of some threat. As far as I was concerned there was no threat -- I was simply a small human being going about his legitimate business in old-time Belfast.)

That was the overwhelmingly positive side of things, but for a sensitive child [yes, I'm talking about myself] there were certain disadvantages. Most of the terrace houses I passed on my way to school sported the ultimate status symbol in the bay window -- a gleaming, multi-coloured perspex parrot -- and my house didn't have one. There was no way to put things right, because nobody I knew had even the slightest connection with the lighter factory. Somehow the absence of a polished plastic Psittaciformes from my family's front window made me feel left out of things. Rejected. Never quite belonging or fitting in.

Of course none of this matters a hoot to me now. It's all in the past, and long forgotten. It's completely trivial and laughable, and if any Freudian so-called psychologist tries to suggest otherwise I'll be happy to go round to his house and smash his head in and jump up and down on his shattered skull until his brains come squirting out of his nostrils. I have a perspex parrot of my very own now, and nothing can take it away from me, so sucks, booh and yah!

CON
REPORTS?
REVIEWS?



AMATEUR
SF?
SCIENCE
ARTICLES?

Well, that takes care of the title -- now for editorial policy...

I think that, basically, PP is going to be a letter substitute. Over the years I have built up an enormous guilt complex as regards the number of fanzines I have received without making any response. Every fanzine is a labour of love and deserves a loc, but writing all day renders me incapable of writing in the evening, and so the piles of reproachful paper grew and grew.

In my defence I can say that I never dumped a fanzine -- I always found good homes for them with neofen -- but I will feel a lot better when, for the first time in my life, I'll be able to send "the usual".

EASTCON

The Eastercon was highly enjoyable this year, even though the week-end got off to a bad start in the Shaw household, otherwise known as Boshkone. In hot weather such as we've been having I tend to suffer from leg cramps in bed. With me they seem to be particularly severe -- the calf muscle twisting into an S-shape and threatening to snap off at the tendons -- and the pain is very bad, so I do my best to avoid them.

The best way is to avoid making any sudden leg movements, so when getting up I go in for a languid, cat-like style of movement which which may be disturbingly erotic for anybody who sees it. But on the Friday morning I woke up with a cramp, and in the agony forgot all about being languid and cat-like. I tried to leap out of the bed to get the blood flowing down into the affected leg, got tangled in the quilt, made a convulsive effort to kick free of it -- and promptly got a cramp in the good leg!

For the first time ever, I had cramp in both legs at once, and just had to lie there and wait for the old corpuscles to meander back into knotted muscles. It's a process which takes a lot longer than when you're standing up, and by the time I eventually got back on my feet I could scarcely walk. Two days later my calves were still painful to touch, and since then I have developed a fear that someday I'll get a cramp so bad that the Achilles tendon will snap. The leg would look rather strange, with the muscle just hanging down behind my knee like a bag of sausage meat. I hope that never happens, but if it ever does I'll publish a photograph of the leg so that you can all see what it looks like.

I went into the above in some detail because I had undertaken to go to Eastercon on my pushbike and the cramp made the trip impossible. The weather was just right for a 15-mile ride, and my new bike has one of those little clips which are meant to hold a flask of glucose-and-water but which I have found is just the right size for a bottle of Newcastle Brown.

It was a shame things didn't work out, but I didn't let that spoil a good con. An interesting discovery was that the real ale bar was selling a tasty brew called Wobbly Bob. Even more interesting was the discovery that the drink lived up to its name. After a few pints I was distinctly wobbly [although my tortured leg muscles must have

been partly to blame]. It was quite an experience to see the toughest gladiators of the beer-drinking set being mown down by this murky potion of modest price. I am reliably informed that during Ken Campbell's GOH speech Henry Newton, who had also been drinking WB, and I were seen slumped up against each other in mutual though unconscious support.

Henry is treasurer of the Warrington SF group, and one of his qualifications for the post is that he is the only fan I know whose name is entirely made up of SI units. In chemistry textbooks one can also find Henry's Law, which states that the amount of gas absorbed by a given volume of liquid at a given temperature is directly proportional to the pressure of the gas. I can't prove it, but I'm almost sure that the law was derived from studies of Henry's behaviour after a few glasses of beer. He starts running back and forth to the toilet a lot.

Anyway, Eastcon '90 was a hell of a good convention. There are people who make a profession out of going around and finding fault with conventions and not enjoying them. Why do they bother going?

HAIR PIECE



About three years ago I started to go bald at a furious rate.

At first I thought it was a trick of the bathroom light. Then the kitchen light started playing the same trick, and soon afterwards I glimpsed myself in a pub mirror and realised I could see my scalp right back to the crown of my head. There was no doubt about the matter. Fifty years of sporting a reasonable thatch had lulled me into believing it would always be there to provide shade in the summer and protection in the winter -- but now it was deserting me. I was going bald.

I had seen other men lose their hair, some at quite an early age, and I could never understand why they got so worked up about it. Some of their antics -- such as adopting the celebrated Walnut Whip hairstyle -- had filled me with condescending amusement. Why did they bother? Didn't they realise that hair is unimportant? Didn't they know that a man can look better without all that stuff on top to distract from his features?

But somehow when it started happen-

ing to me I was less philosophical. It isn't like losing a leg, I kept telling myself, but all at once I was aware of the hair clinic adverts in the local papers. Trichologists, they usually called themselves [Greek root, no pun intended, trichos = a hair]. Everything I had heard until then had convinced me that male baldness is irreversible, and that anybody who claimed to correct it was a crook. But after dithering for a few days I went along for a free examination "just for the laugh".

The clinic was in seedy premises in the same Liverpool street in which Gladstone had been born, and its owner was a small, fiftyish, flashily dressed man who bore a startling resemblance to Liverpool comedian, Johnny Hackett. He began the interview by asking me if I knew how the word trichologist had been derived. I did know, because I had looked it up the previous day, but it was obvious that he was out to impress me and instil confidence, and -- so as not to spoil his routine -- I said I didn't.

"Tri means three," he explained, all the while grinning the enormous Hackett grin. "We work with three things -- the hair, the root and the scalp -- and that's why we're called trichologists."

I gaped at him in silence for a long moment, wondering if I had been unlucky enough to blunder into the real Johnny Hackett in some hidden camera show. How much of a frigging expert could he be, I wondered, if he still didn't know where the name of his profession came from? I was about to make my excuses and leave when he spoke again.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You're thinking that promising to regrow people's hair for them is an ideal set-up for a racket, and that I won't be able to do anything for you, and that all your money will be wasted."

This was so uncannily close to what I had been thinking that, somehow, it bolstered my faith.

"Liverpool is officially a city," he went on, "but in reality it is one big village. I've been in business in these same premises for fifteen years, and if I was a charlatan I wouldn't have lasted six months. I only take on clients I know I can cure. I haven't had one failure in all that time, and you aren't going to be my first."

These were fighting, uncompromising words... the sort of words I wanted to hear... so I signed on for a course of treatment. Each session only cost a few quid, but the snag was that there had to be fifty of them,

so quite a bit of money was involved. I was going to pay by the week, so I consoled myself with the knowledge that if things didn't go well I could always [no pun intended] drop out.

There began a strange period of my life, an entire winter, in which I drove to Liverpool three times a week. The treatments were administered in little cubicles by women who continually chatted to each other over the partitions. The sessions involved manual massage, dabbing of the scalp with lotions [some of which stung], mechanical massage, more dabbing, more massaging. Always there was the massaging. On the days I didn't attend the clinic I had to apply colour d fluids morning and night, and make sure to massage them in. Massage, massage, massage...

I would soon have become too bored to continue, but after some weeks an amazing thing happened. My hair came back! It felt really weird for a while -- a furtive crew cut growing up under what was left of my normal length hair -- but Johnny had been vindicated and I persevered to the end of the course. By the time it was finished I actually had more hair than five years previously.

For months afterwards my mind kept returning to the little adventure, mainly because the belief that male baldness cannot be cured is as widespread and firmly held, and just as erroneous, as the conviction that the Mary Celeste was called the Marie Celeste. I became intrigued by the subject, started researching it -- and eventually came to the realisation that balding men, and women, can regrow their hair by the simple means of massaging cold tea into their scalps twice a day.

I said cold tea, but coffee would do. Or lemonade, or squirrel semen, or water in which fanzines had been boiled, or beer, or virgin's tears...

In short, it doesn't matter much what you rub in as long as you do it regularly and vigorously. [I am tempted here to make a pun about the medium being the massage, but don't want to risk giving you the idea that this article is just a spoof.] What I found out was that anybody who is losing or has lost his hair has only to rub his head energetically with a towel for four minutes a day, and -- unless there is an underlying medical condition -- the hair will return. It is all to do with the supply of blood-borne nutrients to the papillae, but that isn't a suitable subject for a fanzine.

The real subject of this article is the

strange nature of the rules which govern publishing in this country.

To me the mastering of any subject is made up of three distinct phases. There is the period when you are struggling to take it all in. That is followed by the beautiful, fulfilling moment when you realise you've got it. Then comes the urge to proselytise, to dash around passing the good word on to anybody who will listen.

I duly got the evangelistic craving, which -- I have to admit -- was considerably reinforced by the notion that there would be money in it. Millions of people who would like to have lots of hair are losing it and would be quite happy to part with [no pun intended] a bob or two to get it back. I was willing to give them the benefit of my researches -- not for some cruelly exploitative sum -- but for only the price of a couple drinks.

I got to work and produced an eight-page pamphlet, in the same format as this fanzine, which was genuinely informative and well illustrated. It was called YOU NEEDN'T BE BALD, and was priced at £1.75, which I reckoned would give a profit of £1 a copy after allowing for expenses such as advertising. At this stage I was quite worked up over the scheme. An advert in EXCHANGE & MART would reach millions of prospective customers every week, and it would need only a small fraction to respond for me to make a good income. I named my little outfit Trichogen Press -- which I thought was rather nifty -- and even rented a P.O. Box to handle the expected volume of mail.

I wrote a good advert explaining what was on offer, mailed it off with a cheque to E&M, sat back and waited for the loot to roll in. But what actually happened was that E&M returned my cheque with a note to say they would not accept my advertisement.

Baffled, I wrote back and asked them to explain. They wrote back and said they weren't going to explain -- they weren't accepting my ad, and that was that. It takes a lot to put me into a bad temper, but E&M had succeeded. I rang the relevant department and refused to be put off until I had an explanation, and eventually was informed that as a member of the Advertising Association the magazine could not accept my ad. It turned out that nobody is allowed to claim to regrow hair, or even to improve hair! The AA clings to my former belief that baldness can't be cured, and refuses to countenance fake claims to the contrary.

"This is crazy," I spluttered. "Every week in E&M there are adverts for books

which claim to teach you how to levitate and float around your living room! To me that seems a trifle less likely than growing some hair."

"That's publications," the woman said. "Nothing to do with medical ethics."

It would be medical if somebody tried to levitate from a fourth floor window, I thought, but in the end had to give up the argument. Eventually E&M agreed to run a bland little ad which offered advice on scalp problems. Even then, I couldn't just ask for people to send £1.75 to my P.O. Box.

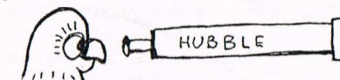
"You could be a criminal," the woman explained, showing a flair for customer relations. So I had to advertise an explanatory leaflet and order form with my full address. I duly went through the motions, but did so with a heavy heart, knowing all the while that without a hard-hitting advert the whole enterprise was doomed.

And that's how it turned out. Only a trickle of replies came in -- and even though my leaflet was a masterpiece of copy writing which brought a 100% order rate -- I barely made enough to cover advertising costs.

Another problem I hadn't anticipated was that quite a few of the people who wrote in didn't do so on a straightforward business basis. They went into all kinds of details about worries such as lack of confidence, and I found myself being drawn into the role of an agony aunt, something for which I had little ability and even less interest.

In the end it was with a sense of relief that I closed down Trichogen Press. The above is, of course, a cautionary tale. I've learned my lesson, but lately I've been noticing that doctors who give the public medical advice often get asked what can be done about painful mouth ulcers -- and they never can help. I have an infallible cure for mouth ulcers, and there must be millions of sufferers out there who would be happy to pay a mere £1 for relief.

If only I could figure out some way to get past the woman at E&M...



I'm pretty disgusted with the media coverage of the Hubble telescope. The only time interest was shown was when it seemed things were going wrong. Apparently the mysteries of the universe are of less interest to the Press than naughty vicars and the like.

Talking of such mysteries, I've always had trouble in reconciling two particular bits of my astronomical knowledge. I'm quite happy to accept the result of the Michelson-Morley experiment -- that when you measure the speed of light from any given star you always get exactly C. If the star is coming towards you its speed is not added to the speed of light; if it is retreating the speed is not deducted. In other words, the speed of the light you measure is not affected by the motion of its source.

Fair enough, but when I read books on cosmology I find statements to the effect that the most distant galaxies in our expanding universe are going so fast that the light they emit can never reach us. For instance, James Muirden in his GUIDE TO ASTRONOMY, when talking about galaxies at a distance of 13bn light years says: "A galaxy at this distance is receding at the speed of light, and therefore its light cannot get a start -- it is being dragged along behind!"

To me he seems to be saying that the speed of light is affected by the speed of its source, but I suppose there's an explanation for it. It may be something to do with what Paul Davies says on the same subject in THE EDGE OF INFINITY. He explains that the distance between the galaxies is increasing "not because they are moving apart in the traditional sense" but because the space in between them is "continually swelling".

Science grows more wonderful all the time.



The above illo is not one of Arthur Thomson's, but is an attempt by me to draw a little farewell sketch in his style. Another penalty for having been so slow at pubbing my ish is that I'm too late to get an Atom illo for PP.

The following paragraphs were written

soon after I heard of Arthur's death and have already been published in Vince Clarke's fine 100-page tribute. There's no point in my trying to expand them...

Arthur Thomson and I always lived far apart; circumstances seemed to conspire against us meeting more than once every four of five years; we exchanged only a couple of letters in decades -- and yet I knew that he was a good and close friend. There is no contradiction involved. Anyone with even a smidgin of fannishh telepathy could tell he was one of the Good People.

I entered fandom forty years ago, and stayed precisely because it contained a few people like Arthur. It wasn't necessary for me to meet him regularly in the flesh -- he was always around in the mental hyperspace of fandom, enriching my life with his talent and personality. It is hard to accept the fact of his death. Somehow it seems an affront to all that is good and right in the universe.

CLICHE CORNER

I recently heard a BBC reporter interviewing an expert from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries on the vexed question of why Continental fishing fleets do so much better than the British.

"Why is it," the reporter said, "that the French can catch fish and sell them so much cheaper than we can?"

"The reason," the expert replied solemnly, "is that the French have more ships on the ground."

Trust the Frogs to think up a sneaky idea like that! There are our lads out there in the North Sea, daily risking their lives in treacherous waters to bring us the harvest of the deeps, when all they have to do is keep their ships on the ground. Mind you, I'd like to see the machine the French hurl their nets out with. It must be the nautical equivalent of that Iraqi gun.

I SUPPOSE YOU THINK THAT'S FUNNY

Some years ago I introduced a character called Warren Peace in my only humorous novel to date, WHO GOES HERE? I am now embarking on a series of three novels featuring the same character, and I'm doing so with a certain amount of trepidation.

Most people's idea of what is dramatic or exciting is pretty much the same, but when it comes to deciding what is funny one is on shaky ground. ['Shaky ground' is a cliché, but it's a brilliant one.] In this country it is possible to become very rich and famous as a professional comedian with-

out ever having said or done anything funny. Cannon and Ball are a prime example.

Particularly worrying for me is the case of Garrison Keillor. January before last I took a bad cold, the weather was utterly depressing, and I knew I was doomed to pass a couple of days in bed. When I was a kid that misery was always alleviated by my mother bringing me one or two of Richmal Crompton's William books from the local library. Coincidentally, for the previous month I had been bombarded by fanzine and general press references to Keillor as being the funniest man in the world.

That was what I needed! Hour after hour with the funniest man in the world. Using the last dregs of my strength I went into town, blew £7.45 on LAKE WOBEGON DAYS and HAPPY TO BE HERE, came home and sank into bed with a tremulous sigh.

When I started reading the former my mouth was already tweaking at the corners, paving the way for giggles and full-bodied guffaws. It took me perhaps an hour -- with the tweak muscles at the corners of the mouth gradually beginning to flag -- to realise that I was totally bored by Keillor's interminable pseudo-historic ramblings. Try as I might, I couldn't find anything funny in them. I couldn't see the joke. I then turned to the second book, hoping for essays to put alongside Thurber and Perelman and Patrick Campbell, and found it even worse!

Is this due to some fundamental difference between the current British and American/Canadian ideas of what is funny?

I hope not, because all British authors depend on American sales for a decent living, and I'll be spending the next year or so writing stuff that I think is funny.

ONE MAN'S MUTT..

Not so long ago I was having a quiet pipe in the pub when a woman acquaintance, call her X, rebuked me for forcing her to be a passive smoker.

That irked me for a number of reasons. One of them was that for a large part of her adult life X had burned up about 40 Kensitas a day, and in my experience of cigarette smokers an admitted 40 means 60 or 70. Another annoyance was that she was equating cigarette smoke with pipe smoke!

As it happens I'm not really bothered by cigarette smoke -- but I also revel in the aromas of paraffin stoves, the smells given off by petrol, hot engine oil, leather seats in old cars, newly applied paint and varnish, creosote and hot tar, and the resin used in

fibre glass work. These are smells which cause lots of people to reel away squirting antihistamines up their noses. It has always been obvious to me, however, that the scent of a high-quality pipe tobacco is in a different class altogether.

Insurance company statistics have shown that pipe smokers tend to live longer than people who don't smoke at all. That fact is so unwelcome in the present climate of opinion that it is no longer mentioned, but it exists nevertheless. The tobaccos I smoke are so carefully chosen that people nearby have complimented me on them, and have actually asked me to blow more smoke in their direction. Sometimes I've been forced to say, "You'll have to be patient -- the people on this side put in their request before yours."

That's partly why I got peeved with X. She represents a movement which has begun in this part of England to ban smoking in pubs altogether! "Breathing smoke is bad for you," their argument goes, "so you have to cut it out."

"Fair enough," I counter, "but pouring a carcinogenic liquid like alcohol down your gullet is also bad for you. Ever since the days of Raleigh the pub has been a place where one can go to enjoy a chat, a drink and a smoke. If you can't stand tobacco smoke the remedy is obvious -- don't go into pubs. And if you are happy to risk cancer from alcohol but not from tobacco, start your own smoke-free pubs."

In case I've given the impression that I'm an aggressive smoker I should say that I never smoke in other people's houses unless they are in favour, or in other people's cars, or in shops or public buildings. I have wandered away from the point of this little discourse, because for a while I forgot my main reason for objecting to X's comment.

The real annoyance was that she was the doting owner of one of the most revolting dogs I have ever encountered. Now, I don't mind people being dog-lovers -- but I do object to being forced to be a passive dog-lover.

I've had occasion to watch X's hound going about its quotidian affairs. In a fairly typical hour it will devour a dish of rank kangaroo meat, and then go around emitting farts which display the classical properties of gases by assuming not only the shape but the volume of their container -- which is another way of saying they spread to every part of the house. Then the hound goes out for a stroll, during which it meets several other members of the canine fraternity and

in time-honoured tradition sticks its nose up their bums. [If dogs are so clever why have they never worked out a better way of saying hello?]

Next, it discovers places where other dogs have been and celebrates the event by joyfully sinking its snout in little puddles of urine and little mounds of excrement. That done, it notices that it has disturbed a few bluebottles which were happily patrolling the turds, and -- instead of apologising -- runs after them, snaps them in its jaws and chews them up. Pleased with its achievements, the hound ambles back into the family residence, lies down and enthusiastically and noisily licks every square centimetre of its bulging pudenda.

The next big event in its life is that X shows Bob Shaw into her living room and invites him to sit down.

The hound responds by leaping straight onto Shaw's chest and shoving its germ-laden snout into his mouth!

There is no way, professional world-smith though I am, that I can explain how objectionable I always find that experience. And then -- on top of everything -- to have X complaining to me about passive smoking!

As far as I can determine, there are thousands of civil servants and anti-tobacco volunteers going around calculating how many people die every year because of passive smoking -- but what about passive dog-owning? How many people have gone to an early grave because of things like distemper and bluebottulism?

In future issues I may touch on the subject of passive pop music listening, passive knitting and passive lager drinking.

LEVIN'S BABY

For many years many people, ranging from reviewers in the heavy Sunday papers to long-time SF fans, have been telling me that Ira Levin's first book -- A KISS BEFORE DYING -- is one of the best novels ever written. Recently my curiosity became so intense that I ordered it from the local library, and with some misgivings -- on account of the Keillor experience -- settled down for a good read.

At first I was a little disappointed because I quickly recognised the plot from an old Robert Wagner film. It's the one in which he gets a girl pregnant, promises to marry her, lures her up to the roof of the registry office building, pushes her to her death, and finally gets caught because the girl's sister is alerted by the fact that the victim was wearing something old, something

new, something borrowed, something blue. (I really liked that bit in the movie, because a woman just might catch on to something like that in real life, whereas no man ever would.)

I can remember this story too well, I thought at the start, but I needn't have worried, because the book goes into a spiral of complexities that the film didn't even attempt to deal with. It reminded me that, no matter what movie buffs may claim, the screen is not a good medium for conveying intricate and subtle thought processes. That's why so many SF movies are unsatisfactory.

I had read that Levin was only 23 when he wrote KISS, and that gave me a second interest in it. I wondered if he could really have been a brilliant writer at that age, and therefore paid extra attention to the text. Levin's command of words was shaky -- I squirmed a little as I spotted quite a few of my own old faults -- but it was intriguing to see him learning on the job, so to speak.

He would write economically for a page or two, then remember it had been some time since he had put in a good simile to improve literary quality. So in a description of a street at night we get, "Yellow windowed houses faced each other on either side, like timid armies showing flags across no-man's land." Or how's this for somebody changing expression? "The exultant expression clung to his face for a moment, like a stopped movie, and then it cracked and slid slowly away, like thick snow cracking and sliding from a canted roof."

A dollop of that kind of stuff every now and then brought the story to a halt like, if I may try it for myself, a speeding locomotive plunging into drifted snow and, bucking and twisting, gradually exhausting its kinetic energy and screaming like a wounded elephant as ice and snow came into hissing contact with red-hot metal. No, I can't do it right!

Levin also had a habit of demanding more of his adverbs than they were capable of giving. More than once he had characters walking "bitterly". How do you walk bitterly, for Krysake?

All that apart, I was compelled to read the book right through and I enjoyed it. It reinforces the advice I give to aspiring SF writers -- get yourself a really good idea and you're IN.

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