

Philosophical Gas

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I REMEMBER - sure, it was a long time ago, but I remember - when I was a real person. Then Lee Harding got to me and I started blurring at the edges. I became a fanzine editor. The fanzine did pretty well and the real me started to disappear behind the BNF legend. Now - well, now I've reached the end, I reckon. I am nothing more than a character in a James Blish story - and a twisted character at that.

In my new role as a figment of Jim's imagination, I am (to quote his story "We All Die Naked") "Bang Jøhnsund, who wrote an interminable 3V serial named The T.H.I.N.G. From O.U.T.B.A.C.K."

Ah well. What Jim could not be expected to know, I guess, is that that serial was based on a modestly successful story of mine called "Who Goes There Down Under?". Published in an obscure magazine under the pseudonym Stu Donart, it began with the immortal words "The play stank", and went on to describe the unearthing of a hulking alien beastie which had been buried for countless zillion years under the Ettamoggah Mechanics Institute.

I wonder why Jim chose to mention this 3V serial rather than my very successful family comedy series, "Witchetty's Planet"? Later on in his story, Jim writes: "Take Bang Jøhnsund, for instance: who on the moon could use a talent for writing the most moronic and endless kind of 3V serial? The answer might well be, everybody; surely, under such confined and near-hopeless conditions, a talent for taking people's minds off their troubles might turn out to be of tremendous value." Perhaps "moronic" is the key there. "Witchetty's Planet" is not so much moronic as downright imbecilic. Pays well, though.

In the same week, Bruce Gillespie showed me the sentences I've quoted in his copy of THREE FOR TOMORROW, Dave Piper wrote from England to tell me about them, and I received a copy of the book from Gollancz's local agents. Also Mervyn Binns sold me a copy of THE MAKING OF KUBRICK'S 2001, wherein jolly old ASFR is quoted no less than (count them) three times. Wow! It's Egoboo Week at the old homestead.

The writers quoted in KUBRICK'S 2001 are George Durner, G. Curner and Bruce Gillespie. Well, one out of three isn't bad. The quotes aren't very flattering; there were much better passages could have been chosen from ASFR 18. Ah, 17 that is. And it seems a pity that the Jessen/Harding theory about the meaning of the number 2001 wasn't quoted. Still & all...

Last Philosophical Gas contained a letter from Ursula LeGuin. Pardon my going on like this, but Mrs LeGuin continued the story in a subsequent letter:

"I must finish the Tale of the Hugo for you. There was Alan Nourse in North Bend, Washington, with it, and me in Portland, without it, you recall. Well, we had to drive up to Seattle (four hours from us and half an hour from him) to buy a cello for my eldest child, there being an outstanding repairer and dealer in stringed instruments there. So I called Dr Nourse and said can we meet, and we couldn't, but he said, I'll be in Seattle Friday and I'll leave it at the luthier's shop. Fine, says I. So on Saturday we arrived, and the luthier came forward from among a forest of disembowelled violins and said, "Ah, Mrs Le Guin, I have a rocket here for you," and handed me a rocket, "and now would you like to look at the cellos?" That's what I call Aplomb."

Saturday, 21st November... (My god, I still haven't got over Easter and here it is nearly next year already!) We've just invented a new word, we think. We? George Turner, Peter Innocent (Peter lives with me, and that really is his name) and me. Peter wanted an antonym to "euphemism", so we racked our brains and I resolved again to one day buy a dictionary of antonyms. Then I had the happy thought of turning to good old Donnegan's Lexicon (the second edition, much revised, of 1831) and there found, under euphemismos, a refer to dysphemism - the words of ill omen which you avoid by use of euphemism - and there's our antonym: dysphemism. No prizes to the first person to bring our attention to previous use of this word, but we'd be interested to know when Robert Graves or whoever invented it.

Now, have a previously unpublished Feghoot:

MRS Ethel Schildblum was one of those fortunate people who could afford the best - with, giving credit where due, considerable assistance from her clever and well-paid husband, Emile. But her taste was not so much for the best as for the latest. It was the source of most of the arguments this otherwise reasonably happy couple engaged in.

Toques were in. Fashion decreed it, Mrs Schildblum wore them. Ridiculous little excuses for headgear, Mr Schildblum thought. Since grey was the colour of the moment, grey was the colour of Ethel's toques. Stupid, thought Emile - men wearing floral pants (not him, of course), women wearing grey skirts, grey hats, grey everything.

But let it be said immediately that Mrs Schildblum bought her latest fashions from the very best places: shoes from Parnell's, skirts from Montedori's, hats (hats: snorted Emile) from Liddell & Eichhorn.

It was a toque purchased from the latter salon that provoked the most violent argument Emile and Ethel had ever had.

A little grey thing, very demure, rather pretty actually, Mrs Schildblum was wearing it one day when it started to rain. Quickly she raised her little grey umbrella (from Quirk's of Collins Street, of course), but the damage was done. When she arrived home, Emile said, "It's been raining today?" Ethel said, "Yes, but I didn't really get caught in it." "Are you sure about that?" asked Emile. "Why do you ask?" "Well," said Emile, "either your head has shrunk or your toque has expanded!"

"Heavens!" cried Ethel, running to a mirror, "you are right!" What could have happened?"

"I doubt if your head could shrink any further than Dr Seussmeyer has achieved in his nasty little clinic..." "I hate you!" cried Mrs Schildblum. "...so I must assume that something strange has happened to that vulgar little head-piece you are wearing..." "You beast!" sobbed Mrs Schildblum. "...and it seems to me that the only explanation," Emile continued, regardless of the consequences, "is that grey toques from Liddell-Eichhorn's grow!"

::: QUOTE: "In these troubled times it is encouraging to know that the initial letters taken from the Christian names of the Royal Family - Philip, Elizabeth, Anne (and Andrew), Charles and Edward - spell PEACE.

- Mrs J.F., Newcastle, NSW."
(Australasian Post, 5.11.70)

And I leave you with this thought: G.K. Chesterton on a mini-bike.