

The Deyniad

Book 83c

un zine de Bob Devney
25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760 U.S.A.
E-mail: subscribe to bobdevney@aol.com
Web archive (PDF) linked from: www.deyniad.com
Auctober (August-October) 2002
For APA:NESFA #389
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Top Ten Things We Missed by Not Attending the San Jose Science Fiction Worldcon

10. Hyper-intelligent people from all over the world rhyming Vinge with hinge
9. Two words: California fangirls
8. Volunteer opportunities involving miner's hat and map of McEnergy Convention Center sewers
7. Much-needed quiet time to decompress in total solitude at fanzine panels
6. A bad case of beanie hair
5. Crottled Bushburgers at "Crawford Texas in 2008" bid party
4. Acres of Hawaiian-shirt-clad flesh (per fan)
3. Art Show installation entitled "Piss Shatner"
2. Hesitating between Suprêmes of Quail and Double-Stuffed Oreos in Green Room
1. At long last, precious face time with favorite author and his nosehair

London High and Lowlights, Part 2

Like most vacation destinations, London kept trying to kill me.

I suppose that's part of the "Lowlights" bit in the title of this (not actually interminable, but close) series. Although the trip my wife Maureen and I took in late May to London was just about as glorious as I'd always imagined it would be, there *were* slight drawbacks.

For instance, in London they drive on the left. Now, they pretend to be all concerned for the welfare of visitors from rightist (ahem) countries such as the U.S. They even stencil LOOK RIGHT in big letters on the street at curb crossings.

But if they really cared, wouldn't they just switch?

Death Threat

So even though I do it correctly hundreds of times during our 10-day stay, there is this one moment, early in our stay, the Monday we shake the gilded dust of Harrods from our feet. After dinner, we take a cab into Kensington to look at the hotel that had been third on our list. (Queen Maureen likes to torment Herself and Her hapless consort like this on every big vacation. Her feeling: the carpet is always greener in the hotel room not taken.)

After the taxi spews us onto the sidewalk of the busy Brompton Road and pulls away, I check the map. Then lead on, prudently looking left and stepping off the curb – but three things happen:

1) Maureen yells.

2) I'm struck by the bull nose of another big black London cab (coming, of course, from the right, sneaky bastard) and launched into the air, thumping down dead 14 feet further along the street like a bag of shotgunned watermelons.

3) I jump back.

These three things happen just about simultaneously, and *almost* in that order. But, luckily, not quite ...

In this timeline at least, I manage to get to 3) first, so 2) doesn't happen that way. Instead, 3a) the cab hurtles on into the night with a disappointed blat. It's missed me by, as they say in the U.K., millimetres.

Surprisingly, this perks up my whole evening. After all, nothing in life is so exhilarating as being driven at without result.

Down the Tube

So I survive the Great Taxi Attack, which was entirely my own fault. But just being in a big city, you seem one step closer to the darker side of life than in smug suburban North Attleboro, Massachusetts.

For instance, we spend a great deal of time on this trip whooshing to and fro far beneath the streets on the London Underground. It's called the Tube because, well, use your imagination. Besides, since [EXPOSITORY LUMP COMMENCES] it's the world's oldest subway — the tunnel for a buried steam-powered railway line between what are now the Paddington and Farringdon stops opened in 1863, with the first electric traction underground line debouching at what's now Bank in 1890 [SUPPOSED END OF EXPOSITORY LUMP] — the diameters of the tunnels and cars do actually seem a little smaller than Boston (1897) or New York (1904).

Now on the tourist trail, many of the people you meet are other tourists or folks of the catering class. But you can have a nice sit-down with other kinds of Londoners just by taking the Tube. Every ride is an instant sociology field trip, a great way to encounter people from all classes of British society.

But not to *talk* to them, of course. After all, they're British.

Anyway, one evening in the middle of our stay, we encounter a rather ominous service interruption.

This stoppage, the cultivated tones of the woman on the loudspeaker under Leicester Square tells us, is due to "passenger action at King's Cross." But as we jump on and off a few trains to route around the obstacle, the driver on the Jubilee Line car is less circumspect. We're all delayed a bit, he says, because of a "person under the train."

Then the same thing happens again at another station, only 4 days later. We reckon that, since we're only one couple out of several hundred thousand that must ride the Tube daily, and since

we don't actually spend every waking minute on the thing, could it be that five or ten people a day forget to "mind the gap"?

The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Pedestal Sinks

I keep pointing out nice things re the Curzon, our hotel that Mo isn't too fond of. For instance, the heated towel bar. And the bathroom's bigger than the one in our hotel in San Francisco last year, isn't it, dear?

Although agreed, both feature pedestal sinks whose usable counter area would be measured in femtomicrons.

Tourists on Parade: Changing of the Guard

Whilst in London, Queen Maureen does not happen to call on Her opposite number, that Windsor woman. But we do check out her digs. Now, the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace is said to be the best free tourist attraction in Britain. I say you get what you pay for.

And Peter Ackroyd agrees with me. He hurried his weird, grumpy, magnificent 801-page magnum opus *London: The Biography* (2001) into print just in time for our trip. But though it enables me to instruct Maureen that "the great tourist attractions of Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square," with their "sheer vulgar theatricality and opportunism," seem "in a sense to be a joke upon their visitors themselves," I'm not laughing one cruel morning when dragged by my scruff a half-mile south across Green Park to the palace.

It's an indeed rather theatrical huge pile of cream and gray stone. Inside are installed artworks by Rubens, Canaletto, and Vermeer, plus 78 bathrooms, none of which we'll get to gaze upon since it's only open to the rabble July through early October. Buildings this bulky and self-satisfied always remind me of the story about Kirk Douglas's father, a former Russian peasant not too impressed by the Long Island mansion of one of his actor son's fancy new friends. Good old Dad spat and said something like, "Ha! I hate to pile manure around *that* to keep warm for winter!"

Peering through the black iron uprights of the palace fence, you can see two or three guys in red coats and tall bearskin hats. True, they're just standing around. But they're performing this office so alertly it seems that big exciting things must occur any minute. Which is a bearheaded lie, since it's only 10:15 a.m. and the show starts at 11:30. Even this early, we're too late to get a prime position by the gates to the forecourt, and so claim

the nearest clear spot on the fence about 50 feet to the side.

The architect here was cleverer than the rest of his work suggests, since at first you think you can perch in comfort with your back against the bars and your butt on the fence's stone base, just at sitting height. Of course, the stone cleverly slants out and down for maximum tush torture. I save Mo's place for an interminable hour or so while she goes to find a bathroom, apparently in Scotland.

Squirring nonstop, I chat with fellow suckers in the crowd that rapidly fills in all up and down the fenceline. My neighbors include a couple from Hong Kong (they're unaware of the meaning of the word "Colorado" on their bag, so I explain it's where cowboys come from); a surly pair from Russia, who make it clear via a language we share (Elbownian) they think I'm hogging two places just for myself; and three college students who it turns out are from Colorado (I apologize to them for oversimplifying about the cowboys.)

Eons pass. Still the guards stand at attention in the otherwise bare forecourt. Pinkerton does not return. Eventually Maureen does. We wait some more ...

Later I'll look back and realize I'd been lulled into some kind of bored trance that persists throughout the Changing ceremony itself. Eventually there are lots of redcoats marching around behind us, and in and out of the forecourt, thick black chin straps almost obscuring what I assume are their stiff upper lips; plus more soldiers on horseback. I snap out of it only enough to notice that, instead of the ancient ceremonial rifles I was expecting, these thick red lines of heroes are all carrying big, mean-looking weapons that look capable of sustained rates of automatic fire. I recall there have been several attacks on their Queen in living memory. This palace guard stuff isn't all just spit 'n Kodak.

Some of these guys carry instruments instead of weapons, part of a military band, which takes (surprise) an interminable time setting up. Then they launch suddenly into their first number. "God Save the Queen"? "The Colonel Bogie March"? "Their Satanic Majesty's Request"?

No, it's the theme from *Star Wars*. (Which, come to think of it, was filmed not far from here.) We and the Russians and Hong Kongers and French and Coloradans and probably Pakistanis, Polynesians, and Peruvians in the crowd laugh in unison. It's a small galaxy after all.

A last memorable bit: when somebody's trouser-seam apparently falls half a millimetre out

of line with its mates, one big bearskin hat whips around. Under it glare the fried-egg eyes of the attending noncom, who fair chews his chinstrap as he reminds me, the other tourists, and some pigeons in the park a half-mile away just where the expression "parade-ground voice" comes from.

"WOT DO YOU THINK YER DOING?" he screams, and carries on berating the poor private as they march on by. Not sure I'd yell like that at a trained killer carrying an automatic weapon, but they do things differently in the military.

It's the best moment of the event, though, for me. A tedious touristic exercise turns into one small moment of connection with a living, breathing beast — the British Army. This beast I recognize with some affection, from *Zulu* and "Barrack Room Ballads" and even *Good-bye to All That*.

Positively Sick-Making

Have so far spared you from one sad fact: the very morning I got up to fly to fun fab London, I was struck in the face (and chest) with what the natives might call a vicious rotten effin cold. Thus for the length of this once-in-a-lifetime tour of the landscape of an English major's dream, I see the whole city through Kleenex.

Actually lose my voice for 2.5 days in the middle, which is a surprisingly huge handicap when you're touring. Put that together with Mo's back strain getting off that nice Heathrow express train (her No. 1 tip for all middle-aged London travelers: *take a taxi* to your hotel instead) and you'll understand we are a pretty miserable pair.

Eventually learn to signal Mo with whistles and gestures. At one point, I compare her to a well-trained Border collie. Since she loves animals, this actually goes over pretty well.

Where the Books Are: the British Library

The Changing of the Guard loomed large on Maureen's shortlist; mine of course prominently features the Shelving of the Books.

It's about a 5-mile tube ride north from the Palace to the new King's Cross location of the British Library. As we climb from the station stairs up blinking into the sunlight, we're hassled by some scraggly guys, in fact more aggressively panhandled (or insulted — couldn't be sure what they were saying) than we'll be anywhere else in London. Throughout history, this has been kind of a rough area. I recall that my research said in 1690,

right around here they found the bones of a mammoth ... intermingled with pieces of the flint hand-axe that carved out its lights and liver 500,000 years ago.

We step briskly away from the cat-callers to avoid similar treatment.

The library's a few seedy blocks north of the tube. On the way, you pass St. Pancras Station, a red-brick, massive Victorian mountain of endearing ugliness. The nearby library, which opened in 1997, pays tribute to this train palace with its own massive modern-architecture twist.

It may be the most hated British building of its time.

First, architectural conservatives despise the Library's design. Which features a large scale, a passing resemblance to the station, few windows, a terra-cotta color scheme with black and deep red accents, an industrial-looking clock tower, a pretty charmless windswept front plaza, and a main entrance sadistically hidden in the shadows of a deep overhang. (I'm with them there — we're late for our tour time, and rush around frantically seeking Secret Door #1.) To my eye there's also an Asian influence, with slanted roofs and Chinese-red trim. The overall effect, if you must be harsh, is kind of like a blacking factory in the Forbidden City.

Nevertheless, I like it. It's not a wimpy copy of something else, and it eschews the concrete-slab school we're all sick of by now. It has its own character, and is the kind of building that could come into its own as the years go by and familiarity breeds content. Hey, if it worked for St. Pancras ...

The other controversy about the new Library is that it's here at all. The institution itself was founded only in 1973. Before that, and indeed up until 1997, much of its collection was part of — and housed in — the British Museum, about 2 miles south in Bloomsbury. The Museum's Reading Room was a storied shrine for writers over 150 years; it's where Karl Marx dashed off *Das Kapital*, for instance. When the Museum decided it wanted its space for, you know, museum stuff, and the Library declared its independence, you could hear the howls in the Hebrides.

I'm not sure if they're still worried about hordes of enraged bibliomaniacs storming the walls, but they do keep tours of the building fairly small and not too frequent. We've called a few weeks ahead from America, as the guidebook advises, to secure reservations. (It's about 15 pounds for two.)

Guide Michael Nolan looks like a young Dick Francis, and has that ex-jockey's brisk economy with words, and with the organization of his tour, too. Some impressions we glean as he hustles us around:

The 11 reading rooms are open only to accredited scholars. So forget spending the rest of your vacation here, Devney.

This place is honeycombed with a conveyor system you can tell Mr. Nolan thinks is very cool. He boasts they get 90 percent of requests from the stacks to the reading rooms in under 20 minutes.

Readers looking for material in the humanities are fairly easy to handle, requiring an average of only five references per visit, consulting each at some length. Scientists, as you might expect, are (he doesn't put it this way) bigger pains in the neck, needing only fleeting references but to a greater variety of sources.

There are 12 million items in the collection, from the lowliest pamphlet published last month to, say, two of the four surviving first copies of the *Magna Carta*. (Actually, my notes say "12n itsmi." Damn Graffiti handwriting recognition program on this handheld.)

If, St. Lawrence the Librarian forbid, they have a fire and must go to the sprinklers, fear not. There's a plan. A number of fine British supermarkets are standing by — with spaces held in their walk-ins so they can *freeze-dry* valuable volumes for later restoration.

The 18th century statue in the hall depicts William Shakespeare in knee breeches, but with the head of David Garrick.

Yes, this is the actual *Codex Sinaiticus* here under the glass. The Bible, written in Greek, dated from about 350 A.D. — so it's the world's earliest complete New Testament, for instance. And here's the complete 42-line Gutenberg *Bible* from 1455; they've got 2 here of the 20 that exist in the world, Europe's first full-scale work printed in movable type. (The hand-painted illustrations, the heavy creaminess of the paper, the sheer discipline of those 42 crisp, regular black lines moving down each page, broken by red highlights for first sentences: forget history, this is one attractive artifact in its own right.)

But of course you know the Koreans had movable metal type a full 7 decades before Gutenberg. You didn't? Well, here's the *Collected Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* from a little later, a Buddhist text printed in Seoul in 1434. Or of course an even earlier Buddhist text

over there: the *Diamond Sutra*, printed from blocks in China in 868.

(Why oh why was all the earliest stuff people felt moved to write down and compelled to save, from *Gilgamesh* on, religious? I know, only clerics had the leisure to read, so on. But wouldn't it be a different — perhaps a better — world if the earliest texts had been, say, love poems? Or comic books?)

The tour guide doesn't actually adopt the prideful tone above, and some of these items I see later, as we browse in the exhibition rooms after the tour. It's just my way of indicating how stunned I am by the collection there. If you love books or libraries — hell, if you ever thought a librarian was kind of cute — you've *got* to make a pilgrimage to this place.

And I haven't even mentioned some of the more modern stuff. Such as the Shakespeare First Folio. Or Admiral Nelson's chatty letter to his chief subordinate about what to do if they corner the French and Spanish fleets off Spain anytime soon. Or the parodic history of England penned by that cut-up, the 16-year-old Jane Austen, with cute drawings by her beloved sister Cassandra. Or something I didn't even know existed: a *handwritten* little story sent in 1864 by a professor named Charles L. Dodgson, with his own drawings illustrating the text, to a young girl named Alice Liddell. (It's titled "Alice's Adventures Under Ground.") Or Paul McCartney's lyrics for a new song: reading his fairly clear handwriting in my copy of the Library's souvenir book, it's the one that ends "Oh you got that something/I think you understand/When I feel that something/I wanna — " well, you probably know the rest without my holding your hand.

One last sight I must mention: the magnificent central column of the King's Library tower. Rooms within rooms, old books on shelves encased in layers of metal and glass, it rises up several stories to form the spinal column of the British Library. But it also looks spookily like the vampire archive Wesley Snipes karate-kicks into shards in *Blade*.

The tower holds one of the oldest and most extensive germs of the Library's collection: 65,000 books collected by George III. The guide tells us George kept these treasures in 4 rooms appointed with the utmost care and luxury — while keeping his 15 children in much plainer, even shabby quarters in the far corners of the palace.

Not sure I see the problem.

Cool!

You *can* get extra ice in your drink in London now, with little more difficulty than in Boston. Harry Purvis must be spinning on his barstool at the old White Hart, where you had to beg for a berg the size of a postage stamp. Apparently much has changed lately.

Could it have anything to do with global climate permutations?

A Feast for Observers: the Royal Observatory

Another day, we essay a splendid cruise (God, how British can I get?) on a river boat up the Thames to Greenwich, perhaps 8 or 10 miles east. (Thames River Service, one-way, 4 pounds 20 each with our Tube card discount.) Then up from the waterfront, and the Royal Observatory is a lovely walk through parkland and, unsurprisingly for a place where seeing the sky is kind of a priority, up a fairly steep hill.

Spring rain pours down while we ascend, but as the elevation increases we see sunny spots just over toward the river to keep us cheerful. Besides, we take our Gore-Tex parkas everywhere in England except the bath. I also sport a Gore-Tex hat and even Gore-Tex shoes. Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be rained on without result.

The brochure for the Royal Observatory modestly refers to its facility as "the centre of the world." For precise astronomy guys this betokens an odd notion of the topography of spheroids, but then the whole establishment gets quirkier the deeper you look into it. King Charles II founded the Observatory by royal warrant in 1675 at the urging of his mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth. This sounds like Judith Exner's or Marilyn Monroe's being responsible for founding NASA. Or have I stumbled onto something here?

The building's delightfully odd too. Brownstone with white trim, two large cupolas to the sides, then two wedding-cake flourishes swooping up to two smaller central cupolas, one of which is topped by a big red ball ... crowned by a thick cross ... o'ertopped by an arrow weathervane.

If you've ever seen the HQ of the Harvard *Lampoon*, you get the general idea. The whole thing just looks like fun. I consider telling the woman at the desk that if she's ever interested in selling, my science fiction fan association is looking for a new clubhouse ...

This is Flamsteed House, built (and named) by Christopher Wren for the initial Astronomer Royal. Who as his first solemnly scientific official duty *plotted the horoscope* for the observatory's success. Just for a laugh, he claimed.

Finally, catch this: Wren screwed up the whole thing from the start. The Observatory's primary mission was to map the motions and fixed stars of the heavens "for the perfecting of the art of navigation," by taking telescopic sightings along a north-south line, or meridian. But Wren built on the foundations of an earlier tower — so the whole grand edifice is aligned slightly off to the west. The early astronomers here did all their real work in a shack at the end of the garden.

Most of *our* real work here involves jockeying for position amongst all those (other) pushy tourists and schoolkids trying to photograph themselves astride the Prime Meridian: the space between two aluminum lines bisecting the pavement. Well, the designers here may have sited the whole building askew, but they were most meticulous about things that really count.

The Prime Meridian points precisely at the door to the Gift Shop, hint hint.

There's some truly marvelous stuff once you get inside, though. (Admission: FREE. Wheee!). I'm captivated by the Octagon Room, a large, airy, extremely elegant space at the top of the house. Apparently no hard-working astronomy workshop was complete in Restoration times without creamy golden walls, finely burlled paneling, ornate floral moldings around the ceiling, huge twin portraits of patrons Charles II and James I — plus extremely tall, narrow windows. You see their purpose immediately. In front of the windows are mockups of long-tube refracting telescopes, suspended between sort of sawhorse arrangements on the low end. And at the high end, their supremely simple elevating gear: long tall ladders with lots of close-set rungs!

Finally, what I really came to see:

Downstairs the Royal Observatory gives justifiably prominent space, a whole gallery, to John Harrison. He's the Lincolnshire carpenter/clock maker who spent 40 years trying to beat out all the high-born boffins and perfect a workingman's solution (the chronometer) for determining longitude. Most people reading this report probably know Dava Sobel's little book *Longitude*, which became an international best seller in 1995. The rest of you, make a bee meridian for it and discover what happened.

(I note that Sobel isn't mentioned anywhere here. The souvenir guide lists a Harrison book by Jonathan Betts instead. A bit sniffy about the Yank woman's success perhaps? Further research reveals Betts is Curator of Horology at this very Observatory ...)

Anyway, shining here in four glass cases are Harrison's fabulous devices. Ah! The amazing compactness of his final creation H4, which looks merely like a fat pocket watch.

And the fascinating, mind-bending complexity of the earlier benchtop models H1, H2, H3 — one of these is actually *moving* as you watch. The springs going in and out, the golden little arms going up and down. If my brother Michael were here, his tinkering-happy heart would be going in and out too. But when he and my sister Liz visited Greenwich in the mid-90s, they were due in London and turned back halfway up this hill ... Oh, the humanity!

England Expects Every Man to Clean His Plate

We have a late lunch at the Trafalgar, down on the Greenwich waterfront. Our first English pub. The Queen orders fish and chips, I the roguish-sounding veggie tartlet. There's a view out the window of the rain on the river.

When you see it close, the part that isn't mud looks sluggish and kind of nasty. I'm talking about the view, now. Our snug dining room is all dark wood, walls and furniture; perhaps not completely clean in the corners. Soon our chips clatter down without ceremony, a huge pile each, all bright yellow. They taste faintly of burnt lard. The waitress is a bit short with us. Wafts of smoke sidle in from the bar and pry at our prissy American nasal passages.

Her Majesty is not amused, and I attend her complaints with husbandly sympathy. Inside, I nurse a sense of profound rightness.

Our first English pub!

The Nelson Bond: National Maritime Museum

Waiting for service in the Trafalgar used up time we really didn't have. Hey, this is ironic, innit? Because when we enter the lobby of the museum (another free admission, yay) with only 28 minutes til closing, leaving Maureen at the ladies' room door and hurrying up to the guard, I emit only one word in my crippled croaking whisper: "Nelson?"

He nods as though tons of Americans turn up voiceless, and directs me to the last gallery on Level 3.

On my trip up I gather that this is an excellent example of modern museum-making, worth more of a look than I can afford today. Good lighting, comprehensive signing, and plenty of exhibits on maritime trade, art, and science as well as the expected warships and other boy-toys. (The full-

scale replica of the submarine's aft torpedo department does look tempting, though.)

I press on under full canvas to Gallery 21, which is devoted to the only British naval hero ever featured in a report to Mr. Mears's 10th-grade history class in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Knowing my audience, I recall editing out some of Admiral Nelson's final words down on the orlop deck of the *Victory*, spoken to his flag captain with the forthright manly sentiment of another age: "Kiss me, Hardy."

Hey, I had enough problems in high school.

This is great. A long series of rooms with cases containing plenty of pictures, letters, and artifacts concerning the life (1758-1805) and even some about the loves (Emma Hamilton, chiefly).

I like this quote about the three things Nelson expected of his captains: "initiative, close-range gunnery and a high rate of fire."

Wow, I'd forgotten how meteoric his rise was: Rear-Admiral at age 39. Especially considering his earlier 5 years on the beach, when — according to this letter in another case — he wondered if he were really cut out for this navy stuff.

Not that doubt played much part in his character. Frankly, he was a ruthless bastard. Here's a famous little "recipe" Nelson wrote, describing the Battle of Cape St Vincent to his wife in terms the little lady might understand:

"Take a First Rate and an 80-gun ship and after well battering and basting them for an hour, keep moving in your force balls and be sure to let these be well seasoned ... So soon as you perceive your Spaniards to be well stewed and blended together, you must throw your own ship on board the two decker, back your spritsail yard to her mizzen mast then skip to her quarter gallery window, sword in hand and let the rest of your boarders follow as they can ... Your Olla Podrida may now be considered completely dished and fit to be set before His Majesty."

Maureen has joined me by this time, and the gallery is so well laid out that even she's enjoying it, with history not her subject and several museums already in our turbulent wake on this trip. We're both silent in front of one of the climactic exhibits. Hard to believe they still have this. An old cutaway navy — in both senses of the word — uniform coat, with faded gold orders and medals.

And the fatal musket ball hole clearly visible, high on the left shoulder.

In my high school days, clearly one reason I liked Horatio Nelson is because he gave us

Forester's Horatio Hornblower. Later, he also at least partly gave us O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. Although he has finally to answer for Weber's Honor Harrington ...

One final note: it's at the Maritime Museum that there occurs one of those disaster which can be expected to screw up any trip.

One of us — exactly who shall be nameless, it's not important, after all the purpose here isn't to accuse anyone, the blame game is for more petty spirits — drops and breaks our camera while rearranging our clothes in the ladies' room.

A Life at the Movies: Greenwich Cinema

Okay, so I'm obsessed. Our feet hurt, we're tired, it so happens that *About a Boy* is playing at the movies in town, and I haven't had my celluloid fix for a whole week. Maureen is putty in my hands.

Hugh Grant is looking older, showing some more crows' feet but also more range than usual. Some good clever lines here, as expected in any movie made from a book by Nick Hornby. Hugh the Cad: "I'd never watched a woman crying without feeling responsible before."

British movie theaters still have curtains across the screen before the show. How quaint.

A Transthamesian Tunnel, Hurrah!: The Greenwich Foot Tunnel

At dusk, we walk back down from Greenwich town to the waterfront. In this maritime suburb, it's no surprise to pass the sleek black *Cutty Sark* at permanent anchor. No time earlier today to tour this queen of the tea clipper fleet or its tiny companion, Francis Chichester's single-handed round-the-world ketch the *Gypsy Moth IV*. But to the left of the larger ship is a small, round, brick building with a glass dome. For some stupid reason, this represents one of the top items on my London to-do list. Probably because it's not on most people's list at all.

Entering, we bong down, down, down a spiral of iron steps and emerge into the long white-tiled worm-belly of the Greenwich Foot Tunnel.

Built in 1902 to schlep workers across to the sprawling docks and yards east of London, this quietly wonderful construction is 1,217 feet in length and dives about 50 feet. Below the river bottom or the river, er, top, my reference doesn't specify.

A flat-bottomed cylinder with pavement about two footpaths wide below and tiles lining the walls all up and around you, the tunnel curves

somewhat ominously down ahead until you reach midpoint, then trends up. A line of unglamorous light fixtures makes a glaring catenary overhead ... possibly to keep you from dying mad and screaming in total darkness.

This was my idea, so why am I accentuating the negative here? Be grateful there's no sound of dripping water.

We're totally alone down here, cut off from daylight, from civilization itself by metres of mud and yards of rushing river water; totally at the mercy of any ill-intentioned passerby, for instance. Our steps echo hollowly. The sign at the entrance promised monitoring by "24 hour recorded C.C.T.V.," so if we're mugged dramatically enough we may make the British version of *Cops*. Posthumously, of course. I glance covertly at Maureen, who seems quite cheerful about all this.

She's looking ahead. We've encountered no other pedestrians to this point, but now there's Somebody Coming.

Sound carries down here. So the Ripper's footsteps are audible while the tunnel is still empty ahead. A blur appears at the top of our sightline, and descends. Will a thought about the geometry of the Jupiter spaceship Ferris-wheel scene in *2001* be the last movie reference to congeal in my cold, dead brain?

While I make quiet conversation with Maureen to drown out the rabbit hip-hop of my heart, the outline of the threat takes terrible shape.

Omigod, it's an English guy in jeans and a sweater! *Run!*

No, wait, he's pushing a bike — he can ride us down and take us from behind. What if I use Maureen as a speed bump? I've got to *think* ...

While I'm making plans, the guy passes by with a nod, and somehow, eventually, we reach the other side unslaughtered. A few hundred puffs up another long set of stairs in a twin tower to the one in Greenwich. We emerge to find our way through the peaceful twilight a few blocks to the Island Gardens light rail station.

So guess I'd recommend the Greenwich Foot Tunnel unreservedly, as a really cool, free experience, a bit off the beaten track, for those of you not currently suffering from psychotic paranoid delusions.

Big, Empty, Kind of Magnificent: the Banqueting House

Back in the city another day, halfway along Whitehall there's what seems at first to be just another light gray massive government ministry.

This is the Royal Banqueting House, the building by Inigo Jones that supplanted the gaudy Tudor half-timbered whitewash-and-red-paint look. It led to a 300-plus-year vogue for public buildings in the classical Palladian style Jones learned in Italy.

Here King Charles I enjoyed many state occasions and banquets before his last visit in 1649, when Cromwell's men served up Charles's head on a plate.

Unless you're being executed here yourself, this is not the most exciting attraction in London. (Maureen likes it more than I do.) The exhibition science could be better. First you watch a lengthy video in the undercroft (basement to you, bub), with glare carefully placed across the screen for maximum discomfort. Then you're guided around the large single hall upstairs by a rented little CD-player-on-a-rope that carefully repeats half what the video just told you.

Both point out where the scaffolding was in front of the building. And this is the window they broke out, from which Charles stepped onto "the floor of death," at the conclusion of the English Civil War. (Not clear on the history? His side lost.)

In happier times before (the building was opened for Charles's father, James I) and since, the great hall upstairs has hosted many a ball, masque, ambassadorial presentation, and other swell occasion. The CD does do a good job envisioning these scenes: all those lords and ladies packing the room with glittery high life. The space is about 50 feet high, 50 feet wide, and 100 feet long, with columns along the sides, a balcony running above, and tall windows on both levels letting plenty of daylight fall to the wooden floor. That double-cube proportion is probably the best classical idea Jones purloined. It provides a space all airy and noble without making you feel like an ant. (NESFA clubhouse architects take note.)

As it says in the guidebook, "The effect was completed with the addition of Rubens' great painted ceiling in 1636." Now, said paintings, the main attraction here, are 50 feet overhead. Luckily, I'm carrying a little 8X monocular. (Devney Touring Motto: Always Overprepared.) We carefully study the nine great ceiling canvasses, most featuring people who have eaten too much for too long. Hey, I can see that in the mirror anytime. Except these guys and dolls are half-dressed (if at all) in flowing robes or armor, are surrounded by similarly chubby cherubs, usually have their eyes blatantly averted in a cheap trick to direct your attention to some more important part of the composition, and all illustrate some sucking-

up-to-the-patron point such as "Wise Government Holding A Bridle Above Intemperate Discord."

This close-up view confirms what I've long suspected: Peter Paul Rubens, magnificent master painter of the Flemish baroque, bores me.

One wouldn't skip Westminster Abbey just down the road for The Banqueting House. But it's probably worth a stop if you're in the area — especially if it's been a long time between rest rooms.

Sneak in the front door amidst a cluster of real customers, and duck downstairs without paying 4 pounds for the upstairs tour. (Nothing in life is so exhilarating as being overcharged without result?) Halfway along the corridor are two of the best-appointed toilets in London. You can tell this place is still used for banquets and other grand social occasions by the upper crust. Beautiful heavy fixtures. Individual cakes of soap! And lovely solid wood top-to-bottom doors for your own little room ...

Cheap Thrills

We spend money like toffs ourselves on this vacation. But I've never had the fortitude to join the travel-cheap crowd, who seem to relish the prospect of fighting with a homeless person to steal a favored sleeping spot under Battersea Bridge.

A graphic designer I knew had been to every country in the world, and appreciated none of them. Jeff's stories of the wondrous places he'd been all revolved around *bargains*.

On one return from London, did he enchant us with breathless descriptions of the masterpieces at the Tate? No, he was too caught up reliving the triumph of trudging 3 miles to save the taxi fare and finding a really cheap room in Hoxton.

Though when freshly back from Florence, he did admit liking the "old Pontevecchio bridge." Which I freely translate as the old old bridge bridge.

[To be continued, apparently in every single future issue for the rest of our lifetimes ...]

Statistics of the Month

[From a (perhaps prejudiced) shark expert named Nigel on the NBC Today show, 8/8/02]

One hundred fifty people a year die from being hit on the head by coconuts. Ten people a year are killed by sharks.

[Yet still those blockbusterheads in Hollywood won't option my exciting new screenplay, Fronds. Even

though I supply the perfect tag line: "Just when you thought it was safe to sit under the tree."]

Web Site of the Month

You must visit — once — a dreadfully simple construction entitled *www.deathclock.com*. The next best thing to Dr. Hugo Pinero's little business venture...

Word of the Month

Affretando — a musical direction, from the Italian for "becoming agitated." On a musical score, it means "to be performed in a rushed manner."

I see wide applicability here, from practically everything about modern life to poorly profread fanzines.

FlimFan

Was going to edit the below fragments into full reviews after I got my Sisyphean London report done.

Hah!

But some of these fruit are way past ripe already, so here they tumble into the basket.

EXCELLENT:

Minority Report — This is a full-fledged, serious science fiction movie, based on yet another story by Philip K. Dick, made by major talents with all the production values they could muster. And a lot easier to like than Spielberg's *A. I.* Rejoice ... A florid, retro, but beautiful style that would also be perfect for Walter Jon Williams's *Metropolitan* ... However, there is an uneasy distance here. You watch it rather than live it ... Watching, you're constantly thinking of other movies: *Blade Runner* most strongly (darkness, eyeballs, the last shot), but also of course *A.I.*, and in a more minor way things like *The Fifth Element* (cool aircar maneuvers, vertical freeways), *Total Recall* (can't recall why now), and *Starship Troopers* (the trooper getups, the ads, so on.) I especially like the ad tagline: "Imagine a world without murder. Precrime. It works!" ... In the year 2054, why are most clothes so 2002ish? That's fashion, silly ... Cruise's little virtual reality dance in front of his screen must definitely be Release 1.0 of that interface software; how would it transfer, say, to a laptop in an airline seat? ... Max von Sydow, that most invaluable actor ... This is another riven Spielbergian family, with the agony of that more to the forefront than in any of his other movies since *E. T.* ... Ah! Definitely the best personal jetpaks fight scene ever filmed ... Samantha Morton as the precog — after years in a tank, she wouldn't just cling weakly to your shoulder as she walked along. She'd be a pile of jelly on the floor ... Some of the unfortunately less unlikely extrapolations here are in the areas of privacy and civil liberties. From a Justice cop: "It's not the future if you stop it." Absent some still-developing technologies, the flick barely goes beyond where the current U.S. administration's head seems to be right now. You don't have to be PKD to worry the erosion is accelerating, could easily lead to Bad Things ... Apparently the production department kept an 80-page "2054 Bible." Look for it on the DVD next year? I'd vote yes on the spiders, the sick sticks, the jetpaks, and

the invasive advertising. No on the vertical speedways.

Frailty — Christ! What an awkward yet compelling movie, about a father raising two sons — a man (Bill Paxton of *Twister*, in his incredibly promising directorial debut) who seems to be descending into a frightening, perhaps murderous religious mania. It's clumsy and melodramatic in so many places, but oh so powerful overall. When this comes to video, you're guaranteed a most disturbing night.

Spirited Away — This major new fantasy by the master of Japanese animation Hayao Miyazaki may be the best movie I've seen this year. (He created *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke*, if that persuades you.) Full review to come, I hope and pray to the river gods ... but see it now while you can, and let's talk later.

VERY GOOD:

Road to Perdition — This 1930s crime drama, directed by Sam Mendes, whose first film was *American Beauty*, is an even more beautiful movie, perfectly shot. In fact, it's too perfect to achieve the masterpiece status to which it so clearly aspires. Is it *The Godfather*? Absolutely not (although *The Godson* might have made an interesting title here). It has perhaps just as much art, but less heart. L. P. Hartley said "[T]he past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." True enough of *The Godfather* — but *Road to Perdition* looks back on no country there ever was. One where hard men all wear long, thick coats that photograph marvelously in the cold rain that always comes on cue. Where a nice guy (Tom Hanks) becomes a tommygun-toting legbreaker entirely out of foster-filial devotion. Where the good folk of America can be neatly embodied by the cleanest older, childless farm couple since Ma and Pa Kent. Where a cabin by the lake becomes just as perfect (and hollow) a goal as the illusion of Shell Beach in *Dark City*. And where a villain (Judd Law) isn't just a brutal Mob hitman, but a quirky serial killer with a trademark twist right out of a comic book. This story by David Self was actually a graphic novel first, by Max Allan Collins and Richard Rayner, and I'll bet it worked better there. A meaner, thicker Tom Hanks layers a bit of the action hero on top of his usual appealing decency. Paul Newman has a juicy role as a literal crime godfather, long-time crooked Irish ruler of a small Illinois city. And the theme of fathers, favored sons, and true sons does have a deep resonance for anyone who's ever been any of the above ... Some of my carping above sounds

like you spend every minute hating this movie. Not so. You actually pay rapt attention and find yourself quite close to purchasing the fable that's being sold here. But afterward comes a buyer's remorse.

GOOD:

Unfaithful — This study of an affair and its consequences is directed by Adrian Lynne of *Fatal Attraction* and *Lolita*, so you get slick and sexy doings with at least the appearance of thoughtfulness. Plus some close observation, beautiful visuals, and worthy acting. There's still a tendency to think of Richard Gere as a glamorous prettyboy, but actually he's done a range of things before, certainly playing characters who are desperate and, even more unstarlike, unlikable. But I admit it, for me the draw here is Diane Lane. This actress has held my close, some would say obsessive interest for years. She displays great work here, and more.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding — An old-fashioned ethnic comedy. No surprises, but warm and funny things we all enjoy believing get reaffirmed most entertainingly. I love the bit where the heroine is narrating her tormented adolescence as a dark misfit amongst blonde Barbies, and her voiceover drones despairingly, "Then my grandmother came to live with us —" we see a bent-over crone in black 1000-year-old village garb, standing on a suburban Chicago lawn shaking her fist — "because we weren't weird enough."

Blue Crush — How can one not attend a movie based on a magazine article titled "Surf Girls of Maui"? Actually (though close observation convinces me they couldn't fit one in those bikinis), this is a big jock flick. One women might enjoy as much as if not more than guys. (The article was by Susan Orleans, one of the best and most observant magazine writers working.) And the cinematography of the sport is the best since *The Perfect Wave*. Sometimes I was actually gawking at ... the waves.

DECENT:

Men in Black II — This big obvious hit was co-written by Robert Gordon, scriptwriter for *Galaxy Quest*. I'm glad such a talented guy was able to cash a check. And there are laughs enough here, I guess, to keep you amused through more popcorn than is good for you. The original was a revelation: a late pulp SF humor story such as Ron Goulart might have turned out, filmed with verve, humor nay wit, and the full focus of the world's best film

entertainment production business. (That was a compliment to the good people of Hollywood, in case you didn't recognize it coming from a reviewer.) Here, I like Will and Tommy Lee and Rip of course, and especially Frank the pug and his favorite song: "Who, Who, Who Let the Dogs Out?" But there's a big, in fact giant, elephant-shaped dog in the room while we're talking about this. Guess I'd better acknowledge his obnoxious presence: Folks, this is a sequel. So almost by definition, not one moment is inspired.

About a Boy — See my short, distracted review in this ish's report of my trip to sunny Greenwich.

GOOD/BAD

Star Wars — Episode 2: Attack of the Clones — What do you care what I say? You've already seen it, you'll probably get the DVD. It is what it is.

BAD:

CQ — An indie flick that's the directorial debut of Francis Ford Coppola's son, and it's about a guy making a *Barbarella*-style SF fantasy in 1960s Paris! The above tells you why I went. But I forget now why I stayed.

Reign of Fire — There's one early moment that gives hope: a playlet, for an audience of wide-eyed post-disaster children, of an ancient and resonant fable from the dawn of Time Before. Hint: its denouement features the dramatic words "I ... am ... your ... FATHER!" Otherwise, this mess is the worst movie I've seen this year. And it had to be SF.

SimOne — The New Zealand-born genius who wrote and directed *Gattaca* and wrote *The Truman Show* — Andrew Nicoll, clearly one of the best new talents of the 1990s in the science fiction world — has written, produced, and directed a disappointing dud. It's a satire about a control-freak director who makes empty art movies (sample title: *Eternity Forever*). But it plays too much like what it satirizes ... Al Pacino is tired auteur Viktor (think Frankenstein?) Taransky, a man fed up with star tantrums who is secretly given the perfect leading lady: a virtual-reality actress. Simone, this dish-on-a-disk, looks great on digital film but only talks back if he programs her to. Will she be a hit or fall flat on her nonexistent face? After awhile you don't care ... The performances are a mixed lot. Winona Ryder virtually shoplifts the flick with a small scene as a bitchy, screwed-up star. Also, Pruitt Taylor Vince has a nice turn as the most truly deluded stalker in

the history of movies. The major roles are less successful. Rachel Roberts as Simone is beautiful but unbelievably uninteresting. Pacino does his artful best to break up a bagful of windy monologs, but his character is drawn too sympathetically to be enjoyable monstrous yet too flatly to be much fun. The usually deft Catherine Keener of *Being John Malkovich*, playing a studio head who's also the director's ex-wife, keeps flipping back and forth awkwardly between cold-blooded exec and old friend ... We don't get a good story or consistently interesting characters here, but we do get much verbal wit. I like everything from the derivation of Simone's name (SIMulation ONE) to her mad-scientist creator's pride in overcoming technical challenges ("I licked her skin, I licked her hair, I licked every part of her") to Simone's answers to fawning interviewers ("I guess what I like most about my movies is that they're not about special effects.") Even here, though, it breaks our engagement with this story to have the writer constantly winking at us. Perhaps the subject dooms *SimOne* from the start. Like a novel about a writer, a movie about a filmmaker can be an awfully artificial thing ... [Note: Ratings systems can be troublesome. Obviously, *SimOne* is not anywhere near as bad a piece of moviemaking as *Reign of Fire* above. But it's a far bigger, more bitter disappointment.]

The Banger Sisters — Oh, Susan Sarandon, you tried so hard, but it was no use. Goldie Hawn, go to your room. Geoffrey Rush, what were you thinking?

The Four Feathers — "You English walk too proudly on the Earth," one "native" character says to a British soldier in this umpteenth remake of a corny-the-first-time sun/sand/thin red line melodrama about the First Sudan War. Not after seeing this.

[EGO SCANNERS NOTE: Not that plenty of you haven't been sending me correspondence, but I'm out of time and space this month. Wait for it ...]

Backchat
on APA:NESFA #386,
July 2002

To Tom Endrey

Don't see why you shouldn't put forth your ideas for the 2004 Boston Worldcon gaming room

in an article here, instead of mailing it only to the gamebrains of NESFA. Conrunning details can still be interesting even to those of us who haven't acquired that particular debilitating addiction.

To Mark Olson

Love your line about the theology sections of *The Science of Discworld II*: "[S]ome chapters read like a college sophomore's first foray into shocking his parents."

I'd once encountered the name of the college in Lexington, KY, and wondered at it: Transylvania University. Deflating to hear it's a straight translation of the Latin describing the local topography. Still, one wonders if the students at least have had fun with it. Too much to hope the football team would be known as the Bloodsuckers?

The geological/meteorological portrait of New England for your foreign gardening correspondents was a gently worded marvel as well.

To Anna Hillier

You "don't seem to have much to say"? What are you, un-APAish? Well, I suppose everyone deserves a rest now and then. Enjoy your time off, Anna.

To Tony Lewis

Thanks for the Midwestcon and Readercon reports. Yours are usually all about meals, mine all about program items. I'm not saying which is better food for the soul.

So the title of NESFA Press's upcoming Charles L. Harness book is *Cybele, with Bluebonnets*. I had a vague memory that Cybele was an ancient Middle Eastern goddess with something scary in her character or story. Here's how the Web (with a page at www.candleandcauldron.com/glossC.html) filled in my blanks:

"Cybele was the Phrygian form of the Great Mother, Who was adopted by the Romans as Mother of the Gods ... Cybele was the first Being to exist in the Universe ... She was both male and female, at the same time. When She grew tired of being alone and desired a companion, She castrated Her male parts, and flung them to the Earth, whereupon they became the God Attis, Her Son, Brother, and Consort ... Cybele was worshipped by transsexual Priest/esses who castrated themselves and afterwards lived as women ..."

Cybele, with Bluebonnets, huh? Now I'm afraid to look up "bluebonnets."

To Ray Bowie

You mentioned your parents moved to New Hampshire years ago "to get away from Democratic Massachusetts." Of course, this cuts Joe Ross and me to the quick. But also recalls a capsule biography Rex Stout used on one of his fabulous Nero Wolfe books, saying something like "He was born in Indiana in 1886, but moved to Kansas at the age of one because he was fed up with Indiana politics."

To Sheila Perry

Had fun with your short, snappy reviews.

I liked Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone*, about the birth and possible grisly future of Ebola and its ilk, perhaps even more than you. Isn't it possible part of the reason it's so "horrifically compelling" is the very "lovingly detailed variations on exactly how appallingly one is killed by the various types of filovirus" that you dislike?

To Lisa Hertel

Much enjoyed the description of one uneventfully eventful day in the life of you, Mark, and your pair of 9,000 children. That kind of minutely detailed journal entry will be the gift that keeps on giving, as you take it out every 5 or 10 years and boggle at the changes. Plus passing it on to your kids. Imagine Liana at 36, who hadn't thought about *The Wiggles* or Mom's ancient Palm Pilot for years ...

Also loved your spam from the individual asking assistance of passing time travelers. "My life has been severely tampered with and cursed! I have suffered tremendously and am now dying!" Hey, get in line, buddy.

To Joe Ross

Thanks for the usual terrific quotes from all over. And the mounds of corrections to Trivial Pursuit game answers. They certainly should have called you before daring to ask anything about 1950s TV or radio.

Your David Letterman quote sent me to his show's Web site, and soon to the Top Ten Archive (www.cbs.com/latenight/lateshow/top_ten/archive/). Almost at random, here's my favorite entry from Top Ten Interesting Facts About Air Conditioning: "3. Concept of variable settings introduced by Ed Low and Jim High."

On APA: NESFA #387,
August 2002

To Liana Hertel (cover)

What a pretty pink pig!

To Elisabeth Carey

Enjoyable reviews of novels by C.J. Cherryh, Andre Norton, Terry Pratchett, and Robert Sawyer. It strikes me how nicely middle-of-the-glory-road these choices are: all name authors, all fun for almost any fan from 8 to 80, all with heavy-enough genre elements to deny them audiences outside the field. (OK, Pratchett's an exception to the last part, but he still feels firmly in the pack for the rest.) You've got a focal-point reviewzine going here.

About your second ish this month: it's a peculiarly satisfying feeling when someone takes a whole page and more writing a response to one's comments. Even if it soon becomes clear you're just using me to launch a more extended essay on the question. And even though I feel guilty about hogging everyone else's reply space this month ...

To Sarah Prince

Welcome to the APA!

Now you've got to write the rest of your Boskone trip report. You can't leave us hanging, hinting it commences with "ferrets stealing my glove" and then stopping there ...

To lose one's cat, Ms. Prince, may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose both one's cat and one's dog looks like carelessness. (Always wanted to use something like that line on somebody. Hope you can forgive me someday.)

To Pam Fremon

Delighted to see another report on your incessant trips to Sweden. Showed it to our Web designer, who leaves this week for vacation in Finland and Russia; Jeff was so charmed he's contemplating adding an overnight ferry trip to Stockholm. (Advised him not to miss that ship-in-a-building attraction the *Vasa* Museum you covered last year.)

Your encounter with the bewildering ice cream menu, wherein you couldn't order because you didn't know your *skopa* from your *strut*: talk about the tortures of the damned! Why doesn't she lurk somewhere nearby, I thought, until someone orders something tempting, then point? Glad to learn you found another stand and did exactly that.

To George Flynn

You harrowing account of airport miseries to and from Cincinnati for Midwestcon makes me wonder if the Era of Easy Travel has truly passed. Probably the one such interval in world history, when a journey over 20 miles didn't necessarily mean discomfort, hardship, and days out of one's life. We might date the Era from the rise of true highways (autobahns, in the 1930s?). Perhaps it started to wane in the U.S. with the tax revolts of the 70s (when much transportation infrastructure maintenance went on infinite deferral) and the War on Some Terrorists after 9/11/01.

To Tom Endrey

About your request for dietary advice: I'm sure Leslie Turek and other leading well-being experts will tell you changing your diet isn't enough. You must increase exercise too. I'd look up more specific advice in my bookcases down the hall, but this chair is too comfortable.

Thanks for scaring us about everyday delights like toxic mold, asbestos, airplane thrombosis, and houseboat-diver carbon dioxide poisoning. (OK, I'm not so frightened of the last one.) The mold thing particularly gets me. Our basement sump pump solution has failed twice in the last decade, so we had some water on the basement floor, and I certainly feel my soma has been on the downhill slope over the subsequent time. Do you know if toxic mold definitely causes weight gain, hair graying, and a fed-up feeling at work?