

# The Devniad Book 55b

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## Measurement and Fantasy

What abbreviation do you use for the word "liter"?

Actually, this is a trick question. And my emotions are running high at the moment about it. Also it's all balled up with two nominees I recently read for Best Novel in the World Fantasy Awards.

So. About abbreviating "liter." What's it going to be, pal?

But wait, let's recap the story so far. You see, I grunt for my gruel at a small ad agency just south of Boston, extruding concepts and copy for clients in various technology-based businesses. Recently somebody at a new biotech client firm raped my wife *and* my mistress, spat on the sacred flag of my motherland, and shot my dog.

That is, he changed my copy.

Armed only with encyclopedic knowledge of his product and field, a Ph.D. in bioscience, and unmitigated gall, this "expert" careened recklessly through a 16-page white paper I'd ghost-written for him about combinatorial chemistry (I tell you, tech advertising is glamorous work) — and changed each occurrence of "ml" to "mL."

Hah! I may not have to deal with liquid measures much, I thought, but after a lotta years in the biz I know my SI units.

I've seen it as "ml" for years, in all kinds of technical contexts. Besides, I clearly remember that the Erlenmeyer flasks in my high-school lab were graduated with little white lettering that clearly indicated each mark was counting off the contents in "ml."

And — trump card — the rule in *le Système International d'Unités* (that's French, meaning "New World Order for Measuring

Stuff") is that capital letters are used for abbreviations only when the name of the unit is derived from a proper name. You know, like kPa for kilopascal? (And by the way, the trick above is that SI units have European spelling. Thus, in scientific or engineering work even American texts really should make it "metre" and "litre.")

So hauling out my style books, dictionaries, and almanacs, I prepared to slay the client. Dragon. (See, I *told* you this article would have fantasy content.)

Only it turns out that "litre" is not a basic SI unit at all. Just, let's say, an associated unit or fellow traveler. And much worse: "mL" not only is an acceptable alternative to "ml" when abbreviating "litre," but, five books to two, is preferred. Apparently a lot of people mix up a small "ell" with a small "eye" otherwise and, what, think a test tube is calibrated in milli-inches? Milli-idiots.

I thought I knew something, knew it solid. And it turned out not to be true. This rocked my world. And not in a good way.

But this ill-fated stroll through the style books did remind me of something worthy of a technology buff's highest encomium: Kinda Neat.

If you think about the number prefixes used to indicate orders of magnitude, you're probably familiar from personal computer ads with terms such as *mega-* for 10 to the 6<sup>th</sup> and *giga-* for 10 to the 9<sup>th</sup>. You know, like megabytes and gigabytes in any discussion of how my hard drive is bigger than yours?

And I also knew the next steps up: *tera-* for 10 to the 12<sup>th</sup> and *peta-* for 10 to the 15<sup>th</sup>.

But the style books (specifically here *Merriam-Webster's Manual for Writers and Editors*, 1998) unveil a whole strange and beautiful little microcosm of metaprefixes

up there beyond the familiar — points on which I'd never focused before. How about *exa-* for 10 to the 18<sup>th</sup> and *zetta-* for 10 to the 21<sup>st</sup>?

And — my favorite — *yotta-* for 10 to the 24<sup>th</sup>. Admit it, ya gotta love yotta.

Plus on the other end of the scale, if you sweat the small stuff there's much beauty to be found down below *milli-*, *micro-*, and even the SF favorite *nano-* (for 10 to the minus 9<sup>th</sup>). Would you believe *zepto-* for 10 to the minus 21<sup>st</sup> and *yocto-* for 10 to the minus 24<sup>th</sup>?

What are these, the lost midget Marx Brothers?

My boss David Izzi asked a good question about these further ends of the scale. What would you use numbers like that *for*?

I told him they'd be useful for reckoning the number of atoms in the universe, counting seconds since Creation, etc. But the real reason, of course, is for exaggeration.

Like "He discovered that it was quite difficult to make one's first yottabuck writing science fiction fanzines." Or simply, "There sure are a yotta unhappy people in this world."

Or on the other end: "Yeah, there's about one yoctochance she'd go out with a loser like you."

Back to the shock to my system of this "mL" discovery. And I promise, we'll finally get to some fantasy topics too.

You see, I thought I knew something and it turned out I didn't. Which naturally reminds me of one central aim of many good fantasy novels: to uproot some long-cherished beliefs. Make you question your place in the universe, or that universe's shape, perhaps its very existence.

Take Charles de Lint's 1998 novel *Someplace to Be Flying*. (It's up for the World Fantasy Award to be handed out, conveniently enough, at the World Fantasy Convention in early November in Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A. — where de Lint coincidentally is a guest of honor.) On his fine Web site (at

[www.cyberus.ca/~cdl](http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl)), de Lint defines his work as "fantasy for people who don't normally read fantasy. I've taken to calling my writing 'mythic fiction,' because it's basically mainstream writing that incorporates elements of myth and folktale, rather than secondary world fantasy."

This strikes me as just wrong. Way too modest, at least as it applies to *Someplace to Be Flying*. Here's a book (set in de Lint's familiar North American city Newford) where ancient spirits live among us — beings here before the Europeans, storied by the Native peoples but predating them. Individuals of power who embody animal spirits such as crow, coyote, cuckoo, raven, and fox, and who can assume human or animal form at will, fly, stand up to bullets, etc. These creatures by the end of the book will meet and clash in a kind of mythic apocalypse that could destroy the world we think we know. That's the plot, folks.

"Mainstream" it simply isn't. At least, not the main stream I *thought* I was swimming in.

Animal people aside, de Lint certainly deals with a lot of mainstream characters here: a gypsy cab driver, artists, musicians, a junkyard owner and the odd "family" of displaced persons that congregate in his trash palace. And there are plenty of mundane issues, like getting jobs, finding apartments, consulting lawyers, and talking to friends via e-mail about your latest romantic prospect.

But his most successful creations, the ones that keep you reading, are unquestionably creatures of fantasy. (I think.) Like the delightful crow girls, small punky kids dressed all in black who mostly look and act about fourteen ... so you tend to forget they're as old as the universe. These days, Maida and Zia live in a tree in an apartment lot yard; shoplift; and subsist on biscuits and jelly beans. Or was it peaches and bacon?

When de Lint's characters are clicking and his atmosphere is properly magical, he really does manage that tricky

transformation of old Native American myths into modern men and women.

I'd call the mix simply good urban fantasy. By my measurement, de Lint's Newford is more mainstream than, say, Emma Bull's *Borderlands*; less so than Ed McBain's nameless city of at least 57 precincts.

Reading his work, I assumed Newford was mostly just Ottawa, where de Lint lives. But his Web site says "Interestingly, Canadian readers tend to think of Newford as an American city, while Americans usually think of it as Canadian. No surprise really, I suppose, since it has elements of both. The one thing I specifically settled on was to use the American legal system in it."

I can only say that it seemed to have a real Canadian flavor to me.

As did the entire book. A certain gentleness, perhaps: the darks here are soft grays, not jet blacks. Although de Lint tries hard to depict evil and its works, I never felt the real dangerousness you get in the works of, say, Stephen King or Richard Laymon. More like, say, Zelazny Lite?

There's an old pleasant hippy quality here too. Most of the characters in the book belong to a set of extended friends, do their own little creative crafts, and are artists and musicians. Maybe the right term for this is coffeehouse fantasy.

It's my first de Lint, I'm sorry to say. But I certainly wouldn't mind another visit to Newford someday.

Another World Fantasy nominee I just read also builds her material out of Native American sources: *Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich.

Erdrich's books usually draw on her background as a mixed-blood Ojibwa. They've found a strong response among serious fiction readers and critics for their quality and craft.

Sidebar: Admittedly, this current enthusiasm for Native American stories makes me a little uneasy. I find myself in dark moods wondering, if the Nazis had triumphed, would there have been a

comfortable little resurgence of interest in Tales from the Shtetl among the litry set of some resettled Eastern Reich a hundred years on? Or, about a similar if even longer-gone culture that's also back in fashion right now, what are we doing reading in a derived Anglo-Saxon tongue about the ancient mysteries of the Celts? Never mind.

Anyway, to be honest, a time or two *Antelope Wife* proved too rich for my blood. Its poetic language and close observations of people's lives and moods and feelings just gave me a temporary literary overdose, and I had to push away from the table.

But then I'd go back, and Erdrich would catch me again with something else quite wonderful.

Like the look on an Ojibwa infant's face when she escapes a U.S. Cavalry massacre by being borne, lashed to a cradle board on a dog's back, aimlessly away from her village into the great empty West (her expression is described as "mystified and calm").

Or an old reservation dog's advice to some young pups. ("Eat anything you can at any time. Fast. Bolt it down ... Avoid all black-and-white moving objects. And slow things with spiny quills ... Avoid outhouse holes ... Do not sleep under cars. Or with horses.")

Or the bit about the perfect *blitzkuchen*, a "complicated European torten" that a Native American cancer survivor/baker has taken as his life quest.

Or the love medicine that selfsame baker practiced when he met a new woman; she recalls it well: "The first time Frank and I took a walk together, he fed me bits of a cinnamon roll from his bare fingers and then bent over and tied my shoe. Bent over in the middle of nowhere, by a rock. I sat. He put my foot down and he tied my shoe — it wasn't an attractive shoe, either, a track show, an old shoe ..."

Just to tie up this whole disjointed essay real fast (my deadline is *right now!*) with one tiny and extremely crooked bow: maybe that's what fantasy measures best. Moments.



## A Note on Providence Place

For sojourners to the World Fantasy con, you may see a map indicating that the Westin is linked to a nearby brand-new shopping mall — Providence Place — by an overhead walkway called the Skybridge.

Forget it. I made a fast checkout visit last week, and Skybridge is Ozymandias city right now. One vast and trunkless concrete pylon by the side of the road ... so don't cross that bridge until they get to it.

About Providence Place itself, it's only about 40% open right now. And even then, hours are only 10-9 Mon-Sat and 12-5 on Sunday. But it does have several of the fannish necessities: a CVS drug/variety goods store, for a little set of those tiny screwdrivers you'll need when your glasses come apart and fall right off your nose while you're chatting with Robert Silverberg. And both Godiva and Lindt chocolate palaces, plus a restaurant called The Cheesecake Factory. Enough said. Oh, there's a sort of upscale Brookstone's called Restoration Hardware where you can find yuppie ironmongery and other spare parts for your saucer's impulse drive.

Finally, if you're looking for a great Italian restaurant, of course there are all the usual suspects on Federal Hill north of the city center. But you can also look east, to College Hill. Up near the Brown University campus, there's a superb example of upscale Italian/ Californian named Adesso. Mange, dudes!

## Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

That'll teach me to be so late getting the e-mail version out. Responses this month slowed from a torrent to barely a rivulet.

However, the more glory to the happy few below.

Luckily for the rest of you unresponsive know-nothings, artist **Christopher Sullivan**

subsequently recalled the answer to his own question last ish — about which SF works overtly acknowledged a debt to the theories of controversial catastrophist Erich von Daniken.

Oh, hold on. Fan **Kurt Siegel** did say:

"Waitaminit! You mean someone *intentionally* wrote a novel based on CHARIOTS OF THE GODS???????"

"Blurgh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

But I'm not sure that counts as an answer.

Give up? According to Chris, they're James Hogan's Giants novels, starting with *Inherit the Stars*.

And the most learned **Chris Logan Edwards** of Tyger Eyes Books is looking forward as I am to next month's gathering of fantasy fanatics in Providence.

"Glad to see you'll be making it to World Fantasy. I don't know if you've been to one before, but they have a very different atmosphere."

What the hell does *that* mean, Chris? Like methane and ammonia, or what?

"There are a couple of books I just recently read in preparation for the convention that you might want to consider looking up. Both were published by Donald Grant, and may be found in the NESFA library. The first is *Lovecraft's Providence & Adjacent Parts* by Henry L P Beckwith Jr; it's basically a walking tour of Providence covering buildings and places from Lovecraft's (and Poe's) life and writings. The second is *Act of Providence* by Joseph Payne Brennan and Donald Grant and is a supernatural mystery set at the first World Fantasy Convention in 1975. Fun stuff.

"Lorna, Hannah and I will all be making it up for the convention, and we look forward to seeing you there!!!"

Since Hannah must be, what, less than a year old, I assume she's about as far behind in her reading for the con as I am ...

## From "Deep Thoughts"

by Jack Handey

(on TV's old *Saturday Night Live*)

"Too bad you can't buy a voodoo globe so that you could make the earth spin real fast and freak everybody out."

## FlimFan

### EXCELLENT:

***American Beauty*** — With all the sharp satire and dark portrait of suburbia you expect but also an added mystical sweetness that takes you by surprise, *American Beauty* is one of the best and most important movies of the year. You may think from the posters and promos that it's some sort of *Lolita* story, but it turns out you're wrong. It's about a 42-year-old suburban guy named Lester (Kevin Spacey) who suddenly realizes he feels "sedated" all the time, and tries to wake up and change his life. Falling in lust with the best friend, Angela (Mena Suvari), of his teenage daughter Jane (Thora Birch) is just one avenue he takes to do so. Annette Bening in a standout performance plays Carolyn, his frozen, ambitious wife, of whom Lester observes that "the handle on the pruning shears matches her gardening clogs." Queen Maureen laughed harder at Benning's big sex scene here than at any other similar moment in years. Outside of real life, of course. Wes Bentley plays Ricky Fitts, the boy next door, who may be in love with the daughter, or at least certainly likes to videotape her through the windows at night. This is one of the most visually gifted films in 20 years: in one fantasy sequence, Suvari is bathed in a swimmingpoolful of roses on the ceiling of Lester's bedroom. It's a really beautiful shot in a movie full of them; these moviemakers know the white lights and white-hot thoughts that flood suburban bedrooms of a night. Spacey has some scenes here where he loosens his usual iron grip on icy control, self-centeredness, or rage: When Ricky gets him

stoned out back of the building and then Carolyn busts them, Lester's giggles have a completely real feeling. I also quite like Ricky, who in a weird way you could consider the film's viewpoint character. Unlike his martinet father Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper), he's got some real surprises to offer us. If F. Scott Fitzgerald were alive, this is the kind of story he might be telling now. It's not perfect: some plot twists (like the problem with the Colonel) were obvious too soon, and I never ... relaxed into its greatness as I have with other real masterpieces. But like many good movies, *American Beauty* leaves a lingering curl of questions. What's wrong with Mrs. Fitts? What happens to Ricky and Jane afterward? And, hey, what does "American beauty" really mean? Is it the girl Angela? Too easy. Bening's real estate wife? Interesting. Perhaps the after-all rather shapely soul of Lester himself? Or is it [WARNING: I'M GOING TO GET ALL MYSTICAL NOW] trash blowing in the wind on a street corner? Moonlight on sheets and walls and dreaming faces? One sad moment of humanity from a pitiless father? Or even the happiness we may find in life, or in death?

### VERY GOOD:

***Three Kings*** — Too good for me to rush through the review simply to make a deadline. More next time?

***Fight Club*** — This dark-souled slacker fisticuffs fantasy starts as a satire of our empty, purposeless, wage-slaving, condo-squatting, totally emasculated lives. (Not that I'm bitter.) There's even an occasional SF note struck, as when the nameless yuppie drudge narrator (Edward Norton) muses that the same corporations enslaving us now will end up owning the universe also, giving us "the Microsoft Galaxy" and "Planet Starbucks." Then the gloves comes off, and the distancing essential for precise satire is lost. Our aimless hero encounters the enigmatic Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who becomes a violent id to the narrator's up-tight superego. (Both actors were at the top of their forms here, by the way. I hate Pitt half the time; this was one of the other

times.) Together they take what starts as a drunken, how-low-can-we-go exchange of blows and make it an obsession, then — as it turns out to be just what a lot of other low men have been looking for — maybe a revolution ... Durden sells his violent nihilism as a transforming experience for today's lost generation, who "work at jobs they hate to buy stuff they don't need." Sound familiar, anybody? Speaking of familiar, Helena Bonham Carter takes a slumming vacation from her Merchant-Ivory ingenue roles for a deliciously dangerous turn here as the gutter-loving Marla, who purrs after her first tryst with Tyler: "My God, I haven't been fucked like that since grade school." ... You start out laughing at the outrageousness here, as with a great slacker classic like *Trainspotting*. But director David Fincher of *Alien 3* and *Seven* (who, by the way, never saw a rotting old building he didn't like) gets into the fighting way too much, and takes us with him. Or at least half of us: the males in the audience hear their testosterone trumpeting, but even with Pitt, a lot of women may hate this move. Nevertheless, *Fight Club* is a serious effort of art by some talented people. It lands a lot of laughs. (Who could forget the boys' fantasies of fighting Lincoln, Gandhi, and Shatner? Or the raid on the liposuction clinic? Or Norton's literally beating himself up, and quite balletically, too? Or "I am Jack's complete lack of surprise"? Or teasing the priest with the garden hose? (Or of course Bob, the big guy with the breasts?) And it's hard to deny the attraction of mindless physical violence. At least until it hits you in the face.

**GOOD:**

***Bringing Out the Dead*** — Minor Martin Scorsese is still pretty good by anyone's standards. Here you get a few days in the life of a New York City emergency medical technician: a "medic" who in the careening course of the movie drives a "bus" (ambulance) for three fun-filled night shifts. Nicolas Cage plays a man who, you look up the definition of "burnout" in the dictionary, there's a hollow-eyed hologram of him. He's

been on the job way too long, can't sleep for misery and guilt (two specialties of Scorsese and his screenwriter Paul Schrader) over sights seen and people unsaved. He tells us, "My training will be useful in less than 10 percent of the calls — and saving somebody's life was rarer than that." So now he sees the ghosts of all his unrescued dead. It's another almost-comatose performance by Cage, like his suffering sleepwalking routine in *8MM* — but this time, he's in an otherwise good, lively movie, so we at least can stay awake. (Don't get me wrong; I love Cage when he's got some energy, say in *Moonstruck* or *Wild at Heart* or *Red Rock West* or even *Con Air*.) His character spends the whole movie needing someone to tell him a simple truth: "It's not your fault. No one asked you to suffer. That was your idea." Cage's real-life wife Patricia Arquette does an effective job playing the woman who will tell him that. She's the daughter of his first patient in the movie; they fall in love in a nice wordless little scene, riding in the back of the jolting ambulance and bumping their heads in unison. Look, you've encountered all this material before. But absolutely go see *Bringing Out the Dead* anyway for all its dependable Scorsesian qualities. Enjoy his usual great taste in musical scores, featuring everything from Van Morrison to R.E.M. to Natalie Merchant to UB40. Listen for Queen Latifah and Scorsese himself as the dispatchers' voices on the radio. And dig how Scorsese captures that famous New York sensitivity and compassion. As when a doc examines a patient's pupils and pronounces in front of the family, "They're fixed and dilated. This guy's plant food." Or when Frank delivers his own expert opinion to another patient: "This is the worse suicide attempt I have ever seen." And you get other fine performances: my favorite is Cliff Curtis as the extremely mellow, persuasive drug dealer, who describes one of his wares as "very King of the Jungle, *hakuna matada*." He keeps his cool right through the most wonderful scene in the movie, when, despite becoming one of Frank's patients while involved in an *extremely* tricky predicament, he stretches out his arm

toward nighttime New York's skyline while sparks fly (don't ask) and declares with passionate sincerity, "I love this city!" You also get three tangy performances by John Goodman, Ving Rhames (there's never a film where you're not glad to see Ving show up), and Tom Sizemore as Cage's rotation partners. Being big-city ambulance crewmen, they are of course as crazy as Cage's character. But each in his own way; and they're all *awake*, dammit. I don't fault their professionalism for overeating, drinking, whoring, Jesus-shouting, or beating people up on the job — this work is pretty stressful, obviously. But can't trained, street-smart emergency medicine experts for God's sakes see that Cage needs a *gallon* of *Visine*?

#### **DECENT:**

***Double Jeopardy*** — Since the trailers for this Ashley Judd/Tommy Lee Jones thriller already tell you it's about a desperate mother wrongly framed for the murder of her husband, framed *by* her husband, and how she gets out of prison and all she wants is to get her kid back from the bastard and Tommy Lee Jones is her mean parole officer who won't let her and then will ... what more can I say? It's pretty well filmed by a good director, Bruce Beresford. And the story leaves out some tedious parts in an interesting way. Except all the parts I just mentioned. Oh, and apparently the whole premise of the movie is untrue: you *can* be tried for murdering somebody twice, as long as it's for two separate "transactions." So don't try this at home, ladies. Especially you, Maureen.

#### **PRETENTIOUS TWADDLE, MOSTLY:**

***Illuminata*** — John Turturro was in this. If you're a relative of his, OK, see this one. Otherwise, don't bother.

### **FlimFacts of the Month**

According to something in *Fight Club*:

You know the circular white marks that appear every so often — just for a second — in the upper right corner of your movie screen? Apparently (if you believe Brad Pitt's character Tyler Durden, anyway), they're not really flaws in the film stock. They're actually secret signals for the projectionist, to warn of an upcoming reel change. Known in the trade as "cigarette burns."

You heard it here, uh, second.

According to something in *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1999:

Survey says 35 percent of everybody who enters a video store comes out empty-handed.

Or, in the case of people renting a lot of top box office Hollywood product, empty-headed. He said snidely.

### **Backchat**

**on APA:NESFA #352, September 1999**

#### **To Mark Olson**

Cool — a 32 page contribution! And all so chockfull of downright goodness. You've outdone yourself, sir. Hope I can hold my answer to a slightly smaller page count.

Fine book reviews, as always. You may even force me to do something abhorrent: read a work that one author started and another finished after the first's death — in this case, *Lord Demon* by Roger Zelazny and Jane Linskold. Normally I run screaming from what I think of as "zombie literature."

About your dumping on poor George Flynn about Readercon, I'll bite, Mark. I myself happen to "particularly like Readercon." If that makes me a "self-proclaimed, self-congratulatory, intellectual-like person" — well, I can only say with Whitman, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume." That's Walt Whitman, not Whitman Sampler, for you non-intellectual-like people.

Sure, the dark side of Readercon is literary pretension. But that's the chaff — there's nice wheaty literary merit walking around there as well.

Hey, I particularly like Boskone too. Glad I don't have to choose between them.

Re my Faulkner quote intimating that great art is more important than people, or people's feelings, or some feelings of some people — that's not offensive Romanticism, it's enlightened pragmatism. Art (by which I mean Science, too, if that makes you feel better) and weirdness go together. If you value the results at all, you cut artists some slack. In our field, this can range from bringing Lois McMaster Bujold an extra hot dog at your cookout to, I dunno, letting Hal Clement (or Ellen Klages) sleep with your wife. (Just an example, Priscilla. You too, Ellen, Lois, and Hal.) Of course, we each decide where to draw the line ...

About the note from Priscilla: there are a few New York style diners around here, surely? Like the Rosewood in Somerville, and the Blue Diner near South Station?

About your 28-page trip report re Ireland: lovely! Thanks much for the photographs, too. And especially the maps: the fairly expensive Hammond I keep in the office had one distant view of all of GB and Ireland, then forced me to hip-hop amongst three other pages for partial close-ups at larger scales, with all of northwest Ireland, for instance, a no-show.

Must be British mapmakers: you know how they like to keep Ireland partitioned.

You didn't say much about Irish accents, Irish turns of phrase, etc. Did no one tell you it was a fine soft day, or try to borrow a fag or anything?

If you're reading this in late October, and that smoked eel you bought in Kinvarra August 19 is still unopened in your fridge — I'd throw it out today, folks. In fact, by now, maybe the whole refrigerator.

Thanks for your restraint, Mark, in not appending full geological surveys of fascinating rockpiles like the Burren. Your level of detail was just right.

Still haven't been to Europe, and at my advanced age. Sounds really great, mostly.

But perhaps I'm scared off by news in reports like yours that the plumbing is Dark Ages vintage, the roads are scarce better than goat tracks, and the bars have to order out when you ask for an ice cube ...

### To Tom Endrey

Thanks for the little sketch of your personal language history. I love that stuff.

So what's this newer "old Turkish" theory that's replacing the Finno-Ugrian view of the origins and relatives of Hungarian?

About your opinion that spoken Australian is "a separate, but related language" to English, let me be among the herd that rushes to repeat George Bernard Shaw's immortal quip about England and America: "[T]wo nations separated by a common language." There's also a useful sentence demonstrating the *sound* of spoken Australian, that I once encountered in a book about how to talk 'Strine: "Rairping piper iz uzully bran."

Liked also your story of a chance meeting with our own Mark Hertel 200 miles from home in an out-of-the-way NYC restaurant. Seems almost infinitely improbable — but must not be, since into each life one or more such coincidences must fall.

One of my own such stories: having spent my late childhood and adolescence in several towns in eastern Massachusetts, I went undergrad to Boston College. But my high-school (and still current) friend David Rice from Foxboro, MA, attended Syracuse University, 300 miles away. One weekend midnight, Dave is walking down his dorm's hall toward bed when a floormate starts asking around for a spare bed for his visiting friend. Dave's roommate is away, so Dave volunteers. Just as Dave's falling asleep, the stranger turns chatty, starts comparing backgrounds. Somehow the conversation works around to the revelation that this guy is a lifelong resident of Scituate, MA — and remembers well this kid named Bob Devney who'd attended part of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade with him 10 years before!

(In the interests of full disclosure: Dave claims the question that clinched their mutual ID of me was “Walks like a duck?” Which reminds me afresh that real soon now, I must remember to kill Dave.)

Anyway, how about it, NESFans? A bracing round of astonishing personal coincidences followed by learned debunking of same should be good for at least 6 months of APachat.

### To Tony Lewis

Thanks for sniffing out that little guide to fragrance grading, from parfum at 22 or more percent oils down through eau de parfum and eau de toilette to eau de Cologne at less than 8 percent. Reminds me of an old coffee gradient, possibly from somewhere in Heinlein. In descending order: coffee, joe, java, jamoke, carbon remover.

Small correction before George (or Mark Hertel) pounces: you told Ed Meskys that an APA contributor gets the ish he or she appears in, plus the next one. Isn't that the next *two* issues?

About postal codes: since the International Standards Organization mandates three-place alphanumeric, not two-place, I propose the U.S. and Canada comply simply by adding a last-place letter uniformly to each of their codes. For the U.S., it could be a nice neutral letter like X.

That would make Massachusetts MAX, which is a fair tribute to our preeminence. However, California and Colorado might not like the sound of CAX and COX. And maybe Nebraska would want to trade with Hawaii to get the coveted descriptor HIX. Everyone might agree that peaceful Pennsylvania deserves PAX, while easygoing Louisiana might accept LAX. And it could be a kick to have maps of the Northwest show Oregon with the legend, HERE BE ORX. But would Maine move south to be closer to MEX? Where's Michigan in the MIX? Would Puerto Ricans care to be known as PRX?

Or would those naysaying New Yorkers NYX the whole thing?

### To Paul Giguere

Nice reviews as usual. You like *Ender's Shadow* more than I, but we can both agree it was surprisingly better than we might have expected from some mere moneygrubbing sequel.

Particularly like your description of what Thomas Harris has accomplished in *Hannibal*: a portrait of Lecter as "a more sympathetic psychotic."

Thanks again for your great service in cherrypicking the best upcoming releases from the *Locus* list. I too am already agog about Wilson's *Bios* (Nov), Banks' *Inversions* (Nov) (a new Culture novel — yippee!), Haldeman's *Forever Free* (Dec), Barnes' *Candle* (Feb), Zettel's *Quiet Invasion* (Feb), Flynn's *Lodestar* (Mar), and Gould's *Blind Waves* (Feb) — and have a feeling I'll be excited about Egan's *Teranesia* (Nov), MacLeod's *Stone Canal*, Baker's *Mendoza in Hollywood* (Feb), and McMullen's *Miocene Arrow* (May) as soon as I get around to reading my copies of those authors' *earlier* books.

Given her revolted reaction to Filthy Pierre's rather innocent nickname, somehow I don't think Ms. Hillier is someone to whom you should say, as you did, "Aw sucks."

### To Elisabeth Carey

Once more, a tasty set of book reviews. Must get to every single one of those novels real soon now.

The friendly disagreement you've got with Mark Olson about the definition of "space opera" interests me. You define it as "adventure fiction spanning interstellar distances, frequently involving conflicts of civilizations." Mark would argue it also must include adherence to, as you put it, "a relatively mindless formula." Think he's holding to the term's original definition in the field. It seems obviously borrowed in direct analogy with the term "horse opera," meaning a relatively mindless, formulaic Western movie ...

Oh, hold on; I just read Brian Stableford's wonderfully complete entry for the term in the invaluable Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. He lets us put paid to the debate right here. Even traces it to an SF source, Wilson Tucker, and a year, 1941, when Tucker proposed it as an apt descriptor for the "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn, spaceship yarn." Point for Mark. But notes it "soon came to be applied instead to colourful action-adventure stories of interplanetary or interstellar conflict." Point for Elisabeth.

And game for you, Elisabeth, I think, since Stableford goes on to show that "space opera" is appropriately used of some quite wonderful work by such luminaries as Asimov, Dickson, Delany, Banks, Cherryh, Brin, and Bujold. I'd add, oh, Catherine Asaro and Julian May.

It's all part of what I hereby christen *genre gentrification*. (*Genrefication?*) Same thing happened to the good old-fashioned spy story once Graham Greene and John Le Carre and Charles McCarry came along.

### **To Jim Mann**

A reviewer see what's on the plate in front of him; a *critic* compares it to what he ate last week. (A *fan* notes that the eatery absorbed an impromptu party of 12; had big-enough chairs; and offered kosher, veggie, and kzinti entrees — but that's another comparison altogether.)

You did your critic's job better than I did re *The Sixth Sense*, articulated a context I missed. You're right; one of the reasons it was so good is that it focused our attention by dumping the usual horror film conventions of upfront gore, boffo FX, and hectic pace. Should easily be nominated for Oscars and a Hugo.

Jim, you asked me off-line (actually on-line, but you know what I mean) why I termed the Stanley Tucci/Oliver Platt indie 1998 video *The Imposters* a "noble failure." Sorry I've neglected to reply until now. The short answer is: because for me, it wasn't funny enough.

I worshipped Tucci's first directing effort, *Big Night*. (Great video rental, everybody.)

I like the *idea* of *The Imposters*: a talent-packed tribute to 30s farce. I like most of the cast. The plot is promising: two impoverished actors assault a more successful Broadway ham (Alfred Molina) and escape jail by stowing away on a cruise ship, where, naturally, the ham also takes passage. And the movie had some fine lines and little comic bits of business.

Like Billy Connelly, the great Scottish comedian, in a wild turn as a predatory homosexual who boasts his grip is

"powerful enough to snap the neck of a small beast, and yet sensitive enough to caress the tender throat of a young castrato. Coax a song out of him." Or Campbell Scott as a ship's officer, sporting the Nazi accent to end all Nazi accents. Or Tucci and Platt themselves, in bits like the silent ballet at an outdoor café that begins the movie, as both try simultaneously to hone their craft AND escape paying for their meals by faking a fight ... then a death scene.

I laughed at all the above, and at some other points.

But too often, the action or dialog became too tedious, or a joke was repeated too many times. I just stopped caring about the movie ... So for me, it was a noble effort, but just not as successful as I'd hoped.

### **To Anna Hillier**

So you're going to lay off APA comments for awhile, and just send in artwork. Well, we'll miss your astronomy updates.

Maybe you could draw little star charts?