



SKYPECAPTAIN PLOKTA *and the* TOMORROW

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This is issue 32 of *Plokta*, edited by Steve Davies, Alison Scott and Mike Scott. It is available for letter of comment (one copy to Alison's address is fine, we pass them over to each other), trade (copies to each of our addresses if possible, please), contribution, editorial whim, or for a festering cherub.

Steve Davies

Alison Scott

Mike Scott
Moving soon! Watch this space

locs@plokta.com
www.plokta.com

The *Plokta News Network* is at
www.plokta.com/pnn/

The cabal also includes Giulia De Cesare, Sue Mason, Steven, Marianne and Jonathan Cain.

Cover by Alison Scott

Art by Sue Mason (2, 7, 11, 12, 16), Alison Scott (5, 16)

Photos by Giulia De Cesare (3), Pat McMurray (4, 5), Alison Scott (6), Steve Davies (7), Mike Scott (8), David Gray (9), Jon Singer (16)

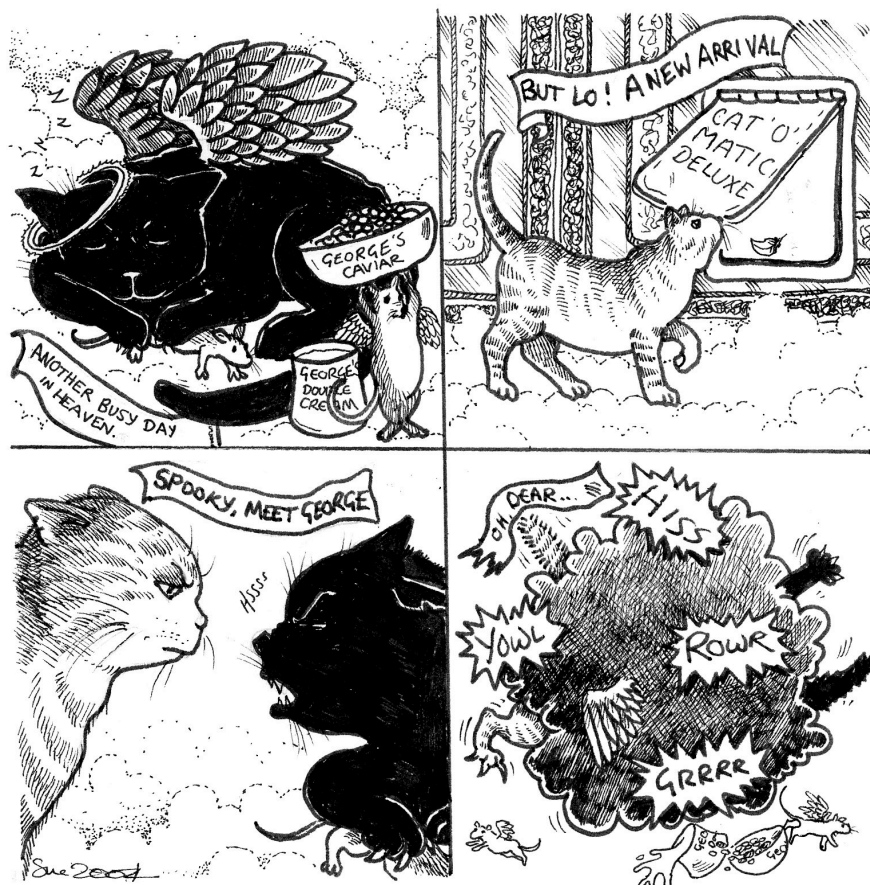
Contributors

(So many that there's no space for addresses.)

John Berry
(Attributed to) Tom Holt
Lucy Huntzinger
Rob Jackson
Pat McMurray
Jo Walton
Jaine Weddell

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Editorial

HERE we are again in the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Well, perhaps not mellow given Jonathan's propensity for crying, screaming and opening doors that should, quite definitely, stay closed until the person behind the door has finished their business. That child is developing some very strange behaviour patterns—not that there's anything unusual about that around here, but we usually associate such behaviour with the corset-wearing segment of the population.

On the other hand, fruitfulness has been very much on our collective minds. Yesterday was the local museum's celebration of Apple Day. We went along, determined to rescue the poor abused PowerBooks from being covered in toffee, or squeezed for their juice, but unfortunately the apples involved seemed to be more of the organic variety. Tasty, but you can hardly get OS 9 to run on a Ribstone Pippin at more than a crawl, let alone OS X. We made up for this by arranging our own version of Apple Day, as you can see from the photo at the bottom of the page.

The mists descended last night, somewhere after the second bottle of sake. Mellow isn't quite the word, to be honest. There we were, screeching with laughter as we looked at embarrassing wedding photos and wondered how anyone could get away with hairstyles like that. Well, we *were* younger then.

On the coffee table as we write is the latest issue of *Chunga*. As these things do, this includes a 6-year old trip report from Ulrika O'Brian that describes Alison as "festeringly cherubic". Our memories must be worse than we imagined. It's true that the ranks of fallen angels must have included some cherubs (well, according to *Lucifer*), but she isn't that spherical. Alison is currently recovering from an operation, which has left her unable to perform all sorts of ordinary

household tasks that she doesn't fancy. Her sphere (sorry) of activities is restricted to lounging on the sofa, playing video games and eating chocolate. We feel confident this will render her spherical in very short order.

We are also up to our necks in putting together the Fan programme for Interaction in 2005. We are communicating via transatlantic phone call with Ian Stockdale, the new programme supremo, and initiating him into the mysteries of superfluous technology. Hopefully, being in California will render him immune to Alison's degenerative Kirlian aura. We are looking for help of every kind in this. If anyone has ideas for programme items, wants to volunteer, has interesting photos of members of the Interaction committee in compromising poses or would just be happy to take the whole thing away from us, please get in contact at the usual address. Right now, we're planning on just ignoring the existence of the rest of Interaction and running plokta.con 3-and-a-bit in the Moat House Hotel. But maybe not with pirates this time.

Speaking of Worldcons, we failed to win a Hugo at Noreason 4, for the sixth year in a row. Sue also missed out this year following last year's stunningly unexpected win.

Half of the Cabal are on the move. Steve and Giulia want to move a couple of miles out of Reading towards Tilehurst, if they can persuade their buyer to do something radical like buying their house. Mike is leaving his Fortress of Solitude in Croydon, and he and Flick are buying a Duplex of Duality in Rotherhithe. Look for CoAs next issue.

As you may have guessed from the illustration on the contents page, Sue's cat Spookie died a couple of weeks ago, at the ripe old age of 22. She consoled herself with a shiny new iBook to sit on her lap and purr.



Photo by Giulia "Windows holdout" De Cesare

BOLLOCKS

Middle Plokta Revisited

She raised herself up to her full height of 4'11" (4248 points). "I cannot be harmed by any weapon wielded by man. Or woman. Or hobbit. Or little fuzzy thing from Alpha Centauri. You're not going to get me that way. And what do you mean I look like a festering cherub? Oooh, hang on a minute, the runes on that sword look interesting, is that a distressed uncial? Stop waving it around so much, it's making it hard to check Identifont... arrrrgh."

And thus passed the Font Queen of Angmar.

"I remember Rumble shagging Flick in the middle of the living room floor after she'd been neutered"

Tat-on-a-Stick

Stuck for the perfect Christmas present for the Fan Who has Everything? How about a unique, handcrafted piece of fan art? On a stick. Ok, well, not on a stick, but on a t-shirt, bag or other handy consumable?

The new *Plokta* cafePress shop is up and running, and you can visit it at http://www.cafepress.com/plokta_tat. There you'll find a variety of designs to start you off, but we actually want input from you. Email us, at merchandise@plokta.com, to let us know what *Plokta* art you'd like to see on items, and we'll put up a link and tell you where to find it. We can personalise items, but only *before* you buy them. In other words, Do Not Buy The Online Samples unless you want things that are pre-personalised for Dr Plokta. Email us, we'll design something personalised for you or your mates, and we'll send you a link to the personalised version. A con book bag with your name in great big letters? A mug with your <plokta.con 3> badge on it? Your Tat is limited only by your imagination.

We can use pretty much any art that's ever appeared in *Plokta*, except where we've violated somebody's intellectual property. (Would we do a thing like that?) Ask if you're not sure.

The Big Pineapple

“YOU WANT to see *what* when you come to Queensland?” says my sister-in-law Sue. “You come all the way to Australia and you want to see *The Big Pineapple*. Why on earth do you want to see that?”

Sue is quite fond of her strange Anglo-Irish in-laws, but she’s also very Australian. And now she wants to know why I’ve chosen *The Big Pineapple* out of all the delights of Queensland as the one place I would like to see. She *really* wants to know—this is obviously one of those crucial relationship moments.

So with my usual aplomb and cool I stammer, “uh, it’s in my guide book, and it looked interesting.” “Uh-huh,” she says, clearly unconvinced, “*The Big Pineapple*, we’ll see what we can do.”

She’s obviously willing to forgive, but never to forget. She likes Queensland, but seems to have what appears to be a fairly common low opinion of the locals, that’s shared by many of the people who have moved here from the big Southern cities—they’re all a bit slow around here, would be the nicest way of putting it. Think New Yorker moving to Alabama, or Londoner moving to Somerset. But still, wanting to see *The Big Pineapple* sounds a little too much like dissing her adopted state, new home and beloved country.

What I should have said is that I’m just enthralled by Australia, and for me the first stage of fascination is the visual—the architecture of the houses, the sculptured groups of animals everywhere—sheep in Canberra, pigs in Adelaide, kangaroos in Perth—the magnificence of the public architecture—the Harbour Bridge, the New Parliament, the DNA tower, and, and this fantastic obsession with the BIG. Australians do BIG things—fruit, animals, other things—they’re advertising, tourist destinations, just plain fun.

Anyway, Sue says, “Well, if *you* want to see the Big Pineapple, we’ll *have* to make sure we see *The Big Pineapple*.” It’s probably at this point I should be starting to worry...

I fly up to meet them at Maroochydore Airport. “So, what would you like to do while you’re here?” “Hang out, get warm, I have to go to Brisbane for the day on Sunday for some stuff with friends, I’d like to go see the Big Pineapple—apart from that, no worries.”

Sue looks at me—“Again with the Big Pineapple, huh? OK we’ll sort *that* out.” Even Mr Sensitivity here thinks ‘Scary Australian Women—don’t push your luck on *The Big Pineapple* issue.’

“Right”, says Sue “we’ll show you some of Noosa.” Noosa is difficult to describe. It’s a little like Puerto Pollensa on Mallorca—which is very helpful to the one or two of you who have *seen* Puerto Pollensa on Mallorca. And for the rest of you, use your imaginations; and those of you without imaginations, just google.

So, Noosa. It’s warm—have I mentioned it’s warm, really warm, in the 20s in the first week of a Southern Winter... On this first day I don’t get to see much of Noosa, I get driven around a bit and shown things, which I’m finding is a good way to start in a new place on a fan fund trip—sit back let someone else do the driving and stare out the window at the interesting world going by.

We get up the following day, a Saturday and we’re discussing what to do that day. Sue looks at me and says “Maybe we could do the Big Pineapple today? On the other hand, it’s Eumundi market.”

Eumundi market is quite a famous market, supposed to be one of the biggest in Australia. I get dropped off

while David and Sue go to do real shopping, so I wander around for a couple of hours, checking out stuff. It has an arts and craft market, with some interesting stuff, and fairly light on tourist tat. I have coffee, buy some presents for people, hang out a bit. There are no books, but apart from that it’s an interesting market.

Sunday morning dawns bright and early, and Sue says “so you’re going to see your friends in Brisbane then?” And I think “well, I’ve never met any of these people, I know almost nothing about them, we just share the same weird sub-culture”, and I say “Yes.”

I spend that Sunday being driven up and down to Brisbane by Heather Gent, I have lunch in a sushi train restaurant with Erika Maria Lacey, I go for pancakes and Worldcon discussion somewhere else with the Fantastic Queensland people, I go bookshopping in Brisbane, including a fantastic sale in Dymmocks, and Archives Fine Books, though Gaslight Books is shut. Generally a good time is had by all, though my throat hurts by the time we got back. There is this awful performance fear, being a GUFF delegate, that I never really get over—my god, what if they don’t like me, or think I’m boring, or strange or something. This day is the day I get to see a highway sign saying “The



The Big Pelican in Noosa

Big Pineapple” as we drive by it in Heather’s mini-van. Yes! I’ve seen the highway sign to the Big Pineapple!

Monday swings round in its usual inevitable fashion, and we climb Mount Timberwah, go to Boreen point, find out that their mountain is actually Mount Cooroy—they don’t own it, they just live in the shadow of it—and do some more tourist type stuff. We’re running out of time, and I’m thinking we’re not going to see the Big Pineapple. However, I decide this is keeping mouth shut time.

So it’s Tuesday, my last full day in Queensland. Sue and David have to go to Brisbane on business, so I decide to go to Tewantin, catch the ferry down to Noosa and back, and generally hang out a little.

Tewantin has a couple of shops and a nice café, where I hang out and await the next ferry. The ferry is a river ferry, which goes a few k along the river down to Noosa. You get some guided tour stuff, but not so much as to be annoying, and the pilot on the way down has a pet parrot, who sits on his shoulder.

I like the story about Goat Island, Cow Island and Sheep Island. They were so called because they were used to quarantine goats, cattle and sheep in the 19th Century. Or rather Cow and Sheep Island were. Whoever surveyed Goat Island did it at high tide, and it took the goats about six months to figure out the water was shallow enough to walk through at low tide. And once one knew, they all knew, and thousands of goats escaped into the wild. And despite best efforts only a tiny fraction were recovered! So, don’t survey your

quarantine island at high tide, and expect to keep clever critters like goats there.

Noosa is where I nearly get attacked by a kookaburra. I’m sitting in a park, having an ice cream, and I see a bird. It’s a kookaburra, so I decide to see if I can get a good picture without frightening it off. So I take out my mobile phone / camera and start inching closer to the bird, trying not to frighten it off. My mobile phone is a good camera, but you have to be quite close to get a detailed photo. I get closer and closer, and I’m thinking that if I can just not frighten this bird off, I’ll get a damn good photo.

And then I look in the kookaburra’s eyes. The kookaburra isn’t feeling frightened. He’s looking at me with the light of battle in his eyes. If I get six inches closer this tiny little bird is going to attack me. I take my photo and back away carefully and quietly. This is not the first time I’ve been threatened by Australian wildlife and it won’t be the last, but this incident really brings home the Pratchett truism that the only safe animals in Australia are *some* of the sheep...

Wednesday is the day I’m flying away, but it’s also David’s birthday, so we go out for dinner to a restaurant somewhere on Tuesday night. Sorry to be so vague, but I have no idea where it is. As we walk out the door, Sue says to



Killer Kookaburra

me, “We’ll pass the Big Pineapple on this trip, won’t have time to stop, but at least you’ll *see* it...” She isn’t being *actually* untruthful.

So we drive down the motorway, take an exit and drive for miles over the mountains. We’ve managed to take completely the wrong exit to wherever it is we’re going. I sit in the back and keep my mouth shut, while everyone else pulls Sue’s leg about taking the wrong exit. I watch the sun go down and silently give up on any hope of seeing The Big Pineapple.

So we have a nice dinner, somewhere in Queensland, and then we all pile back in the car, in a merry mood. And Sue says, “Now, Pat, at last you get to see the Big Pineapple—it’s only a couple of k back to the highway and the Big Pineapple is between here and there—haven’t got time to stop though.”

So, we kind of bounce along in a very merry and jolly way, “you’ll see it in a minute”, “we’re nearly there”, “round the next corner”, “keep an eye out on your left”, “look, there it is!”

And there it is, a black blob in the darkness, unilluminated, unclear, impossible to see—it could be the Big Echidna or the Big Office Block for all I can see of it—but the promise has been kept, I have seen the Big Pineapple, at night, from a distance. And provided hours of entertainment in the process for my in-laws and various random Queenslanders.

Fare thee well, Queensland. I look forward to returning some day, and seeing that damn Big Pineapple by daylight.

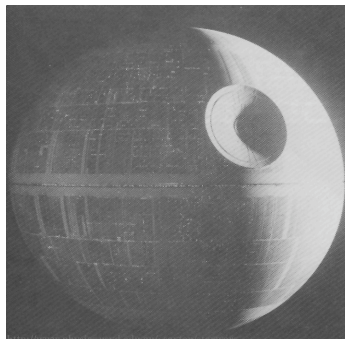
—Pat McMurray



BOLLOCKS

Separated at Birth

Seaman Dop writes, "Have you noticed the strange resemblance between the Death Star and the moon Mimas? Could we possibly be about to be vapourised?"



Moon of Saturn



Evil battle station

"I can't find my
camouflage jacket"

Native Habitat



Susanna Clarke spotted recently as she tries to sign Every Single Copy of her massive print run. Congratulations—it's not every day that one of our readers becomes the Next JK Rowling.

Dilemma of a Horn

WITH THE evacuation of British forces and their allies from Dunkirk in 1940, the British Government realised that there would be a long haul before the war ended. A shrewd minister reckoned that if cadet forces were formed for the army, navy and air force, for young men aged between 15 and 18, and they received training for two or three nights per week, why, when they were 18 years old, and due for 'call-up' for the forces, they would be well-trained and would therefore become operational much more quickly.

Being an avid aviation enthusiast, and wishing to join the Royal Air Force as a wireless operator/air gunner, I naturally fell for this cunning subterfuge, and on my 15th birthday became a really keen member of The Hall Green, Birmingham, Air Training Corps Squadron.

I quickly became adept at Morse Code, I knew even more about aircraft recognition than the instructors, and invariably (but not always) managed to turn in the required direction during Drill practice.

Of course, being of a shy and naive disposition, all this hectic air cadet training meant that my concentration was lacking elsewhere—girls were a complete mystery to me, and this was exemplified during a week's visit to an operational Royal Air Force station south of Stratford-upon-Avon. Cadets who stayed at the RAF station were promised at least one flight in an aircraft—Oxfords and Wellingtons were based there—but perforce had to perform mundane duties whilst at the station, such as cleaning toilets and peeling potatoes.

An aggressive RAF sergeant paraded us one night and asked for volunteers to work in the cookhouse to peel potatoes. The cadets were all Birmingham boys, and therefore no volunteers offered their services. Actually, I felt sorry for this poor NCO because no one took up his request, so I gingerly stepped forward to save him further embarrassment. The only other volunteer was older than me (I was a virginal 16 years old), whom I would normally have assumed to be more shrewd and careful.

We were marched to the cookhouse and the older cadet slapped me on my back.

"Shrewd devil," he hissed.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said primly. "It's just to give me a rest from hearing all the chaps in the barrack room saying all those nasty things about girls."

"Crafty blighter," he smiled knowingly to me, and I admit I was bewildered.

We sat either side of a couple of hundredweight of spuds and I started to scrape like mad. The other cadet whistled happily as he carved lumps out of the potatoes.

"Been here before?" he asked conversationally.

"No," I said.

He sneered. "Pull the other leg," he gritted.

"No, honestly I haven't," I said coyly, "have you?"

"I come down every time a visit is advertised," he smiled. "Never missed one yet."

"You must know a great deal about aeroplanes," I suggested.

"Aeroplanes? Aeroplanes? Who is interested in aeroplanes? I come here to see the WAAFs."

"WAAFs?" I spluttered. "But those are girls, aren't they?"

"Clever basket," he said to me giving me a nudge with a knowing elbow.

Honestly, I began to think he was mentally deranged. Then a door opened, and a pretty head peered round it.

"Want a cup of tea?" she asked.

"Yus," said my friend, and he held up two rampant fingers which I presumed to be an intimation that two cups were required.

When she closed the door my friend asked me a strange question.

"Who told you they've nothing underneath?"

"Who hasn't got anything underneath?" I asked innocently.

"Cut the sarcasm," he said, & the door re-opened and the WAAF swayed in, wearing a white overall, clutching two mugs of tea.

"You can come into the kitchen for bread and butter," she said, blinking her eyelashes and looking at my friend.

"Is there another WAAF in there?" asked my friend.

She nodded.

"Thanks for the tea, we'll be in in a moment," he panted.

When she'd gone he pulled out a penny. He flipped it.

"Heads," I said.

"Hard luck," he hissed, not looking at which side the coin had settled, "that one's mine."

I followed him into the kitchen, because that's what his arched thumb indicated.

Mine was a plump girl.

I walked over to her and asked for my bread and butter.

"You're a cool one," she said, "who told you?"

"Who told me what?" I breathed.

"Who told you we wear nothing underneath?"

She opened the three top buttons of her overall and gave me a peep.

I was flabbergasted.

She put her arms around me.

"We don't wear anything underneath because it's so terribly hot working in the kitchen all day... it makes us sweat and it's very unhygienic... but I'd still like to know who told you?"

My friend turned his head, hair disarrayed, forehead covered in perspiration.

"Watch that one," he said to the plump WAAF. "Dead cunning he is... Ooh, he's dead crafty."

We were on parade next morning.

"Two volunteers wanted for 'circuits and bumps' on an Oxford," requested the Sergeant.

No one stepped forward, so I fancied that even a monotonous flight in an Oxford twin-engined trainer would look good on my 'flights obtained' card, so I stepped in front of the Sergeant. One other cadet did. He whispered to me, "You cunning blighter."

The reason no other cadets had volunteered was because there was every chance of a few cadets being chosen to get a long-distance flight in a Wellington Mark V

bomber. The Oxford flights merely entailed taking off and landing again several times.

The other volunteer was the cookhouse gigolo.

"Who told you about this little lark?" he grinned.

"Oh, I was getting fed up with waiting for a Wellington flight, so I thought the Oxford was better than nothing."

"How do you manage to keep a blank expression when you crack a joke," he said. "Who told you that on the Oxford flight a WAAF fits your parachute?"

He gave me a knowing wink, a mute acknowledgement, so it seemed, of his appreciation of some particular prowess he seemed to think I possessed.

Personally, I thought parachute fitting to be unrefined torture. This amigo of mine must have been a masochist. My parachute was obviously designed to fit a dwarf, and the WAAF who kitted me out seemed to find delight in threading the two straps, which dropped down my back, between my legs and pulling like mad. I finished up clinging to one of the hangar roof supports.

On the other hand, my friend seemed to derive some sensual pleasure in this rather uncultured activity. He didn't even want to go on the Oxford flight.

On parade again... The Sergeant asked for two volunteers to wash dishes in the NAAFI canteen. My friend leapt forward and turned his head, looking wildly for me. I stayed in the back row, avoiding his darting eyes. They seemed to hint that, wherever I was, I shouldn't miss this...

Sometimes, I wonder even now if it would have completed my education.

—John Berry

BOLLOCKS

9 Out Of 10 Cats

I'm a sucker for Sunday supplements. I love to spend a lazy day drifting through trivia about celebrities and their clothes, reading weird and offbeat articles. And they don't come much more offbeat than the Sunday Times' recent offering in its regular column, "A Life in the Day". They featured an engaging elderly chap called Bill Bass, who lectures at the University of Tennessee. Steve had his doubts, given the name. Bill Bass. Billy the bigmouth Bass? However, as I had never heard of Billy the Bass, I read on, undeterred.

This gentleman is regularly called upon by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation when it finds dead bodies, and in the course of his work, maintains a "body farm", three acres of scrub surrounded by a high fence, and containing many corpses in varying states of decay, all for the purposes of research.

The gem that caught my particular attention was the following, in a discussion of how bodies may be chewed and scattered by various animals. I'll let good old Bill tell it in his own words:

"Cats prefer lips. The body starts to putrefy within a minute or two of death, and bubbles of gas come up through the mouth. The smell is unbelievably horrible, but cats seem to like it."

Now, my darling Shadow is a very affectionate cat. Whenever he can reach, he will come and sniff delicately at my mouth. And all this time, I was thinking, aww, how sweet, little cat kisses.

Whereas, in reality, he's thinking, "Lips, give me lips, nice, juicy lips..."



Cats just wanna have fun (and eat your lips when you die).

—Giulia De Cesare



Scream If You Want To Be Sick

SOME people questioned the wisdom of holding the a convention in a resort where the sea is the colour and consistency of hot fudge sauce, the tourists have IQs comparable to juvenile gorillas, and you can't walk more than twenty yards without encountering a shop selling red candy penises in at least three sizes. Personally, I was always up for Eastercon in Blackpool, for one simple reason:

Fast, scary fairground rides.

After a token attempt to attend the Con on the first day, on day two I accompanied various like-minded individuals down to the Pleasure Beach. This is not a beach at all, but rather an attempt to cram as many rides as possible into the smallest space, giving a rainforest-like stratification effect. The canopy is the realm of high fliers like Revolution (loops the loop, then goes backwards), Valhalla (involves a lot of steam and water) and of course The Big One, whose awesome initial slope and near vertical drop can be seen from most of Lancashire. At the next level down are even more rollercoasters, including The Grand National (two cars racing each other, lots of brain rattling 'jumps'), the Avalanche (a dry bobsleigh run with no actual tracks as such) and the original roller coaster (tame but plush, and pleasingly lacking in safety features). The lowest level sports a ground cover of crazy golf, narrow gauge railways and unrealistic fibreglass statues.

The general consensus is that all of us, even Dr Plokta, should ride The Big One at least once. Dr. P's fears are not allayed by the observation, whilst in the queue, that what we had initially taken for a camera flash on the highest point of the ride appears to be an aviation warning light. Finally, after three quarters of an hour of queuing, we are rewarded with seventy four seconds of screaming speed. Oh yeah.

For the hardcore adrenalin junkies, once is not enough. On the second run I sit next to Flick, who Knows No Fear. As we near the top of the excruciatingly slow climb up to that first buttock-clenching drop, I notice that she is not joining in the general nervous frenzy of grabbing for rails, bracing legs against sides and crossing oneself.

'Er, Flick, Aren't you going to hold on?'

'Nope. More fun this way.'

'Are you sure that's such a good ideeeeeeeee!'

When I regain the ability to speak and move (about four seconds and a third of a mile later) I too let go. And she's right. Much more fun if you don't hold on. By the time we leave I can feel my brainstem swelling dangerously under the relentless g-forces of many different roller coasters. On returning to the Morlock-infested kitsch of the Winter Gardens I anaesthetize myself with a couple of bottles of red wine. Then the adrenalin crash hits.

Feeling mildly fragile the next day, I find time to go up Blackpool Tower (again with the penis theme, this time in metal) and stand on the glass floor at the top over a 300ft drop. Yes, it's a scary view but where's the motion? I need more speed.

The next day, I get it. Accompanied by Flick plus token men, I visit Blackpool's south pier, home of the sky coaster or, as Flick refers to it, 'the giant swingy thing'. The principle is similar to the children's swings found in playgrounds. However, instead of sitting on a plastic seats the riders are strapped into a harness and hang face down, and to get maximum swing the rider(s) start by being hauled up on a winch to the maximum extent of the swing. Oh, and it's rather bigger. We are rapidly raised to a height where Dr Plokta and Liam (who have elected to stay below and guard the Y chromosomes) are reduced to worried looking faces over foreshortened shuffling feet.

Once at the top we wave enthusiastically. They wave back, rather uncertainly. Then Flick pulls the release toggle.

There is just enough free fall to wonder if I am, in fact going to die, and then we're flying in a huge arc out over the sea, arms outstretched like the Superman sisters. And we're swinging, over the pier, over the sea, over the pier.

When the swinging subsides to a gentle rocking the attendant has to shout to attract our attention as we are so busy gossiping and pointing at stuff. She asks whether we want to go again for half price. Well, we're already toggled up in the comedy bondage gear and hanging from the rope, so why not?



Extreme three-legged racing

When we finally come back down for good, Liam, seeing that we are not only alive but extremely happy, says he might be up for something. Flick suggests the bungee rocket. This giant vertical catapult is the largest ride on the pier, but he can't back down now.

The attendant who straps us in jokes about the appalling safety record of the ride, and warns us against touching anything in case we set off the ejector seat. Flick and I obligingly giggle, but Liam is starting to go a rather funny colour.

Then, five point harness tightened, the attendant tells us to put our heads back, pulls the lever and we hurtle skywards like, well, a rocket. Flick and I giggle, whoop and make the kind of noises generally associated with really wild sex. Liam shrieks like a girl.

But what comes up must come down. The bungee cord stopping us from reaching orbit tightens and, for a fraction of a second (just long enough for Liam to utter the immortal words 'Holy Mother of God'), we hang motionless several hundred feet in the air.

Then, with excruciating slowness, the seats turn on their gimbals and we're falling back to earth at something like ten metres per second. Only this time we're face down. Not being a great fan of upside down, I join Liam in some therapeutic shrieking.

The movement eventually subsides into the gentler bounce-stretch-drop, and we are lowered back to earth. After Liam staggers away, knock-kneed and ashen faced, the attendant turns to us and says, 'So ladies, want another go at half price?'

Need he ask?

—Jaine Weddell

Ark 2 Part 2

[Rob Jackson returns, with a timebinding coda]

DISCRIMINATING *Plokta* readers (aren't you all, ahem) may remember that I shocked people slightly a couple of years ago by returning from near-gafia in these pages, with a piece about a hunt for a part of my past in the forms of a now-deleted LP with an SF concept—a space-shipful of refugees from Earth reminisce about the ruined planet they leave behind—by a group called Flaming Youth.

I had met this band at a small rehearsal gig they did at the Oxford Union when I was a student there, and got talking to the drummer. It was more than 20 years later when I was thinking about getting a replacement for my stolen copy, that I looked through a price guide to deleted LPs and consulted a Genesis expert I knew, that I found out the drummer I had been talking to became quite well known—he was (and still is) a bloke called Phil Collins.

But where to find a copy of this thing?

A couple of years ago, I gathered it had been reissued on CD and deleted, but then that it was also available in Japan. I ordered it, but was worried. Would it be in stock? Would the flash artwork (with a see-through mock-stained glass cover) have the same impact? Would I have to get my language student daughter to translate the Japanese sleeve notes? Most importantly, would the music be cheesy and disappointing 30 years later?

Well, the CD never turned up. Dud. Drawn a blank. Phut. Failure.

What else to try?

Cut to Brighton, August 2002. Coral and I both wanted to look through shops in the North Laine area, a long thin genuinely Bohemian quarter formed of a string of four streets in succession which run north-south from almost up by Brighton station to the Lanes, which is more of a mock-Bohemian quarter with little tourist traps—er, shops—just off the seafront.

Coral's agenda: anything to do with the preparation and care of textiles. Weaving, spinning, dyeing—she is an avid collector, learner and teacher of techniques, anything from Roman drop-spindles to American great wheels, via tablet-weaving, herbal dyeing and everything in between. If you want to

know what a lucet, a rigid heddle, a niddy-noddy, a nostepinne, a charkha, a Navajo ply or an inkle loom is, ask her, but be prepared for a long answer.

My agenda: *Ark 2*, and anything generally interesting or calorific.

We parked at the top end near the station. The first shop you could see looking down the road from the car park entrance was a classic record shop called The Wax Factor, with windows full of rock, jazz, soul and other collectable LPs. However we didn't look in there to start with as we wanted to see more of the North Laine area itself and see what else there was. Also, Coral probably said something like: "If they do have your LP you won't want to risk damaging it by carrying it around all day." She has a tendency towards terribly sensible advice like that.

The flower-power experience really started round the corner. Nearly all the shops on Sydney Street are to do with music, dance gear, arts, crafts, food—or marijuana. One hash equipment shop featured the very best polycarbonate herb grinders. Even an optician's shop was late 60s—there was a mosaic in the pavement with all the spectacular taste of a mid-period Dame Edna Everage or early Elton John, and a bespectacled papier-mâché hippy sun-god in the window.

The shops have names like Sparki, Affinity, Penetration, Crystals, Infinity Foods, Saffron and Klik Klik Whirly Beep Beep. The second street down, Kensington Gardens, is pedestrian-only and full of cafes. However, the Sixties aura fades slowly as you go further south—by the time you get to the bottom of New Road you are back to normality, with Costa Coffee, and round the corner on the main road, North St, you are in anonymous English-city-centre land. The infinite improbability generator that was working brilliantly as we left the car park and went past Wax Factor had gently whirled to a stop.

So back up the time machine we went, retracing our steps into the Sixties. Coral hunted down a heap of specialised textiles, while deputing me to find

interesting textile-related books in the craft section of a second-hand bookshop. I must have been fairly effective—she bought three of the ones I had found.

However, none of the record shops had any sign of *Ark 2*. Until...

Eventually, back where we started at the Wax Factor, at a cost of £27, with a slightly battered sleeve but (I was assured) fully playable, was a copy of *Ark 2*. After all that effort, deciding whether to have it was a no-brainer.

Yes, it does play fine—exactly what it said on the tin.

Were the songs cheesy and disappointing? Maybe if they hadn't been imprinted in my memory from years ago, so that listening was like re-confirming old grooves—but the messages are still there as before. Most relevant of all is "Mars, Bringer of War" in which the group sing a marching-style song in unison as Vietnam GI's: "So we're lying here/Cold with sweat and fear/Answering liberty's call/But while you bloody rotten bastards threaten our way of life/You're gonna get it in the balls."



Photo from www.imagesbrighton.com, © David Gray

Can't for the life of me think how relevant that is. (Are you listening Dubya?—not bloody likely!) I've in fact got it on tape for the car now, as the nucleus of a whole selection of anti-war songs—everything from 99 Red Balloons to Driving Through Mythical America.

However, the whole process of rediscovering a part of my past has been one of the best £27's-worth I have ever spent.

—Rob Jackson

My Spy

THE YEAR I turned thirteen was not a happy experience. I was at a new school and being bullied. My typical day included embarrassing myself spectacularly, sulking, and skipping classes. I spent a lot of time in the library. It wasn't large, but for someone who had already run through the public library's stock of children's books it was a glorious haven. Also, none of the bullies ever went in there.

It took me about half the school year to read all the books considered suitable for girls. Most of them were of the tedious, condescending variety that guaranteed pretty dresses, slimness, shiny hair, and letting a boy do most of the talking were the keys to popularity. Actually, that seemed to be true, but it pissed me off. I read them anyway because I had a voracious reading habit and it was better than doing my algebra assignment.

At that age I thought non-fiction was impossibly boring, so what could I do but turn to the boys' section next? They had their own set of smarmy etiquette books, but they also had loads of adventure stories and a whole lot of novels about World War II. I had no idea the war in Vietnam was going on at the time because my parents never let us watch the news. However, I had seen lots of movies on TV set during World War II and I thought it seemed rather glamorous with all those uniforms and funny hairdos. So after I ran through all the Jack London novels I started reading war stories.

I thought very highly of James Michener and his romantic tales of the Pacific Theater. I ate up stories of the Burma run, daring pilots, vicious battles in humid jungles, rusting equipment on bug-infested tropical islands, the Battle of Midway, and the wicked, wily Japanese. I knew about Hitler and the Holocaust because I'd cried over *The Diary of Anne Frank* which was required reading the year before. But Europe was far away, and the Pacific battles had played out in my part of the world. Eventually, though, I ran out of books on my favorite part of the war and turned to the European stuff. And there, strangely enough, I found a book that changed my life.

It was *You're Stepping on my Cloak and Dagger*, Roger Hall's account of his time

in the OSS. Published in 1957, it was full of dry wit, bawdy humor, biting assessments of the Army's intelligence operations during World War II, and his own vivid, irreverent personality. It opened my eyes to a completely different aspect of the war, and changed my taste in reading overnight. I had never before come across a book so funny and yet so serious. His comic timing was wicked and perfect. I checked the book out over and over again, memorized large sections of it, laughed until my face hurt, and became determined to write as well someday.

Then it came time to graduate and go to high school. It was much bigger than my current school. I didn't want to leave my favorite book behind. Who knew if they'd have a copy up at that big new school? I certainly couldn't afford to buy it, and besides, I'd never seen anywhere but in our library. I had no choice, I decided. So I deliberately committed a crime.

I stole it.

Well, okay, what I actually did was check it out one last time and fail to give it back. All summer I was terrified that the librarians or the principal were going to contact my parents and take it away. Nothing ever happened. My crime went unpunished. I went to high school, and kept the book, rereading it often. I felt guilty about having stolen it, but not guilty enough to give it back. I loved that book. I was convinced no one else would love it as much as I did. After all, I was practically the only person who ever checked it out of the library. It was obviously meant to be mine.

The book remained one of my treasures. It made a lot of moves with me as I went off to college, changed domiciles several times, moved around the world, and eventually settled for good back in the Bay Area. I lost a lot of personal items during all those moves, but I never lost track of that book. I often mentioned it to others. No one but me ever seemed to have read it. Over the years I thought about making recompense somehow—as long as I didn't have to give the book back. I'd tried to buy a new copy, terrified my old one might get damaged, but it was long since out of print and so I hung on to it.

In the late nineties I began writing an online diary. At one point I mentioned

the book as a major influence of my adolescent years, and admitted it was the only book I'd ever stolen from a library. A couple of people wrote to say it was one of their favorites, too, and like me they still thought it was screamingly funny. I was pretty excited to know I wasn't the only person who knew about the book.

Then in 2003 Roger Hall contacted me.

Actually, his wife sent an e-mail saying they had come across my diary entry and had gotten a kick out of my story. They also thought I might like to know the Naval Institute Press was reprinting the book in the spring. All I could think of was, "Roger Hall read my writing. ROGER HALL READ MY WRITING." It had never occurred to me that he'd be alive, much less trawling the Internet for egoboo. I could not have been more surprised if the dog had begun talking; in fact, that seemed far more probable. But there it was, a little two-line e-mail from Roger and Linda Hall.

Eventually, I calmed down enough to respond with a pleasant note and explained in more detail just how much I'd liked his book. I got a quick reply, and we were off and running. I requested an autograph when the new printing was out, and of course he said he'd be happy to oblige. I admitted I was writing a novel. We discovered we both enjoyed singing. I wrote to thank him on Veteran's Day. He replied in one of his rare serious moments that he considered it a privilege to serve his country. Roger himself never wrote directly; Linda said he absolutely refused to learn about computers but was thrilled whenever she found things for and about him online.

Since the book was back in print I decided it was finally time to make reparations to the junior high library. Only it wasn't a junior high anymore. It was now a middle school serving grades six through eight. I contacted one woman at the principal's office who said they weren't interested in book donations at the moment. That seemed unlikely, but I was put off enough to let a few days go by. Then I tried once more.

This time I got through to the head librarian, Denise Radow, who was enormously tickled by my story. She said it was the first time in her career anyone

had ever admitted to stealing a library book; most of the time they would arrive in anonymous packages, overdue by a year or two.

"I can't give you the copy I took back," I said, recklessly perjuring myself, "but I can give you a brand new copy if you want it. It'll put thirty years of guilt to rest." She graciously accepted my offer and invited me to come see her any time, laughingly assuring me my identity would be safe with her. I ordered the book and sent it to the school two weeks later.

I also sent a copy off to be autographed. When the envelope was returned to me I was stunned to find a full-page letter from Roger plus a photocopy of a long article in the Washington Post dated May 26, 2002. He wrote that although he did not have

the hang of this e-mail and Internet business he had gotten a kick out of the idea of a schoolgirl stealing his book because she couldn't bear to return it, and had been delighted to read my correspondence as well as enjoying my colorful descriptions of my experiences traveling abroad and in classical music, two interests we shared. I was absolutely thrilled to see the letter was signed, "Warm personal regards." It was all very flattering and courteous. I eagerly opened the book to see what he'd written.

"Best wishes to Lucy Huntzinger who started on her career in crime when she swiped my book from the library, Roger Hall. P.S. Put it back!"

I sputtered and laughed. That's more like it, I thought, and went on grinning all evening long.

I'm grateful for and awed by the strange circularity of life: falling in love with the book, taking it with me when I left junior high, rereading it over the years until I had it memorized, learning to write by copying his breezy style, working on my own novel, the e-mail contact, the correspondence, the reprint, the autograph, and above all the chance to let him know how much his novel has meant to me over the years. I am not the least bit sorry I stole that book from the library, though I never stole another.

Want to know something funny? My library copy, being a first edition and in good condition, is worth several hundred dollars. I'd never, ever sell it but it amuses me to know that in my case, crime most definitely paid.

—Lucy Huntzinger

Jeeves Drops It In

SCENE: Mount Doom. Bertie Wooster and Jeeves discovered sitting on a rock engulfed on all sides in fiery molten lava.

BW: Well, Jeeves, here we are, what?

J: Indeed, sir.

BW: I have to say, Jeeves, that the o. is looking a trifle g.

J: Quite, sir. Most disturbing.

BW: That's putting it mildly, Jeeves. Dash it all, here we are on this bally mountain, with the sky falling in and hell's foundations quivering. It's all looking more than a little squiffy, if you ask me.

J: Very much so, sir.

BW: On the other hand, we owe it to ourselves to look on the bright side.

J: Sir?

BW: I mean, true, certain death may loom and we may be going down for the third time in the old cock-a-leekie, but at least I'm not going to have to marry Madeline Bassett.

J: Very true, sir.

BW: Or Florence Craye. Or, come to that, Honoria Glossop.

J: There is that aspect to the situation, sir.

BW: So really, it could be worse.

J: Arguably, sir. Might I suggest a tourniquet for your hand, sir?

BW: You could manage that?

J: I believe such an article could be improvised from, say, one of your socks.

BW: Not the purple ones, Jeeves.

J: Sir?

BW: You've never liked those purple socks of mine, Jeeves. I've seen you looking at them as if they were something you'd found under a flat stone.

J: If I might be pardoned for saying so, the sacrifice, though considerable, would appear to be justified in the circumstances, sir.

BW: Oh, very well, Jeeves. Tourniquet away.

J: Thank you, sir.

BW: I don't know, Jeeves. Who'd have thought Sir Watkyn Basset would've turned out to be the Dark Lord?

J: With hindsight, sir, the contingency was one that might well have been anticipated. It was fortuitous, in the event, that you were able to convince Mr Spode to leap into the fire, holding the One Cow-Creamer.

BW: Eulalie, bless her.

J: Quite, sir. Otherwise the consequences might have been most regrettable.

BW: Just goes to show, really. Like Aunt Dahlia said, even Spode may yet have something to do.

J: A most acute observation, sir.

BW: Looking back, I'm not sure I could've done it myself, Jeeves. It's like that thing you came out with the other day.

J: Sir?



BW: Cats came into it, as I recall.

J: Letting I dare not wait upon I would, sir, like the poor cat i' the adage.

BW: I', Jeeves? You mean 'in', surely?

J: No, sir. The terminal consonant is elided for purposes of euphony.

BW: Is it. Well, anyway, that's all done and dusted. I'm glad you're here with me, don't you know. Here at the end of all things, Jeeves.

—received over the ethereal Papernet via
Caroline Mullan from (apparently) Chris Bell
who allegedly got it from one Tom Holt

Lokta Plokta

Henry L Welch
welch@msoc.edu

Jellyfish can certainly reduce water fun. During my teens they used to infest the tidal estuaries of the York River in Virginia (I assume they still do). You neglected to mention that even when they are half-dead they can still sting. This is rather irritating, but they also smell terrible. Nothing like the rotting jellyfish smell to drive you away.

Ben Yalow
ybmcy@panix.com

The article by Mike Scott provides a fascinating chance to see the differences, and similarities, between the London Underground and New York City subways. Some of the differences are well known (NY is a 24/7/365 system, whereas London's shuts down at night—because the NY system has more than two tracks in most places, so it's possible to shut down individual segments for

repair/maintenance and still service the rest of the line, and often the station in the other direction, but London's 2-track system needs to shut down to do that). But the sociological changes that come from construction decisions made over a century ago provide some interesting contrasts.

Lots of the rules he lists have to do with escalators. Whereas, for the most part, New York doesn't think about those much—the subways are much shallower, so there are typically only stairs for almost all stations. And that comes from the original construction design, which was the open "cut and cover" method—slice open a trench and put the tunnel in, and cover it back up. Of course, there are places where it's deep enough, or goes under a river, where that doesn't work—but it mostly did. (Of course, doing so once the infrastructure (power, sewer, water, etc.) was all in place underground, and buildings all over aboveground made it more challenging—see

http://www.nycsubway.org/irt/irt_book/ch2.html for a short article about the early construction issues.) London, in contrast, tunneled deep to avoid all of that, which means that on the deep lines, it needs escalators.

And New York is a flat fare system—it's the same price to go anyplace. So the system, from the beginning, was designed so that you paid your fare at entry—originally by depositing a coin/token—which means that the process at the entry barriers didn't require recollecting a ticket, and there were no exit requirements at all (we now have electronic farecards for entry, but the traffic patterns were designed to be as similar as possible to the old ones from the token era). So the crowd handling patterns at the barriers are different—the exit path is much quicker, so you can get people out more easily.

Lloyd Penney
penneys@allstream.net

Many thanks for issue 30 of Plokta! I think this is the first issue I've received since 26. The carnivorous Post Office must be fed regularly, I guess. Great front cover, ye scurvy dogs...first you pillage and then you burn. And there's not a one o' ye who looks like Johnny Depp...thank Ghod...

Congrats to Sue on her Hugo! I have already been to Robert Sawyer's home a couple of time since to view his golden Holy Relic on display for all to see. I am referring to his Hugo, of course...I'll stop now, I'm in enough trouble. That marvelous photo on the middle of page 3 reminds me of a similar photo of Yvonne blowing up an inflatable tulip for the Dutch Worldcon bid many years ago. Ah, even more trouble.

I'm time bankrupt, too. Fnurt.

Dwain Kaiser
dgkaiser@hotmail.com

I would rather open a couple of bottles of Bruichladdich and check them out for Whiskies of Mass Distinction myself, whatthehell does a webcam know about good whiskies? Or U.S. gov't agencies?

Steve Jeffery
Peverel@aol.com

While I don't have much trouble seeing those Magic Eye 3D stereogram, I still can't get those two pictures at the foot of page 7 superimposed, however crossed my eyes are. I tried the other trick of putting a piece of dividing card between the two photos and my eyes, so that each eye was only seeing one picture. This didn't help either (perhaps the focal length is all wrong) but more worryingly suggested that my left eye is considerably more out of focus than my right. Thank you for that.

It's a shame you are all such clean living folk of impeccable habits, as a colleague turned up possibly the most superfluous PC peripheral I have come across on a website the other day. It's a USB plug-in cigarette lighter. It can only have been invented by a journalist.

Karen Babich

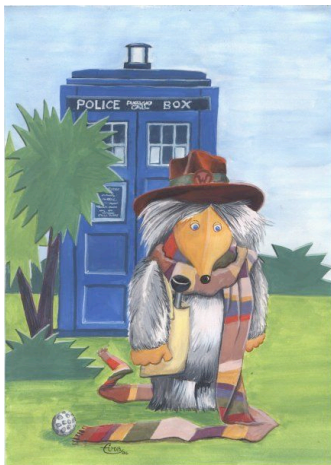
Kids' shows seem to be more and more popular, in part I suspect as entertainers & club owners have more and more kids. They Might Be Giants will be here next month—and all four kids' matinees have sold out. Sterno reported that, at the first TMBG kids show, the Johns found it odd to be performing not only in daylight but sober too.



SMS

eira.sms@virgin.net

Eira (Who's being insufferably smug now) seems to have had no problems selling this old tosh. Being a helpful spouse, I'm eposting you a copy. I suppose the next thing will be working out which fanzine wants it for the cover. you, *Bob*, *Font* or wot.



Anyhow:

My work here is done.

Janice Gelb

j_gelb@yahoo.com

Perhaps having this fanzine in range with its evil Consume Shiny Electronic Toy message being broadcast is the reason why I just bought a new Sony TR3A laptop despite the fact that my old laptop works just fine. Well, that or the geeks with whom I am surrounded insistently saying "But your old laptop is over 6 years old. You have to get a new one!" Meanwhile, I'd be happy to get in on this deal with Dr Plokta whereby he keeps me out of the dolehouse in my old age (as I have no one I can guilt into it) and all I have to do is volunteer to help his plans for world conquest. I'm really good at proofreading diatribes, honest.

As for the Minicon report, even without having read this, if I'd known there was a secret code for an elevator at Minicon that led you to free beer, I'd have guessed the code was 1973. My theory is that if anyone connected with

Minicon asks you anything, you're almost always safe in answering 1973.

Kari

ambariel@ntlworld.com

Can someone please tell why it is that whenever I hear about/see any part of Croydon fandom, I immediately think of IKEA? Lovely people, none of them in need of self-assembly: I don't understand.

SMS

eira.sms@virgin.net

Finally, *Plokta* is old enough to be compared to *Punch*.

It's not as good as it used to be, you know.

(I wonder what you can possibly write in response to that).

[We first made this joke in issue 3, back in 1996—Ed]

Jackie Duckhawk

duckworths@fastmail.fm

I don't suppose you saw the article in the *Gruaniad* about the Eglu? It is the iMac of chicken keeping and absolutely covetable—see omlet.co.uk. Does it count as superfluous technology? I think it probably does as I expect you could get a conventional chicken house much cheaper, but on the other hand the eglu does require less maintenance.



Paul Campbell

nuneaton@nuneaton.plus.com

and working its way to the top of the pile (whatever *was* on top having collapsed into fluff) comes *iplokta*. I WANT ONE! i think it's the colour that does it—that and the do not press button. it looks so much more irresistible than

any of the ones i've got. and a lot more superfluous of course....

actually, having just got for cheap a new big fast handmade beast, constructed locally (no excessive use of fuel here) with a harddrive big enough to hold my medical records without compressing 'em and a processor fast enough to tell me what happens in november (horticulturally)—i'm now doing revolutionary stuff like email....

but i have indulged in a sub to seti@home. well i have trouble building screensavers. remember folks, any ets of your acquaintance, direct 'em to my address so we can work out how to keep duping these astronomer geeks!

oh yeah. sorry to end on an ontological note. but <fiblewinter>! Heheheheheheheheh— <fiblewinter>! tell sue she can stay. <fiblewinter>!....

[Now available on a T-shirt from www.cafepress.com/plokta_tat]

Brad W Foster

bwfoster@juno.com

2004 is the International Year of Rice? Sure, they'd do that when 2004 has become my own personal Year of No Carbs, the swine! Actually, that is working out pretty well. Since starting in January, Cindy has dropped around 25 pounds and I'm down by 30. In fact, going so nicely I've already re-evaluated my goals and am hoping to get even further down. Just about to hit the half-century mark, and I figure if I don't get the shell into the best shape I can now to deal with upcoming age problems, it will be too late. I am planning on living to be at least 111, just to be able to run the three singles in a row, so as you can see, I've still got lots of time for things to continue to break down in.

Did I miss something somewhere here? My loc on pg 10 is listed as Brad W Foster (again). Unless you are now using that notation to show that someone has had a loc in a previous issue, I can't find anything earlier in the issue with my name. Or, could this be my clone has broken out of the attic and is out on his own? I'd better go check.... nope, he's still there, happily squinting at a scrambled porn cable channel.

Andrew Plotkin

erkyrath@eblong.com

Max Hawkida locs of hearing lyrics as "Loc to Dr Plokta, Loc to the Dr, Dr..." I stare at this, ungracefully grappling for any shred of sense, and then realize: *On your planet, "Doctor Plokta" rhymes*. It is only here on the American subcontinent (as we natives cheekily call it) that "Doctor" goes all fiercely rhotic, leaving the poor "Plokta" to linger in want of an Arr. (Pirates need not apply.)

I have been reading your fine periodical for ~~months~~ years nearly a week now, and I have never before realized that the harmonious trochees of your eponymous scholar were—er—quite that harmonious.

Live and learn.

Eric Lindsay

fijagh@ericlindsay.com

You went to a pirate movie, didn't you?

Beaches here contain camels. I just confirmed that again this morning, when I went down to the beach front market to check for terrorists rowing ashore, with boats full of camels. The camels were there. The terrorists seemed to have disguised themselves as capitalists, and were offering \$5 camel rides. I'm a little worried about this upsurge in camel mounted figures here in the remote north. I know that oil prices

are high, but this is just plain silly.

Milt Stevens
miltstevens@earthlink.net

Before reading Plokta #31, I hadn't been aware of STD Awareness Month. Of course, I'm still not aware of what STD might be. I know if it has three letters it must be bad. Like MSG which they traditionally put in Chinese food. If you keep eating it, you might become Chinese.

In order to make anything an Official Something Month, you have to get some legislative body to pass a resolution to that effect. Legislative bodies commonly don't pay attention to what they pass. You've probably all noticed that. In Los Angeles, that became readily apparent on at least one occasion. Los Angeles has a dual city/county government with a board of county commissioners and a city council. A few years ago, the board of county commissioners was quite surprised to discover they had passed a resolution denouncing the city council for racism. One of their staff types had put it in front of them, and they had voted for it without reading it. I can think of all sorts of interesting stuff to slip in front of some legislative body. How about having a Feed The Starving Orphans To The Endangered Species Month. We're always being asked for more money to either save endangered species or feed starving orphans. If we feed one to the other, we've eliminated half the problem. It's just basic accounting.

It's the International Year of Rice. Sounds like a good reason to hold a Sake To Me party. (Come to think of it, I should probably suggest that to the Nippon in 2007 Committee.)

Charles Stross is the perfect choice for guest of honor at Ploktacon. I can't think of any other science fiction writer who better epitomizes superfluous technology. I voted for his novel Singularity Sky in first place on this year's Hugo ballot. How can you not like a novel with a scene of a snarling rabbit firing a machine gun? Not to mention the killer mimes and their deadly cream pies.

Henry L. Welch
welch@msoc.edu

I have never given much thought to corsets. I'm certain I'd look terrible in one even if I could find one that would fit.

Marcus L. Rowland
forgottenfutures@ntlworld.com

The Krupp Stahlshütze (steel protector) is a Prussian automaton used to protect the Imperial Calculating Engines and other important facilities. Where most other nations built automata that can adapt to the terrain on which they are used, for this important job the Prussians have taken the unusual step of adapting the "terrain" to the automata. Sites on which they are used are levelled and surfaced to a high standard, and in buildings ramps replace stairs. This allows the use of a wheeled design with very little ground clearance, the wheels being covered by armour plating, with an aluminium chassis to minimise weight. Electric motors reduce noise. Generally considered to be successful, although they are slow to react and vulnerable to attacks which damage the "terrain" or push them over; they cannot right themselves. An unusual feature is the telescopic eye, which is moved in and out on bellows and improves the accuracy of its marksmanship. The downside of this invention is that it has a restricted field of view and is easily attacked from the side, although sites where it is

used are generally designed to limit opportunities for such attacks.

At least a hundred are believed to be in service. The photograph depicts a model generously donated to the Science Museum by the Kaiser; the unit designation and Prussian crest indicate that the machine it depicts is attached to the Imperial Archives. German soldiers generally refer to these machines as Pfefferpotpsoldaten, literally "pepper-pot soldiers".



David Rouyet
david.rouyet@tele2.fr

Subject: Mail for Mister Rob Jackson

I'd like to tell Mr Jackson that, by reading and posting on www.philcollins.co.uk forum (newsgroup), I have found a guy in The Netherlands (Europe) who has told me that copies of *Ark 2* are available on CD (not Japanese).

I have got one.

The guy is called Willem Beens.

[As described earlier in this issue, Rob has already managed to get hold of a copy.]

Sheryl Birkhead

Umm... err... saying has it in the Veterinary Community that a vet always has one warm arm (un... that applies to large animal vets only). Some of the veterinary (long-sleeved) coveralls actually are

available with velcro sleeves. Way before the ?moose AI, I took a course in AI (artificial insemination) interesting side note—the semen *used* to be "packaged" in forms something like this *[Here Sheryl inserts a suggestively phallic illustration.]*. Some grandmas in the area did model houses—complete with electricity, tiny hand made rugs and even little lamps. One modeler shocked all the rest when she informed them of the source of her lamp bases (empty, presumably).

Ah—So Heath Robinson is the Aussie equivalent of Rube Goldberg....

Zara Baxter
zara@zipworld.com.au

Despite the undeniable allure of Flick's underwear, I managed to read the entire Plokta from front to back with barely a lengthy pause. You'd be amazed how easy it is to read with one hand. Speaking of which, the possibility of a National Facial Protection Month amused me no end.

I loved the description of Giulia's velcroed, glued and wired fire-lighter gadget, but I'm surprised she managed to avoid Heath Robinson so long. My boyfriend's folks' place has an actual Heath Robinson print. Well, it says W. Heath Robinson, so I'm presuming it's the same chap. Now, that's in New South Wales, but it's hard to imagine those prints never made it as far south as Tasmania. One wonders whether Giulia had a very sheltered upbringing... did she perhaps grow up in Penguin or Strahan? [grinning, ducking, running]

I grew up in Matlock, Derbyshire, so I'm intimately familiar with Heath Robinson. In fact, my dad used to describe everything mum ever made as a bit Heath Robinson, Mum, to be

fair, used to say my dad couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery. All more surreal, mum was in event management, and dad was a civil engineer.

Michael Leigh

I can't find the Britney Dance Beats—I have a feeling I sent it to somebody. Instead, and hardly compensation for the wonderful *Wild Metal Country*, here is *Pop Idol*! You too can be Simon Cowell!

Please pass it along if too horrible to contemplate!

I expect you'd prefer the paperclips!

[We haven't tried it yet—Ed]

Dale Speirs

I took *iPlokta* to Moose Meadows on May 26. I have never seen a moose here in all my years, but lots of elk, Rocky Mtn sheep, and white-tailed deer. Sawback Mtn in background.

Dale Speirs (again)

"Captions welcome", it says on page 3 of the latest *Plokta*, where a delightful photo shows Alison inflating a floating animal toy for the swimming pool. Said toy having the inflation valve in its rectal area.

It reminded me of one of George Carlin's old comedy routines where he discussed fake plastic vomit, the kind sold in novelty stores. He

wondered what the design committee meetings were like, and marvelled that accountants would actually cost out the expenses of production versus probable ROI for the fake vomit.

Thinking of this, I have to wonder if the manufacturer of the inflatable toy had thought this out, what people would look like breathing into it. Could it be, perhaps, that the design engineer told his spotty faced apprentice "just stick the valve in there somewhere" and the resentful flunky decided to have some fun? Or perhaps there was a committee meeting in some panelled boardroom, where highly-paid engineers seriously discussed the location of the inflation valve. Fred wanted it anterior-ventral, George preferred the rectal area, and after an extended discussion the committee voted 4-3 in favour of a rectal valve.

Sheryl Birkhead (again)

I didn't realise houses weren't self-repairing (the old farmhouse was in such bad shape we never did much of anything—I thought thatch was *supposed* to grow in gutters)—but I wised up two years into the homeownership bit—and still am sorting out "routine" stuff. Definitely NOT routine, is the fact that my front yard is disappearing. I've had a total of 3 people come out and take a look—but no one has been

daring enough to even GUESS at a cost. The decision is to dig up the whole mess and find out WHY it is disappearing and where the heck it is going (I mean if someone else has part of my real estate, I'd *love* to let *them* pay the taxes).

Martin Morse Wooster

Many thanks for *Plokta* 31.

Flick's mention of her "clubbing corset" leads me to wonder if she has seen *Van Helsing*. There Kate Beckinsale (doing her Liz Williams impression) wears a very sturdy corset throughout the film. She does not go clubbing, but does wear the corset at a fancy-dress ball. But her garment is all-weather attire that is perfect for the commute between Dracula's Lair, Dracula's Castle, and Dracula's Secret Castle (and yes, in the film, these are three different places). Since the only way to travel in Transylvania is either to flee in a burning stagecoach or grab a nearby vine to hurl yourself across the nearest precipice, you need a really tough corset to survive.

Read Lilian Edwards's article about her book club hoping to find some information about books, but I see that it's really about her club's Christmas meeting. Well, my book club, Knossos (it's a chapter of the Mythopoeic Society) also has a Christmas meeting. It's not as fancy as Edwards's event. Usually it's held at a member's house, and people bring cakes, pies, and casseroles. There isn't any booze, but there is far too much soda. Wendell Wagner, who lived in England for a few years, always brings Christmas crackers, and we see how long we can wear those silly paper crowns on our heads before they fall off. There's some discussion about books, more about ourselves, and a fair amount

of conversation about ominous developments in *Angel* and *Star Trek: Enterprise*. Puns are often uttered, and punsters are reprimanded by having a red Beanie Baby chicken thrown at them. At some point during the event Brick Barrientos and I hover in a corner and furtively discuss vital developments in baseball. At 7, we wallow out into the snow and head for home.

Milt Stevens says that "in the trufannish residence, fanzines form sedimentary layers on all flat surfaces." I doubt that's true today; where would you put your books? What's more likely is that fannish residences usually have surfaces covered with printed matter—books, fanzines, prozines. And of course fans are obsessive collectors. I once read an interview with Stephen King in *The New Yorker* where King explained that he had bought the house next to his, put all his books in the second house, and then built a tunnel between the two homes. "Mr. King," the interviewer said. "You're rich. Why would you buy a house just for your books?" "Because I can, that's why," King replied. I think any trufan would understand this.

And speaking of *The New Yorker*, the cartoon on page 10 is from that publication, and is by Lee Lorenz, one of the *New Yorker's* most prolific cartoonists.

WAHF: Tim Kirk (enclosing moose news), **Dave Langford** ("Has the Hugo Nominations Fairy smiled upon you this year?"), **Jan Stinson** ("Marianne's costume is adorable"), **Douglas Kinghorn** ("I understand you are something of an authority on the Chocolate Teapot"), **Tom Feller** (listing his superfluous technology), **Joseph T Major** (Has Milt Stevens tried Japanese taxicabs?) and **Sarah Prince** (offering moose candy)



A Coyote Story

ONE MORNING, Jon Singer woke up and found he was in pieces. So he put himself back together, that was a thing he knew how to do. But after he had put himself back together, he found he had left out the part that knew how to digest wheat. This kept on happening, until he had lost the parts that knew how to digest milk, and onions, and yeast as well. And Jon Singer sat back on his heels and said to his friends, "If this goes on, the day will come when there's nothing I can eat but tea and sushi."



So, Jon Singer asked advice from the Moon, and the Moon said that Jon Singer should make a bowl that glowed in the dark. Jon Singer blinked his eyes at that, because nobody had ever made a bowl that glowed in the dark before, it

was not a thing that anybody knew how to do. So he sat down and thought about how to do it, and a little while later he did it.

Once he had his bowl that glowed in the dark, he stopped waking up in pieces and losing parts of himself, which was a good thing. But as time went on, he wanted to be able to eat bread, and papa rellena, and cheeses with his friends. (The part that could digest milk was also the part that could digest cheeses. I should have explained that before. It was the part that could digest yoghurt, too, and cream, and in fact everything that had ever been milk.)

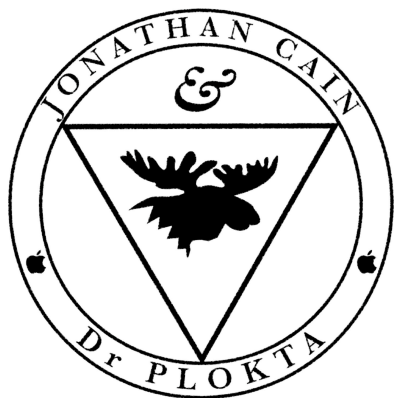
So Jon Singer set off with his friends through the world to find the parts of himself he had lost, and he found them sitting at a table. The part that could digest wheat was eating a bagel, the part that could digest milk was eating smoked applewood smokehouse cheese, the part that could digest yeast was eating marmite and the part that could digest onions was eating a raw onion, with a little black pepper. All of them were sharing a pot of tea and talking to their friends.

Well, Jon Singer couldn't bear to see how little the left-out parts could eat, so, (what else could he do?) he invited them all home for dinner.

—Jo Walton



2004 Publishing Sensation



An Appeal To The Friends Of Superfluous Technology had a most sensational effect, particularly in London. The readers of *Ansible* were quite thunderstruck by Dr Plokta's achievements. There was a general desire to see Dr Plokta; young ladies pitied the poor old fans of Leeds who had been so frightened by him, and wished very much to be as terrified themselves. Clearly such an opportunity as this was scarcely likely to come again; Dr Plokta determined to establish

himself in London with all possible haste. "You must get me a house, Flick," he said. "Get me a house that says to those that visit it that world domination is a respectable profession—no less than Law and a great deal more so than politics."

Flick inquired drily if Dr Plokta wished her to seek out architecture expressive of the proposition that being an evil overlord was as respectable as being a Booker long-listed novelist? Dr Plokta (who knew there were such things as jokes in the world or people would not write about them in fanzines, but who had never actually been introduced to a joke or shaken its hand) considered a while before replying at last that no, he did not think they could quite claim that.

So Flick (perhaps thinking that nothing in the world is so respectable as money) directed him to a house in Rotherhithe among the abodes of the rich and prosperous. Dr Plokta was satisfied with his new house, or at least as satisfied as any gentleman could be who

for more than thirty years has lived in an underground base concealed in a volcano and surrounded by a good estate of death traps and shark tanks—a gentleman, in other words, whose eye has never been offended by the sight of any other man's property whenever he looked out the window.

"It is certainly a small fortress of doom, Flick," he said, "but I do not complain. My own comfort, as you know, I do not regard." Flick replied that the flat was larger than most. "Indeed?" said Dr Plokta, much surprised. Dr Plokta was particularly shocked by the smallness of the server room, which could not accommodate one third of the computers he considered indispensable; he asked Flick how people in London housed their computers? Perhaps they did not have websites?

Dr Plokta had been in London not above three weeks when he received a letter from a Mrs Scott, a lady of whom he had never heard before....

—Steve Davies