

Q36I

June 1990

Edited by Marc Ortlieb, P.O. Box 215, Forest Hill, Vic 3131, AUSTRALIA.

This fanzine is a production of First Person Singular Enterprizes, dedicated to the idea that even b.o.fs gotta pub their ish every now and then.

Q36 is available only on editorial whim. The editor's whim is a lazy sort of creature but it has been known to respond to free fanzines, letters, articles, cover artwork or a naughty in the bushes. (The latter must be particularly circumspect in order to avoid being caught by the editorial wife.)

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Q36 supports DUFF, GUFF, Minneapolis in '73 and the Sydney in '95 Worldcon bid. It is supported by the rapidly diminishing bank balance of Marc and Cath Ortlieb, who are too busy supporting Michael Ortlieb to do anything frivolous like publishing a fanzine.

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The Compleate Quiz Team

Marc Ortlieb

There was tension in the bar. Where, minutes before, there had been the hazy drone of fannish conversation, now there were voices raised in anger. Even Dave Langford had heard it and was edging his way to the periphery of the fracas, pen in hand, jotting down notes for his next book, "Fan Feuds in the Year 2060".

The epicentre of the disruption was a modified Trivial Pursuit Board. Greg Turkich had brought it over from Perth and was trialing it on Eastern States fandom before releasing it as an official "Perth in 2001" money raising venture. Jack Herman had just successfully answered the question "Which Melbourne fan was the ringleader in the successful attempt to scuttle the Perth in '94 Worldcon bid?" but Justin Ackroyd was contesting the answer printed on the back of the card.

"Look Turkich," he said. "I don't know where you got that name, but I can assure you that she had nothing to do with the Perth sabotage. Sure, she helped us to discredit the Sydney in '91 bid but she was back in New Zealand when the Gang of Fifteen used those compromising photographs of Lee and the quocka to destroy any credibility the Perth bid might have had."

I was saying nothing. I'd written half of the questions for Greg and I had no intention of revealing the sources of the innuendos, half-truths and rock solid facts that I'd accumulated. As I watched, I felt an uncomfortable stirring of the hairs on the back of my neck. It was as if I had somehow stepped into something nasty - a copy of Brian Aldiss's "Report on Probability A", for instance. I turned to face Carruthers, who was sitting at the bar, supping a Real Ale thick enough to support the most weighty hypothesis on the nature of contemporary fandom. His eyes sparkled with an "I know your secret but won't tell" gleam and I nodded acknowledgement. There was no point in trying to keep secrets from Carruthers. He invariably ferreted out the truth in a manner akin to telepathy.

"Of course," he said, loudly enough to draw all attention from the contretemps to himself, "there are always people who take those trivia competitions far too seriously. I am drawn to think of a little known event in the annals of fandom, one that certain people have hushed up, but one that holds an important lesson for us all."

You could tell at a glance the neofans in the bar. They had turned sheeplike to face Carruthers. The more experienced fans had made a rush for the door, only to find that the barman had bolted it shut the minute Carruthers had started to speak. The hardened campaigners hadn't moved a muscle but sat in resigned silence. They knew all too well that the barman would lock the door the moment Carruthers' tirade began. Sales of hard liquor sky-rocketed every time Carruthers monologues were delivered. In a room fifty miles from the hotel, three shadowy figures sat in the most exclusive of room parties - they were SMOFs so awesome that they had known three months in advance that Carruthers would speak. They smiled enigmatically at the very moment that Carruthers' sermon began. They were no fools.

"Science fiction fans," said Carruthers, "aren't the only people in the world whose minds are devoted to meaningless trivia, no matter how much yesterday morning's business session may have appeared to support such a contention. There are people in this world whose entire lives are so trivial that they make a virtue of the fact and centre their social and business lives on trivial facts. I speak here of high school teachers. Indeed, I know that no few of our number have, at one time or another, been high school teachers."

Ian Nichols' ears pricked up. "No Ian," digressed Carruthers, "I'm not going to tell you how many. Unless I've missed my guess, that's one of the questions in the category SADO-MASOCHISM AND OTHER FANNISH PERVERSIONS. As I was saying, teachers show an inordinate interest in trivia, so much so that they run trivia quizzes in their own time, after school, and put together teams to compete in fund-raising Trivia Quizzes across the country. As it happens, I know a few teachers - my research into the ales and wines of Australia has resulted in my spending quite a while in bars and you can't avoid teachers in bars. They claim the alcohol helps dampen the chalk dust in their lungs, and who am I to argue? It was in a convivial little bar in Burwood that I met Greg. He had just ordered a bottle of the 75 Chateau le Gopner and I couldn't resist the temptation to point out that the 74 was a far better vintage, due to the infestation of *Lytta vesicatoria* that had struck in that year, giving the vintage its particular body.

'Do you know much about wines?' he asked.

'There are those who trust my judgement,' I replied.

'Are you doing anything on Friday night?'

From some I would have taken this as a rather clumsy attempt to arrange a liaison, but there was an overt masculinity in Greg's manner that assured me that such was not his intention. I was also reassured by his possessive groping of the rather delightful young lady to whom he seemed reticent to introduce me.

'Why?'

'Well, we're fielding a team in the Australian Cirrhosis Support Group's annual fund-raising quiz and our wine buff can't make it - he rang last night to apologize and to get their address.'

As it happened, I didn't have anything to do that evening and so I joined the team. It was a formidable array of talent, consisting of teachers who spent their teaching hours forcing their students to research endlessly in their speciality subjects. They then subjected themselves to advanced pedagogical techniques known only to the inner echelons of the teaching profession. (Those techniques were never used in the classroom and were kept a closely guarded secret from the Ministry of Education. As Greg explained, techniques capable of educating children to university entrance standards within six months of schooling were the last thing teachers wanted made public. They had jobs to protect. Equally, parents would not be impressed by an education system that provided six months free baby-sitting rather than the customary twelve years.)

The evening was a whitewash. As we walked out to the dais to receive our prizes I heard someone from another team mutter 'Bloody teachers! You can even pick the subjects - the flashy one's the art teacher; the bearded one with the holes in his jumper is the chemistry teacher but I can't figure the one in the suit. He looks far too neat to be a teacher.'

I flashed the lady an appreciative smile.

Greg insisted that I go back to his place for the team's traditional post-quiz celebration, which I did and, from what I remember of the rest of the night, it was truly delightful. Champagne flowed freely as did little paper cylinders of certain substances. The conversations sparkled with nuggets of trivia, though when I'll ever get a quiz question about the diameter of the cucumber found wedged in a certain newsreader's anal sphincter or the exact wording of the radio-telephone conversation between Jeff Kennett and Andrew Peacock I don't know. My one clear memory is of my inviting the whole team to join me at the 1996 Olympicon II Trivia Quiz. I pointed out that the kudos from winning a

Worldcon Trivia Quiz had to be worth something.

Three weeks later, Greg contacted me again. He said that preparation was going to be needed and he'd called a council of war for the following weekend. He asked me to provide as much information about the quizmaster as I could.

Armed with copies of Ethel the Aardvark, Pink and Stungunn, I made my way to Greg's house. Greg led me into a dim room that seemed papered with pages from the World Book Encyclopaedia and Ripley's Believe It Or Not. In the centre of the room were five contoured chairs, arranged around a table, on which was the buzzer system from The Sale of The Century Game. Greg looked at it apologetically. "I got it as a consolation prize. I bombed out badly on my first night. Sure, I'd primed myself, but I didn't expect the answers to be so easy. It threw me. There I was, looking for the trick part of the question and, by the time I realized that there was no trick and that the answer was simple, the other bastards had beaten me to the buzzer. Peter has done some work on it though," he added, nodding to the tall young man sitting behind a Macintosh IIcx in the far corner of the room.

"Oh yes," he said. "Minor electronic modifications you understand. Boosters for alpha rhythms, coupled to a feedback device and piped into a LAN via the Mac."

I didn't understand all the jargon, but having been to several of Eric Lindsay's relaxacons - Eric's Blue Mountains Resort is pulling up to five hundred stressed out computer fans every weekend, I hear - I had picked up a smattering of the lingo. "Do you mean," I asked, "That your device can link minds?"

"More or less," said Peter. "It still crashes every now and then and you can't link the whole mind, just the surface layers, where the trivia is stored but that's all we need."

"Not quite," interjected Greg. "Which is why we need you here tonight. Once Peter establishes the gestalt via his box of tricks, it can be maintained with the aid of a few gizmos that he picked up in Tandy, but we need the right team. We have to have people who can cover every facet of the mind of the quizmaster. That's why I asked you to bring in the materials. While I get Peter to scan it and put it onto disk, let's go through a few of the characteristics we'll need."

"Okay," I said. "For a start, you'll need someone who reads lots of Cordwainer Smith, R.A. Lafferty and Orson Scott Card and who likes shared world anthologies. You'll have to have someone who's seen every episode of Red Dwarf and Star Trek the Next Generation and who's au fait with the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and most of the Anderson puppet stuff. You'll need an expert on Australian Fan History, but I think I can fill that particular gap. Then you'll need someone who has memorized all the nominees for the Hugo and Nebula Awards for the past twenty years. It won't be easy you know. You're only allowed four members to a team."

"Fine by me," said Greg. "Besides, remember there are those rote learning machines that guarantee 100% retention. I've got enough clout with the union to get four of those released to us for the duration."

For the rest of the afternoon, Greg and Peter grilled me for information about Alan which Peter fed into his computer as fast as his typing would allow. Peter also hooked me up to his gestalt linkage to get his parameters. The feeling was strange. It was as though I was trying to type up a fanzine with three other people looking over my shoulder and giving useful hints in the most annoying manner. On the edge on my subconscious, I caught the edge of a conversation

<<Do you think he'll fit in?>>

<<I'm not sure. Too early to say. He may leznerize.>>

After I'd been disconnected from the network, Greg expressed his doubts to me but I dismissed them. This was to be my team and I didn't even consider any other option. Over the next few weeks, Greg introduced me to the other two members of the team - Jenny, who had been on the team for the Cirrhosis Association Quiz and Paul, who had read most of the recent science fiction but who was, to my mind, far too young and idealistic for the cut and thrust of top level Trivia Quizzes.

"We've got to have him," said Greg, in response to my unspoken criticism. "The psychological profile we've developed for Alan suggests a degree of naive enthusiasm and we really can't enter a team of cynics if we're to stand any chance of duplicating his mind set. That is the most important thing I learned during my unfortunate experience on SALE OF THE CENTURY. Having the information is only the first step. You need to be ready to provide those aspects of the information that the quizmaster considers important and that is where the gestalt becomes essential."

Greg's demands became even stranger as the days progressed. He first asked for details on Alan's eating habits following which he provided each of us with diet sheets. Then he asked for some of Alan's toenail clippings and samples of his body fluids. The latter were not at all easy to obtain and it required the close co-operation of a female member of the M.S.F.C. whom I'd bribed with the offer of a banquet seat at the Olympicon Hugo presentations. Those samples went into liquid nitrogen storage and Maureen, a friend of Greg's, dropped by to pick them up. "Gene amplification technician," said Greg in reply to my uplifted eyebrow.

The day of our dry run, Greg provided us with a glass of the most disgusting liquid it's been my misfortune to sample. It tasted like one of John Packer's less successful attempts to duplicate the taste of Norstrilian beer. We then sat in the contoured couches, linked our specially designed hearing aids to the computer and Peter read to us questions that his computer had designed, based on the last five trivia quizzes that Alan had run for the M.S.F.C.. I couldn't shake the feeling that my brain was being invaded. There was a strange taste in my mind, consisting of a soft feminine touch that I identified as Jenny, a sweet innocence that seemed to be Paul and a hard-edged competitive animus that could only be Greg. As Peter read the questions, we threw answers to Greg with subtle movements of the finger combined with facial expression. If only Asimov had lived to see this, I thought. "Yes," said Paul. "He predicted something like this, didn't he? The Second Foundation's method of communication does work."

I'd thought we'd done well on the dry run. Of a possible fifty points, we scored forty nine. Greg was not at all pleased.

"I don't understand it," he said. "That was the easy set. We shouldn't have made any mistakes and we were at least five seconds too slow in completing the list of shared world anthologies featuring left handed mutant otters." He gazed at Paul in a way that would have been devastating even to someone without artificially enhanced empathic skills. "As for you Carruthers, how you stuffed up the question about the number of FFANZ votes received by Robert Muldoon in the 1992 race, I'll never know."

Peter ran us through the second set, but it was even worse. We made two mistakes and were lucky not to make another when Greg's misspelling of the name of one of Cordwainer Smith's underpeople accidentally yielded the correct answer.

"It's not good enough," said Greg. "I don't know what we're going to do about that."

"Well," I said, "your aura was dominating us both times."

"You mean you could distinguish it?" asked Greg.

"Certainly," I replied. "We all have distinct personalities within the gestalt."

"Not at all," said Greg. "We should all be thinking as one and the other individuals in the net should not be perceived as individuals. I think that's where our problem lies. Carruthers, you're just not melding properly. I'm afraid you'll have to go."

"But it's my team!" I protested.

"It was," he replied. There was a finality in his statement that did not brook argument.

"Very well," I said. "I suppose I'll just have to find myself another team."

Of course I didn't mention Greg's plans to Alan. To do so would have been the act of a bounder and a cad. Besides, I'd picked up a few hints from the team's more orthodox quiz techniques and I'd set about putting my own team together.

I've heard it said that Olympicon II was a disaster surpassed only by the Star Hiking Media Worldcon held at the Melbourne Townhouse. That could well be true. By the time that the con chairperson had alienated the rest of Australian fandom, even the Yanks had become suspicious and boycotted the convention in droves. (That Terry had chosen to have the convention on the same weekend as the NasFic didn't help matters.) Considering the events that were to unfold at the quiz, this was perhaps a good thing.

Due to a programming blunder, the quiz had been scheduled against the Hugo ceremonies and so only the most fanatic of trivia buffs had fielded teams. By chance, I'd selected people who weren't interested in the Awards ceremonies. Lucy, Bruce and Ian had nominated people to pick up their Hugos for them. The room, situated in the basement of the Victoria Hotel, was not the prettiest of sights, but the teams were determined to make the best of it. There had been little enough of interest in the convention to date, excluding the spectacle of a Worldcon Committee explosively decomposing, and the contestants were determined to enjoy the quiz at least. Alan's ability to run such events had been proven at the previous three Paul Linebarger Memorial Quiz Nights.

Our team was seated just across the aisle from Greg's. I was stunned to note that Greg had managed to lure Roger Dalroy out of gaffiation. Roger was in every way a fan of the Seventies and he'd pretty much lost track of fandom since Aussiecon Two, but there he was, his long hair draped around his shoulders like a shawl, though the tonsure, new since last I'd seen him, gave him an almost monastic appearance. He would certainly provide them with a first hand source for questions prior to 1975 and, if Greg was right about the pedagogue machines, they'd have primed him up with everything since from the pile of fanzines I'd passed to Peter while I was still a part of the team. I waved to Roger and he smiled politely back. The rest of his team was soaking in the ambience, checking out the answering sheets and, from the sour looks on their faces, trying to forget the taste of Maureen's DNA potion.

After the preliminary banter, Karen Pendergunn opened the first bracket of questions. There was no doubting that they were Alan's questions. He'd carefully balanced them, so that there was no more than one from each of his favourite categories in the bracket, but still we were asked for the name of the maiden aunt of Rod McBan the 151st, the identity of the winkle picker in Lafferty's only shared world story and the colour of the ignition button on the Red Dwarf escape pod. Fortunately our team was well prepared and, by the end of that round, were neck and neck with Greg's team, called "Baby Makes". (In a moment of pronounced

silliness, I'd called our team "The Midwich Bomb".)

The quiz continued and I could tell we had "Baby" worried. We were only one question behind them and there were three rounds left to go. The other teams had abandoned the quest for victory and were competing for the prizes for silliest answer. Two really stuck in my mind, not because they were particularly good, but because they seemed particularly silly.

Q: What was the name of Cally's race in Blake's 7?

A: The Avon Handicap.

Q: What is the name of the main character in Kate Wilhelm's short story 'Strangeness, Charm and Spin'?

A: The Quark with a coloured bottom.

Greg's squad were scratching behind their ears at what I saw, in the dim light, to be freshly healed surgical incisions. There was an intensity in their concentration and they were taking regular surreptitious swigs from reagent bottles. They spluttered over their answers to the spot questions between rounds, reciting sequentially but not in the manner of Donald's nephews. If you closed your eyes, it almost seemed as if only one person was talking. Ian muttered to me "Is it just my imagination, or are they getting a little fuzzy around the edges."

"Zarathustra no," I swore. "You're way off Beam, Ian." I nodded at his bottle of scotch. "Better lay off the Piper's."

"But Carruthers," said Lucy. "Ian's right. Look."

I turned to the table and, no sooner had I noticed the fuzziness that had caught Ian's attention, than the whole team began to blur. Clothing slid to the floor, only to be engulfed by pseudopods that sprouted briefly from a part of the team that had been Greg. There was a sibilant slithering as of trillions of cells reshuffling themselves. The heat in the room flowed in to join the fusion and the air grew cold. The entire mass coalesced, pulsating as though some parts were trying to resist the melding of four bodies, otherwise eager to catch up with their collective mind.

For a second, the mass heaved and I could think of nothing more than a colony of slime mould setting a spore capsule. I masked myself in my jacket, just in case the capsule should burst, spreading virulent spores throughout the room, but my precautions were unnecessary. What I had taken to be a spore capsule rippled, forming the prominences and depressions of a face. For a moment I thought I saw Greg's triumphant grin but then it seemed more like Paul's beneficent smile and then like Jenny's cheery laugh. Then, as it experimented with Roger's beard, the face seemed seized by a purpose. It blanked its features and, with increasing certainty, it reshaped itself into the puzzled smile that had hitherto only ever graced the features of Alan, the quizmaster. As if to order, the body reassembled itself, clothing itself in a semblance of Alan's grey trousers and cream shirt. There stood, in the remnants of the table, a four metre replica of Alan, but of an Alan somehow stockier and heavier, even in proportion to his new height. "Inverse square law I'm afraid, Carruthers," said the figure in a voice like Alan's, only more resonant and self-assured. "Enlarge a mouse to the size of an elephant and his legs would snap. I could do something to improve the resemblance, but it'd only be cosmetic."

He looked at Karen, and said, "There's not much point in continuing the quiz now." Without even looking at Karen's question sheets, he reeled off a string of answers and then turned to the original Alan, who was cowering behind the judges' desk trying to pretend that none of this was happening to it. "The answer to your tie-breaker would have been The Adjutant, except you hadn't written that

question down because you thought that no one would come within miles of Carruthers' team."

The figure turned to face the low doorway. "Hope you enjoy the rest of the convention," he said. "And I'm really sorry I ruined the quiz - a fit of youthful exhuberance I'm afraid. I'm a very young gestalt after all." With that, he left the room, leaving the rest of us to sit, slackjawed and questioning our own sanities.

Had Greg somehow slipped a hallucination drug into the airconditioning system? Were we all suffering bottle fatigue? For the briefest of moments, the assembled mass of quiz fandom had no answers but then Ian provided one. He uncorked his bottle, raised it and proposed a toast "To united fandom!" he cried.

"But not that united," came the counter toast."

"So there are those," said Carruthers, "who are wont to take their quizzes a mite too seriously. Still, it did have its good side. Among the flurry of post-convention fanzines that appeared, defending Australian fandom on the grounds that we didn't condone the actions on the Olympicon II committee in the least and that were were not now, nor had we ever been, members of the aforementioned committee, there appeared a gem of a zine. It was called LOUDIE and was edited, written and illustrated by one Dobyns Bennett although it seemed more the work of an entire stable of writers who somehow shared a worldview to an extent previously deemed impossible in fannish circles. Dobyns has never attended a convention, but I like to think of him as a very tall, ill proportioned bloke who has really got it all together."

With that, Carruthers downed his drink and left the bar.



A handy desk accessory for the Mac-using fanzine editor. It has been designed in consultation with members of FAPA (the Faanish Apple Publishing Association) and contains everything the would-be big name fan needs to publish zines of true fannish character.

The program comes on thirty 1.2Mb high density floppy disks, a 50Mb Rodime hard disk or as part of the "Legends of Fandom" CD-ROM. To run all features you will need a Macintosh configured with System 9.0.4(d) and at least 6Mb of RAM.

FEATURES

Ditmar Potential Meter. This program scans your fanzine for egoboo accorded to potential Ditmar voters, compares the issue to every Ditmar winning fanzine since 1969, subtracts the number you first thought of and displays the result as a variable speed spinning propellor beanie in the top right hand corner of the screen. Under strict test conditions, The Metaphysical Commentry #10 was run through the system and the resultant hurricane levelled half of Brunswick.

Fan Feud! When run, this sub-routine searches for the names of big name fans and appends to each name a suitably inflammatory epithet or adjectival clause. The sub-routine will also compose and mail condescending replies to any LoCs occasioned by this verbal abuse. Once initiated, this Fan Feud will run with minimal maintenance from the fan editor. (The upgraded version includes a parcel scanner and a bomb disposal robot.) (See page 15)

NOW WHERE WAS I?

Marc Ortlieb

Welcome to the first issue of Q36 in ages. Those of you who remember earlier issues may wonder why I've resurrected the name. It is appropriate. The idea of getting another ish pubbed was fueled by Danse Macabre, The Australian National Science Fiction Convention, held over Easter 1990 and so what more could a poor boy do than to roll away the stone, dust off the shroud and say "Well I'm back."

There were other prompts. The young Turks of the MSFC have been doing their best to make us dinosaurs feel that there's not much left for us but to wait for some palaeontologist to wire our bones together in a glass case, but Bruce Gillespie refused to lie down and wait for the sediment. He got up at the Australian Science Fiction Awards Ceremony, hoisted his Ditmar on high and uttered the rallying cry "New Wave Fandom one; Boring Old Farts Won!"

So what is Q36? It's a fannish genzine, of sorts, which means just about anything's grist for the mill. I prefer articles to reviews and will publish faanfiction, if it takes my fancy, but I shy away from fanfiction, unless I write it myself. I love articles about science or articles sending up science - even articles on the science in science fiction. Ages ago, Richard Faulder put out a fanzine called Xenophilia, devoted to alien biology; I wouldn't mind that sort of material. I'm also interested in the art and craft of writing - both professional and faan. Material on writing or on people's experiences with publishing fanzines would suit me fine. As a recent convert to the Macintosh computer, I'll no doubt produce the occasional article on using Macs to publish fanzines. I can't see myself keeping to regular publication dates and so I don't promise a scintillating letter column. A fanzine should maintain a frequent and regular schedule if it is to have a worthwhile lettercol. I don't mind letters replying to anything said in these pages, but I don't promise to print them. I pay for the zine and I choose the contents. The sorts of letters I am happiest with are those that can be read without having to skip back to the issue of the zine in question for cross-reference.

Q36 will be reasonably small. We can't afford to publish a large fanzine. More to the point, we can't afford to post it, and the postal costs are going up in September. I'd like to keep each issue below twenty pages. No more sixty page monsters for me.

Expect delays. Since I last published a generally available fanzine, Cath and I have joined the fannish population boom. We are the proud and very tired parents of Michael David Ortlieb, an exceptionally photogenic child, who turned one on April 18th this year. I have discovered, much to my surprise, that I like being a father. Every time I sneak time off to work on a fanzine, I feel guilty. I enjoy working on the zine, don't get me wrong on that, but I also love killing time with Michael, playing ball with him, keeping him out of verboten cupboards, reading to him, even feeding and bathing him. Changing his nappies I'll do - they're no worse than some of the Year Eleven English essays that I have to read.

To make life easier for me, computer-generated, pre-typed materials for Q36 would be a godsend and, to make things easier for writers, these can be sent to me - either on Macintosh disk, or as text files, via the EDMAC Bulletin Board, which I run for the Ministry of Education in my copious spare time. Use of EDMAC will have to be by arrangement, as I'll need to validate you as users of the system, but that's easy enough. The Board operates on 300/300, 1200/1200 and 2400/2400 and

can be contacted on (03) 822 4626.

This issue of Q36 is mainly in the first person singular. I was inspired by the fun I had at Danse Macabre to finish off a couple of ideas I had and then, rather than offer them to other editors, I thought I'd publish myself. I get very paternal towards articles I write and get rather jittery when I think of them, languishing in some other faned's "To be published" file drawer. (Are you reading this, Karen Pendergunn.) This paternalism does not extend to other people's writing. I hasten to add, which is one of the reasons I seldom actively solicit articles. I do though solicit covers, and Ian Gunn has produced a beauty. Thanks Ian. Further covers, featuring an exploding planet motif, are gratefully accepted but, before rushing Rotring to paper, be forewarned. Your artwork might moulder in the filing cabinet for full many years before seeing the light of day.

I slip far too easily into the role of critic and so I should place a disclaimer here. Anything nasty I say about another person's writing, professional or fan, is motivated purely by sour grapes. It usually means that the writing under consideration has somehow done something that none of my writing has done. That said, I pay for Q36 and therefore I feel quite at liberty to publish anything I want to. If I feel strongly about the merits of a story, I'll say so. Feel free to disagree with my evaluations. I'm not the very model of a modern science fiction fan. But I know what I like. If you don't like my soapbox, feel free to ignore it or, better still, build your own. There aren't enough fanzines in Australia at present.

And so we reach the end of the proem. Ortlieb, having reminded the audience of his fanzine philosophy starts thinking about the next one, which will feature his July Nova Mob talk and perhaps, even, the seventh Carruthers story. You never know. It's good to be back - I think.

A FEW OF THE SYSTEM MESSAGES SENT BY TOSCHE DURING THE TYPING OF THIS FANZINE

Are you sure you want to do that?

Yes

No

Cancel

Do you realize that Cath is going to kill you when she reads that?

Sure

Well...

Oops!!!

If you fondle my apostrophe key once more, you perverted son of a bitch, I'm going to send 240 volts straight through your balls.

Okay?

Plot Devices

Marc Ortlieb

1990 has started well for Australian science fiction. Australian writers almost scored the trifecta. There were Australian stories published in the January issue of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and the February and March issues of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Nothing like this has happened in recent memory. It makes the aspiring author wonder what sorts of stories are gaining such acceptance overseas. Closer examination of Greg Egan's "The Caress", Sean McMullen's "While the Gate is Open" and Terry Dowling's "Shatterwreck at Breaklight" may contribute to the development of an understanding of the question of what sells to U.S. publications.

All three stories rely on new technology or a technological device in their plot development. In Egan's story, it is a series of extrapolations on current genetic and bio engineering techniques; McMullen's story revolves around a device which allows people to see twenty five minutes into their own futures; Dowling's story involves a device which allows users to project images of themselves in such a way that the image tangible and is capable of doing most things that the original person could do. All three attempt to examine some of the consequences of the use of their devices and it is here that the stories diverge.

Egan's story is multi-levelled. On one level, it examines the consequences of fanatics gaining control of his extrapolated biological engineering. The narrator is Segel, a police officer in a world where biotechnology is already being used to design drugs that will make people better at their jobs. Would be law enforcement officers are given courses of growth factor drugs so that they are the right size for the job and are "primed" with mood altering drugs while on duty and "deprimed" after work. The parallels with Eastern block athletic training and Western workers who can't make it through the day without regular fixes of caffeine do not require elaboration.

On another level, the story concerns the boundaries between art and life. Lindquist, the villain of the piece, aims to recreate great works of art in real life. He is incredibly wealthy and goes to great expense to recreate a painting, Fernand Khnopff's "The Caress", which features a sphinx with a leopard's body and a woman's head. In the story, the boundaries between art and reality are continually blurred. What appears to be a rescue is certainly so on one level, but on another it is just a part of the priming of the canvas upon which the artwork is to be actualized. The theme is further developed when we discover that Lindquist himself is a piece of genetically engineered art, created by a method that invites comparison to pointillism.

On a third level, it is the story of Segel's own struggle to be himself, given a particularly difficult set of obstacles by his vocation, the occupational drugs and Lindquist's tampering with his mind and with his psyche. It would appear to be no accident that the title for the story is that of a piece of Symbolist art.

"The Caress" is certainly not intrinsically an Australian story. Its setting is transatlantic and its characters are equally suited to any late 20thC setting. Only Lindquist and Segel are drawn in any detail and they are moulded for their positions within the story. The other characters in the story, Marion, Segel's wife, and Catherine, the leopard/woman chimera, are necessary plot devices but are not shown in any great detail. The perfunctory treatment of Catherine is a weakness in the story, but one that is understandable, given that Egan seems more interested in following Segel's development than he does in the problems that

would be faced by such an obvious freak

What, then, is there about "The Caress" that makes it worth publishing. It's a catchy story, with two interesting characters, an interesting situation and a thematic depth that makes it worth re-reading. There are touches of cliché in the central characters and there are times when the plot appears to get a trifle exaggerated, but that can be forgiven in a symbolic piece. While not my favourite story *in that issue of Asimov's* - a place that has to go to Mike Resnick's "Bwana" it certainly compares favourably to the general content.

McMullen's story tries to tie together a couple of trendy scientific ideas - quantum physics and human spontaneous combustion - in a contrived tale of a South American dictator getting his come-uppance. It is difficult to analyse this story thematically. It fits more easily into the "gadget for gadget's sake" style of writing. McMullen postulates a device called a Quantum-Effect Gate, which appears to have something to do with replacing damaged nerve tissue with an electronic component. Exactly what a Quantum-Effect Gate is, and how it is supposed to do things is not at all clear. The key to the plot development is that people fitted with one of these devices experience what will happen to them up to twenty five minutes into the future.

The story might have something to do with the way that only Western society treats life as sacrosanct, as the discoverer of the effect goes to an unnamed Latin American country, where he can continue to experiment on people who are about to die so that he can find out more about the afterlife - it appears that the Quantum-Effect Gate can transcend the material universe and allows the subject to describe what happens to his soul after death. Unfortunately, this theme is never developed. The protagonist seems as amoral as the dictator for whom he conducts his experiments.

One of the problems with the story is that it seems assembled from one of those - "How to develop your character" lectures that one gets as a part of short story writing courses. Dr Hall is a paranoid hypochondriac, which gives one the potential for all sorts of interesting plot twists but they are never realized. The paranoia is used to explain why Hall disappears into South America in an attempt to keep the discovery and subsequent Nobel Prize all to himself. The hypochondria, a trait that one would have thought would have provided almost insurmountable obstacles for a surgeon, is used only to explain the curious liaison between Hall and the inventor of the Quantum-Effect Gate, the equally hypochondriac Dr Kaye Franklin, a virgin who has a huge collection of condoms. (Short Story Writing 2A - Lecture 3: Giving your characters interesting hobbies as a shortcut to characterization.) Their first sexual encounter was potentially for one of the funniest sex scenes in the history of science fiction but it was not to be. It is written off in the sentence "There are probably few things quite so preposterous as a pair of thirty-five-year-old virgin hypochondriacs trying to teach each other about sex." The two exchange germs, with nary a mention of the breaking open of one of Dr Franklin's precious collection of condoms. Dr Hall finds true love and is well on his way to rejecting his previously amoral stance and finding God in self-sacrifice.

There are a couple of cute ideas in the story, but it never penetrates below the level of "I wonder what would happen if I could make someone experience their deaths before they died." Its philosophy on the time travel implicit in the effect of the Quantum-Effect Gate is equally shallow. Asimov covered it all in "The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline" so long ago, and that story had the virtue of being funny.

As far as being Australian goes, there is not the slightest trace of any dinkum contamination in the story. The characters are stereotyped Americans, with a couple of stereotyped South Americans thrown in for luck. Oh yes, and there is a really good priest, courtesy of the Deus ex Machina Corporation. The settings are

hospitals and research establishments McMullen's nationality is acknowledged in the author background at the start of the piece, but that's about it.

McMullen admits that he works to formula in order to get his stories published overseas and he has to be congratulated for doing that, but I cannot for the life of me see anything in this story that merits further examination. Even the protagonist is totally unbelievable and unbelievable characters, though existing in real life, need far more rationale if the reader of fiction is going to willingly accept them. (I have to believe in Mengele - he existed, however much his atrocities have been embellished. I don't have to believe in Dr Hall.) I can't pick a story in the issue that clearly outshines "While the Gate is Open", but that's not to praise the story. It's not a good issue of F&SF.

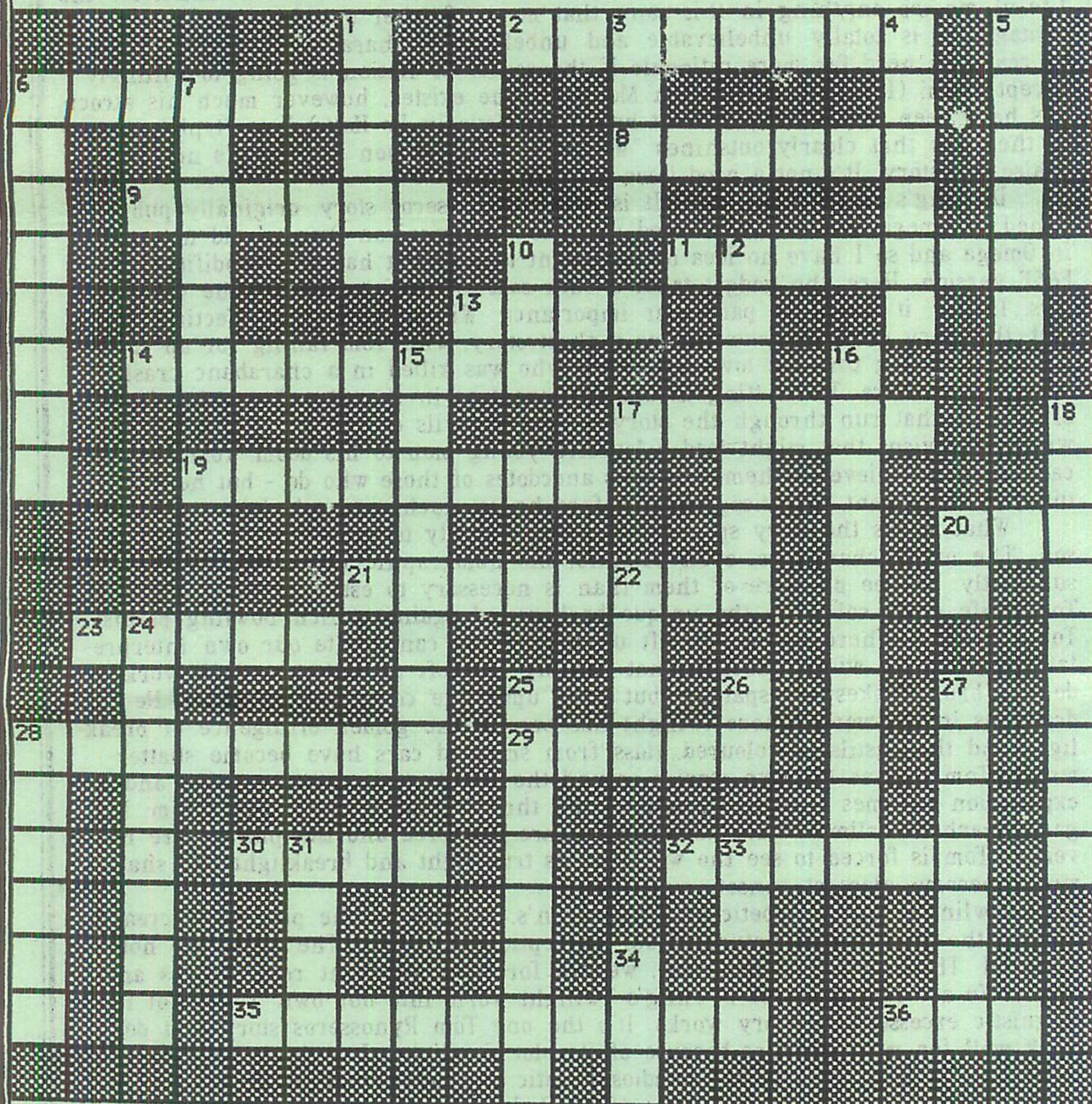
Dowling's story is not new. It is a Tom Rynosseros story, originally published in Omega, Australia's ill-fated reply to the American Omni. I did not read it in Omega and so I have no idea of the extent to which it has been modified for the F&SF version. Here, the gadget takes a back seat to the interplay of the characters. Indeed, it is not of particular importance. Without seriously affecting the plot, the story could be rewritten as a ghost story, with Tom falling for an image, later discovering that his love is a ghost who was killed in a charabanc crash fifty years before. The setting though is important in that it reflects the themes of illusion that run through the story. The dust devils of Twilight Beach are the will-o'-the-wisps that might lead a lovesick young man to his doom. Tom is more canny than to believe in them - he tells anecdotes of those who do - but he is captured by a moment that disappeared before he so much as reached it.

What makes the story special is Dowling's ability to show Tom as a real person. The other characters, even Seianne, his holographic temptress, are sketched succinctly; we see no more of them than is necessary to establish their places in Tom's life or to colour to the unique background against which Dowling paints Tom's portrait. There is enough left unsaid that we can create our own interpretations of scenes without feeling that Dowling has left us with too much work to do. His brushstrokes are sparing, but draw upon the common experience. He draws us into a world where twilight has become the golden effulgence of breaklight and the pastils of coloured glass from smashed cars have become shatterwrack. Tom weaves his own stories around the few facts in his possession and his exploration becomes ours as he follows the threads that Seianne leaves him. His game reaches a climax when the illusions are shattered and the players are revealed. Tom is forced to see the world in its true light and breaklight and shatterwrack become glass at sunset.

Dowling's story is poetic and, like Egan's, reflects on the process of creation and on the multifaceted nature of our perception of reality. The props are not essential. Through the dénouement, we are forced to confront reality, ours and Tom's. We are forced out of Dowling's Twilight world into our own. For all of its linguistic excesses, the story works. It's the one Tom Rynosseros story that does work well for me - perhaps because of its plot simplicity. I've tended to find those others that I have read to be too idiosyncratic. "Shatterwrack at Breaklight" is not my favourite story in this issue of F&SF. I found Nancy Etchemendy's "Shore Leave Blacks" more readable and Catherine Cooke's "The Bat-Winged Knight" more powerful but I don't think that Dowling's story is out of place in that company. The March F&SF is one of the better issues.

So how is Australian science fiction faring in the big-name magazines. Two out of three isn't bad and all three authors are proclaimed as Australians in the stories' blurbs. I'd like to think that, if we could get a few more writers of Egan's calibre submitting stories to Asimov's and F&SF, Australian writers might gain readier access to those markets. What makes the stories worth publishing? I can honestly say I don't know but then I regularly read stories in IASFM and F&SF that do not seem worth publishing. The editors can clearly see something that I can't, or perhaps they are just desperate for something decent to print and, if that is the case, what are you doing reading this fanzine? Get back to your writing. Get published. Give a poor critic the opportunity to pepper his buckshot around some more Aussie fiction.

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD - AUSTRALIAN FANZINES



This crossword is a piece of nastiness that I thought I'd inflict on the readers of Q36. Each clue relates to an Australian fanzine, past or present. On occasions, I've had to perform a no-no in crossword desing and split a word. Sorry about that. Answers in next issue. (That ensures that I get around to publishing Q36J.)

THE CLUES

ACROSS

2. Gauge how long it takes train to get from Flinders St to Flinders St. (8)
6. Is that Neil there? (9)
8. Mix up grit for example. (6)
9. Twice returns not out to say hello. (4,2)
11. Did you brag before your beers? (8)
13. See 20 across
14. Sailor backpedaled on a scheme. (8)
17. Teaches, males and hill. (6)
19. Bannister's love. (8)
- 20 & 13 Across. Article came undone (3,4)
21. A mistake plus another mistake without end. (8)
23. See 31 Down
- 28 & 28 Down. Equal to work unit over the breast of the queen. (8,6)
29. Your own first person objective. (5)
30. See 3 Down
32. Foreign flower. (6)
35. See 33 Down.
36. See 18 Down.

DOWN

1. See 18 Down
- 3, 10 & 30 Across. Border on the rug, right way. (7,4)
4. Solo immersed in basic measurement (6)
5. Claim on an Egyptian spirit. (6)
- 6 & 24. Sounds like grog article is hard yakka. (5,3,8)
7. Found in a gem. (6)
10. See 3 Down
12. Process the hen crud. (7)
13. Take the science fiction out of Bangsund periodical and reverse it. (2)
15. A relative of Dunning's? Without question, add I. (8)
16. Golfers cry "Adidas!" (10)
- 18, 36 Across and 1 Down. Point to a small meal Elliot then ignite. (9,3,5)
20. See 34 Down.
22. I hear it takes away Thyme editor's final letter. (4)
24. See 6 Down
25. It's a knockout Ben!
26. See 34 Down.
27. Wild oats planted by younger lads.

28. See 28 Across.

31 & 23 Across. The van is agro. John/Jeremy.

33 & 35 Across. Big talk on initially nothing without article. (2,10)

34, 26 & 20 A letter in Greek Church note. (3,4)



(Continued from Page 8)

Sup.Dic Fed up of your spelling checker going belly-up after its first thirty encounters with terms such as fiawol, apahack, pangalactic gargleblaster and fyle? Sup.Dic automatically uploads these and 2,500 other fannish terms to your dictionary and automatically flags and changes such common misspellings as "beer" and "fuck" to the fannishly correct "bheer" and "farque".

Interlin This feature inserts interlinations from a stock of thousands. Set on Random Pick, it will mix and match, resulting in such new linos as "It's all Yngvi's fault" and "Handfield is a louse."

Typo This feature gives your fanzine that authentic home-typed atmosphere, by selecting certain perfectly spelled words and inserting letter transpositions, extra letters or, when set to maximum, entire unedited lines from The Matalan Rave.

FAAN.DA is available for the usual - i.e. more than you can afford.

THE PLANT

It's a good thing that there aren't many people around at six thirty of a Friday morning. It saves me no end of embarrassment. Six thirty usually sees me detrammed by an eastern suburbs primary school just opposite the police station. I wait until the tram glides off towards the brightly lit junction and then I start the twenty minute walk through the backstreets towards school. Sometimes I sing and my step is altogether too light for someone heading for work through autumn's crisp morning air. I am one of those foolish people who likes the darkest hour before the dawn. I walk by the flats and businesses and houses and think about those people already working, those who are getting ready for work and those who are still dead to the world, subconsciously cringing at the thought of the alarm that is about to rip into their sleepy cocoons.

I don't know why it was that the school flower bed caught my attention but, had one of the early shift on the building site opposite glanced over at the right moment, they would have seen the classic double-take. I doubled back to take a closer look at the leaves and still wasn't sure. They were the classic five-bladed, serrated shapes I'd come to know, but what the hell were they doing in a primary school flower bed? The plant itself wasn't taller than about thirty centimetres and it looked rather straggly but I was certain it wasn't that strange shrub that Gary Mason used to keep in his rumpus room to shock the visitors. I realized that I was drawing attention to myself and so I quickly grabbed a sprig of leaves for further examination. I should have known better. The stem was tough and wiry and gave me a slight rope burn as I pulled it from the plant. Another piece for my taxonomic jigsaw puzzle. Richard Thompson's "Poor Will and the Jolly Hangman" started going through my mind.

Once off the main drag, I paused by a streetlamp to further examine my acquisition. The top leaves were pale green with a delicate purple tracery around the margins. The lower leaves were a darker green and displayed that shape so beloved of manufacturers of sterling silver jewelry. There was an entry in my mother's old gardening book - "a hardy annual that is very ornamental in the garden in summer . . . It is useful for making a quick-growing summer screen or in groups of three to five plants in a large border or shrubbery." No wonder the Knights who say 'Ni' were so insistent on a shrubbery.

I continued through the sleeping streets, the spray of leaves still in my hand, until I thought how silly I was. Strange bearded men with backpacks, carrying herbaceous substances aren't as fashionable as they used to be, especially when they are respectable teachers at state schools. I found a yuppy garden, not a difficult task in the backstreets of Camberwell, and tossed the weed away.

I spent much of the rest of my walk to school pondering on how the plant had come to be there in the first place - some poor youth tossing a half-smoked cigarette into the flowers upon the approach of Mr Plodd perhaps, or maybe just someone who, on an artificially induced flight of whimsy, decided that the ideal place to plant his seed was just across from the police station.

By Friday evening the whole episode had taken on a surreal quality, to the point where I wasn't sure whether or not what I remembered had actually happened - particularly embarrassing, as I had already recounted the story to a couple of my more liberal teaching friends. Could it have been one of those strangely realistic dreams, like the one where I'm walking along the beach and I come upon thousands of golden doubloons that the tide has just washed clear of the sand? Over the weekend, the garden bed grew in my memory until it was just too solid; the purple tracteries seemed too vivid and I almost convinced myself that the plant was a relic of my younger indiscretions. At the same time I was possessed by an nagging wish to grab the car and drive down to see if my plant was really there.

On Monday morning, I stepped from the tram and there it was, slightly shabbier than my memory had painted it, but palpably there. It's still there. I nod to it every morning, but haven't been tempted to visit it since. Memories shouldn't be dwelt upon.

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For millennia, the secrets of the Eludium Q36 Explosive Space Modulator were lost to the galaxy.

Solar Systems were forced to exist without those terrible disruptions caused by the unexpected explosions of their constituent planets.

Such as the discovery of the Eludium Q49 Explosive Space Modulator, which devastated the city continent of Mandring

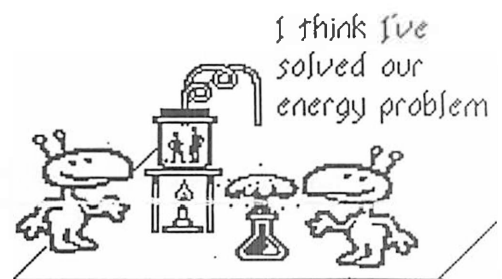


TOSCH

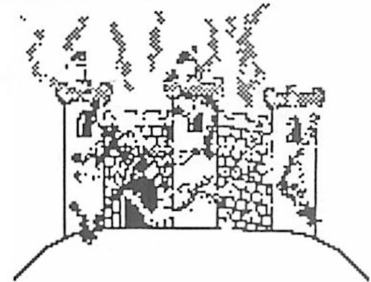
Or the building of the Eludium Q37 Explosive Space Modulator, which did no good whatsoever for a small dunny just this side of Innaminka



There were occasional false alarms.



The invention of the Q49a Explosive Space Modulator, which annihilated the ancient fortress of Feurvixen



In general though, the galaxy continued to exist, quietly and comfortably, until a wave pattern of Morphic Resonance spread through its Western spiral arm.

