

# NOWHERE FAN # 3



21st Century: World Of Tomorrow!!

## Nowhere Fan #3

*Nowhere Fan* is an occasional fanzine from **Christina Lake** about all things utopian, dystopian, fannish, or anything else that happens to catch her fancy. This issue will be available in print form at Tynecon III – The Corflu, and electronically from e-fanzines.com. Comments and contributions are welcome at the usual mailing address [christina.l@virgin.net](mailto:christina.l@virgin.net)

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### Nowhere Thoughts

*Nowhere Fan* has been on the back-burner for the past year and a half due to a range of other fannish commitments. First there was Novacon. Doug and I were doing publications, and didn't have much time to do our own projects apart from getting out an issue of *Head!* for Loncon. And then we were doing programme for Corflu, which shouldn't have been so much work since a) Corflus don't tend to have huge programmes, and b) we were devising the programme in conjunction with Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, fandom's most efficient and creative couple. But even this turned out to be more work than we'd imagined, especially as keeping up with the committee emails sometimes felt like a full time job in its own right (many hands may make light work, but they also make for long conversation threads).

So here I am in early March, hoping to bring *Nowhere Fan 3* into being in time for the Corflu Fanzine launch, and not feeling as creative as I'd like to be. But here's hoping that I can get back into a rhythm of publishing. I'd like to produce 2 or 3 issues a year, to get a bit of momentum going. After Corflu, there will be no more con-running for a while (or ever, says Doug!), so I only have work, PhD research, and my commitment to visiting the beach as often as possible to contend with. I must say I'm really looking forward to that time of nirvana (aka the summer).

Contents for this issue are mainly written by me, apart from the piece on *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* from Sue Thomason, which she came up with after a discussion in TWP, the apa we're both in. Oh, and the letter column. Obviously, I didn't write all the letters myself (though it has been known). The article on Aldous Huxley and Mindfulness was partly inspired by Andy Hooper's Beatles article in *Head!* and Ian Millsted's research on John Brunner, as they both made me feel that research and interesting fanwriting are not entirely incompatible. Some of the con reports have also appeared in a slightly different form in TWP. The cover is from the incredible Mr. Steve Stiles!

Humour has mostly been value-engineered out of this production, in order to make room for more blank spaces, but will return next issue or whenever I discover a gift for spontaneous comedic writing. Meanwhile I will continue in the delusional belief that someone somewhere might find some of this stuff interesting.

*Nowhere Fan #3* was written in the dying days of the CorfluCadre Yahoo group (just when you think it's all over, and actually it isn't), to the sounds of Telemann, OMD, The Phantom Band, Deaf School, Amanda Shires and many more.

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## Karuna. Karuna. Huxley's Mindful Island

Aldous Huxley's last novel *Island* begins and ends with the same word "Attention", and attention, in the form of paying attention to the here and now, is very much the theme of the book. Everybody on Huxley's utopian island seems to be practising a version of what we would now call mindfulness. Mindfulness, born out of a mixture of meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy, has become so mainstream that although it may not be free on the NHS, it's definitely a big player when it comes to relieving workplace stress. I went to a mindfulness taster at work, on a day when I'd been feeling distracted by competing demands on my time, and almost crippled by an inability to settle down to any of them, and found the session very calming. I came back to my desk and was able to focus on completing some of the small but time-critical tasks that needed doing. My head felt clearer and I felt less weighed down by the consciousness of what I was *not* doing. After that, I was keen to sign up for the full course of 8 sessions which began in late January. It was a little bizarre to be taking an hour out of work once a week to be sitting in a circle with colleagues, some of whom I knew well, and some not at all. It felt a bit like a prayer group, or some kind of weird cult. I also had to resist judging the guided meditations in the book we're using as a form of brainwashing. Of course, in a sense, they are, but an active form of brainwashing that is trying to redirect pathways away from destructive habits and into a calmer and more compassionate relationship with the present. Karuna, meaning compassion is also one of the key words that Huxley uses in *Island*. As my mindfulness course progressed, I was increasingly struck by the similarities between what I was learning and Huxley's recipe for utopian living, and wanted to find out what, if anything, was the connection.

Aldous Huxley's *Island*, published in 1962, a year before his death is the fable of a perfect society built around the confluence of Western science and Eastern mysticism set on Pala, an imaginary island, somewhere between Sri Lanka and Sumatra. The plot is pretty minimal, but yet contemporary. Underdeveloped Pala is being eyed up by a number of oil companies, and the neighbouring dictator is about to invade to seal the deal. But this is all just window-dressing. What Huxley is interested in is the mental and spiritual health of his islanders. Somewhere along the line, the cynical satirist of *Brave New World* has turned into an evangelist for new age values

Huxley, famously, was an early partaker of psychedelic drugs. His "dealer" was the psychiatrist Dr. Humphry Osmond. Osmond in fact coined the term psychedelic, though Huxley tried to convince him that "phanerothyme", from the Greek to make visible and the word for soul, would be a better term. Huxley even included a rhyme, reminiscent of the slogans of *Brave New World*, to try and persuade Osmond:

To make this trivial world sublime,  
Take half a gramme of phanerothyme

Osmond, wisely, stuck to his original idea.

In *Island*, Huxley called his drugs the moksha-medicine, probably an allusion to the mescaline that provided his first psychedelic experience. The moksha-medicine is an important part of the cultural and educational system of the island. Children have their first experience of the drug at graduation, when they are sent off to climb a mountain, and then given "four hundred milligrams of revelation" to round off the day. Adults take the drug at regular intervals thereafter, not in the manner of *Brave New World* where the so-called "soma holiday" provides an all-purpose escape from the challenges of life, but a couple of times a year to aid spiritual development. Huxley is careful to frame the moksha-medicine in a totally different way from hedonistic soma. Adding medicine to the name is a clue. As is his insistence that moksha is not for daily use. Not to be enjoyed "as you would enjoy an evening at the puppet show" (the closest that the Palanese come

to popular entertainment). Huxley clearly struggled with the idea that revelation could come from a drug. What was there to distinguish the mystics from the thrill-seekers? He comes back to this problem a number of times. In a letter to Dr Osmond in May 1959, he observes: "There must be something rather disturbing, to people brought up in the traditional Christian fold, in the spectacle of an overwhelming conviction of sin being completely dissipated in a few days by a course of pills." That Huxley himself found it disturbing, if for different reasons, can be observed by his uneasy concern that the abolition of Christian guilt through chemical means would lead to complacency. He suggests, possibly satirically, that "It may be found necessary to alternate euphorics and energizers with depressants and sense-of-sin-producers" – surely something that could have been sold on the black market in *Brave New World*?

Part of Huxley's concern was not religious but cultural. What was the value of education, literature and intelligence if just anyone could achieve revelation? "A century of research on the moksha-medicine has clearly shown that quite ordinary people are perfectly capable of having visionary or even fully liberating experiences," Huxley wrote in *Island*. "In this respect the men and women who make and enjoy high culture are no better off than the lowbrows." Since Huxley had an enduring contempt for the new entertainment forms of the twentieth century (possibly exacerbated by his own failure to break into the film industry), he felt compelled to come up with additional conditions for enlightenment. Drug taking had to be a sacred ritual, not recreation, and to prepare for it, you needed to do work in the form of meditation to cultivate "the state of mind that makes it possible for the dazzling ecstatic insights to become permanent and habitual illuminations". Huxley himself treated his psychedelic experiences as scientific experiments, recording as much as he could of his altered perceptions and corresponding enthusiastically with Dr. Osmond about possible psychiatric uses for psychedelic drugs, or their potential for inducing telepathy. But since the citizens of Pala couldn't all be scientists, they had to have spiritual training to stop them just using drugs for kicks. So, in between the moments of illumination provided by moksha, the Palanese practice the tantric yoga of daily meditation, or as the current paradigm might put it, mindfulness.

Huxley's interest in meditation and Eastern religions goes back much further than his first experiences with mescaline and LSD. After moving to California in the late 1930s, Huxley, along with his friend Gerald Heard and the writer Christopher Isherwood, became a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, head of the Ramakrishna Mission at Hollywood. Here he became exposed to a form of Hinduism that placed emphasis on first-hand experience over doctrine. He was also fascinated by Buddhism, and found what he called the "transcendental pragmatism" of Eastern religions more palatable than the dogmas of Christianity. By the 1960s, Huxley had also become interested in tantric yoga, possibly as a result of his second marriage to musician and psychotherapist Laura Achera, 17 years his junior. She seems to have been more spontaneous and less intellectual than Huxley, but shared his interest in self-realisation, writing her own self-help book, *You Are Not the Target*, with the enthusiastic aid of Huxley. In a letter to counter-cultural guru Timothy Leary in 1962, Huxley wrote: "Tantra teaches a yoga of sex, a yoga of eating (even eating forbidden foods and drinking forbidden drinks). The sacramentalizing of common life, so that every event may become a means whereby enlightenment can be realized is achieved, essentially, through constant awareness. This is the ultimate yoga – being aware, conscious even of the unconscious – on every level from the physiological to the spiritual."

Mindfulness, likewise, is about being aware and conscious, of both mind and body. While there is no sexual element to it – at least not in the seminar rooms on campus where we practice it, the first session did involve holding, smelling and slowly tasting a raisin (the tasting part was a bit disconcerting as it came not long after the suggestion that we might like to put the raisin in our ears). In *Island*, the first mouthful of every meal is held in the mouth and savoured before swallowing, to fully appreciate the food. Both of these practices sacramentalize the act of eating. Huxley cites in support of his ideas, the 112 exercises in

awareness printed at the end of *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, a book I remember well from when I was living with my Zen Buddhist ex-husband, Peter-Fred. Back then I was too impatient to make much of meditation. I remember struggling with the idea that I should be living in the present when I preferred looking ahead or daydreaming, and rejecting the idea of savouring food if that meant I shouldn't be reading a book at the same time as eating. But now, as I embark on mindfulness, I can see the purpose of being more present in the daily activities of life and feel better equipped to appreciate the benefits. The similarities between Buddhism and mindfulness are of course not accidental. Jon Kabat-Zinn who created the 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme studied under Buddhist teachers. Like Huxley he was interested in the scientific benefits of meditation, and tried to place mindfulness on a scientific basis, turning it into a form of cognitive behavioural therapy. Jeff Wilson in his book, *Mindful America* goes further and argues that mindfulness is just the most recent way Buddhism has found to adapt itself to a new culture. My own theory about the success of mindfulness in our current work environment is that email and other social media mirror the interior chatter of the mind, and a practice that helps you stay focussed on what's important and aware in the midst of so much absorbing but inconsequential noise is becoming increasingly valuable. After all, Huxley only had advertising, TV and Rock n'Roll music to deal with, not the giant mindless brain of the Internet.

I'm still learning about mindfulness, but beginning to wonder if the resemblance to Huxley's religion of enlightened citizenship is only skin deep. Mindfulness is above all about acceptance and not changing things. Even though acceptance of death and suffering is a strong theme of *Island*, Huxley always seemed to be looking for something more, mindfulness as a gateway to higher consciousness. In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley's account of his first mescaline experience, he talks about drug-induced revelations leading to a "lack of proper concern with human relations". What he really wanted was an activist kind of enlightenment which would bring back nuggets of transcendental awareness to alter our world and improve the human condition. The residents of Pala might live in the here and now, but they still attempt to improve their genetic heritage through artificial insemination. Their mindfulness feels a bit like a stop-gap until a better class of human comes along, or another way of conditioning the inhabitants to prevent them from being seduced by all the temptations of modern life represented in the book by anything from fast cars to population explosions. In fact, with soma, Huxley came close to the spirit of mindfulness when he wrote:

Was and will make me ill  
I take a gram and only am

Psychedelic drugs may have made Huxley more open to visionary experiences of life, but he remained at heart a scientist and a humanist who feared that human stupidity would destroy the world before we could make the next evolutionary step into becoming more enlightened human beings. Mindfulness, on the other hands, works with people as they are now, and mainly looks to improve quality of life for the individual, and in the process, has found a lucrative sideline in making us more effective workers in the distracting sound-byte world of today.

**ALDOUS  
HUXLEY**  
ISLAND



*The Testament of Jessie Lamb* by Jane Rogers won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 2012, in a year when Chris Priest notoriously tore strips off the entirety of the short-list, declaring them all “dreadful” - with the exception of Rogers’ dystopian tale of science gone wrong. I found the story fascinating but disturbing, and still don’t like its conclusion, which is why I was keen for Sue to write about it for *Nowhere Fan*.

## THE TESTAMENT OF JESSIE LAMB

*Some thoughts by Sue Thomason*

At first glance, this is a near-future end-of-the-world-by-plague story. Bioterrorists have released a virus which has infected every living human. Life expectancy is normal – except that all women who become pregnant die within weeks from a form of galloping brain-rot that sounds rather like speeded-up CJD. Scientists have developed a vaccine, which can be given to uninfected embryos produced from stored ova and sperm intended for IVF. These babies can be carried to term by “Sleeping Beauties” – very young mothers; age 16 is ideal – who are kept physically alive on intensive life support while their precious pregnancies develop to term. After the Sleeping Beauties have given birth, their life support is terminated and they die.

Jessie Lamb is 16. Her parents are unhappily married; she is deeply unhappy herself. She decides to become a Sleeping Beauty, exchanging her life (which she sees as a failure) for the opportunity to produce a perfect baby – with the added twist that she wants to become pregnant by her father, a fertility researcher and sperm donor, in order to give *him* a replacement perfect daughter (an exploration of the classical Freudian Electra complex).

The scientific background of this book is suspect. The virus is a neat portmanteau of current fears, an emotional state rather than a plausible piece of genetic engineering. The epidemiology is... unusual. Infecting *everyone in the world*, with no exceptions, would need a virus that was both very infectious (easy to spread/catch), and with a long latency period before symptoms appear (so that women who are, say, overwintering in Antarctica aren’t spared). A virus that *nobody* was resistant to would probably need to be modelled on rabies (the only known virus with a 100% mortality rate, afaik) – but rabies is not easy to spread, and once in the human body the virus travels quite slowly, so that vaccination *after* being bitten is often effective. Viruses usually cross the placental barrier (which is why it’s not a good idea for pregnant women to be exposed to measles or rubella); a virus that was hugely infectious adult-to-adult but not transmissible mother-to-foetus seems implausible. It is also not standard for a virus to affect ova and sperm – and they obviously are affected, because the Sleeping Beauty programme can only use materials previously banked for IVF; there is no programme to collect ova or sperm from infected adults, even for potential later cleanup. Finally, I don’t understand why the virus becomes actively destructive – to women only – during pregnancy. Hormone changes would be the obvious trigger, but in that case the virus also ought to be active in women taking the contraceptive pill (which mimics the hormone changes caused by pregnancy). So thankfully, this is a nightmare scenario we don’t have to get very worried about: smallpox, measles, and influenza are all much bigger real threats.

There are also problems with the Sleeping Beauty programme. Firstly and most obviously, why aren’t the Sleeping Beauties impregnated with (non-identical) twins? (Answer: because the Sleeping Beauty programme isn’t a realistic attempt to create a viable post-disaster human population; it’s an exploration of the emotional resonance of “a life for a life”). Why must Sleeping Beauties be so young? (Greater emotional impact, and a deliberately shocking antithesis to current official disapproval of Britain’s comparatively high teenage pregnancy rate). Why are the Sleeping Beauties all described as beautiful? (Emotional exploration

of the Sleeping beauty archetype.) What about the existence of a “Mothers of Sleeping Beauties” group for women who wholly approve of this use of their daughters? (Twisting the emotional knife – is this a pro-life group or a pro-death group?)

The wider socioeconomic setting is also unconvincing. Despite the impending population crash, technological society is ticking along pretty much as usual, except that primary schools are closing and nappy manufacturers have gone bust. There is no sense that the next generation of humanity (numbering maybe a few thousand?) will have to do things differently. There is no attempt to create a technologically appropriate setting for the IVF children, no attempt to build a civilization-restart kit. Because that’s not what the book is really about.

Having established that this is a story about feelings, not facts, it’s worth looking at the story’s treatment of “science” and “scientists”. “Scientists” are distant, mysterious, powerful, and rather frightening figures – apart from Jessie’s father, who shows affection to Jessie by explaining things to her. Oops; looks like Men are the thinkers and Women are the feelers in this world. Men are portrayed as rational authority figures -- and Wrong -- while women are their passive possessions and experimental subjects. Men’s role is to act; women’s role is to suffer. The book makes it quite clear that “science”, for all its vaunted rationality and superiority, is what got us into this mess in the first place. Science is Bad. And it looks like Children are Good; in another “world turned upside down” reversal, it’s children and young teens who challenge the old order, and effectively displace it, who say “You have messed up the world; now we want to do things our way”. However, the children’s-power sections of the book didn’t feel very powerful or convincing to me, and made much less of an impact on me than the image-cluster around the power of passivity and pregnancy as self-sacrifice.

Jessie’s “testament” – her self-justifying story-within-a-story autobiography, written while held in chains (well, bicycle locks) by her father in a vain attempt to prevent her from becoming a Sleeping Beauty -- is an excellent study of adolescent death-romance. Jessie seeks martyrdom; her society has groomed her for this. She is simultaneously utterly unselfish and utterly self-centred, and looks forward to dying in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way. She *knows* she’s right. She feels utterly exalted by the idea of becoming pregnant using her father’s stored sperm and bearing his child as a perfect replacement for her flawed self. Her name seems to combine the roles of sacrificial Lamb, and Jesse the progenitor of Christ (the ultimate Perfect Baby). Her testament is also a good example of the increasingly popular “memoir of childhood abuse” subgenre – these narratives are designed as emotional rollercoasters, offering readers catharsis.

As someone who values her unborn child’s life above her own, Jesse seems a perfect spokesperson for the pro-life movement. Her choice asserts that her worth, her value, lies only in her ability to bear a healthy child. Her testament proclaims her right to die, in effect choosing to undergo assisted suicide. She’s not only a dark version of Sleeping Beauty, she’s also a dark version of the Virgin Mary (who is not only exempt from the normal processes of sex and childbirth, but who also “falls asleep” rather than suffering a normal human death).

I found the book an unpleasant, harrowing read; I certainly wouldn’t want to read it twice. I see the central ethical dilemma as having no good outcome: Jessie is wrong to want to die, she is acting from misguided motives and driven by a powerful, twisted, and unhealthy desire. However, I’m aware that in saying this, I am, in the book’s terms, condemning the human race to extinction and refusing to grasp the hope of ongoing life offered by “science”. My own taste in science fiction is to prefer the hope offered by problem-solving stories where the problem is solvable, where understanding is gained, passivity (especially female passivity) is avoided, and individual and species survival aren’t mutually exclusive.



## Convention round-up

The biggest convention in my own personal timeline since last issue was of course the London Worldcon, Loncon III. And the smallest was Micrcon, a student-run convention in Exeter which excelled itself in the smallness stakes. In between, was the hardy perennial which is Novacon.

### Loncon III: Prefer a Feast of Friends

Loncon was quite different from how I'd imagined it would be. Not at all like the last British Worldcon where everything was spread over so many different sites. It was all neatly pushed into one corner of the Excel centre, so the anticipated floor parties that had spontaneously arisen last time wherever we could find space on a hotel floor were no longer necessary, or indeed feasible. Finding people was not so difficult either. Hearing about the queues to register as Doug and I were travelling down to London on the train, and knowing it was going to be one of the biggest Worldcons ever, I was surprised to run into people we knew before we'd even got into the Excel. The fan village kept this sense of ease going – nearly all the fans I wanted to see were to be found there at one time or another. I've no idea where the pros and all those thousands of people I didn't know hung out. Parties, programme items, dealers rooms and games tents, I guess. So the socialising bit worked, but surely that's not what Worldcons are all about? I felt I should be going to the programme, but I also felt lost as to what programme I should be seeing. I could have gone to the academic programme, but I'd been to an academic conference at the end of July, and I felt I wasn't at the convention as an academic, but as an SF fan. I could have gone to see big name writers like George R R Martin and all the GoHs, but I'd seen Martin at Eastercon, and none of the others apart from Robin Hobbs really interested me. I did see Kim Stanley Robinson's talk on Olaf Stapledon, Virginia Woolf and time, which was well worth it. But mostly the proliferation of options left me with a lack of focus. There was no feeling of community or shared experience in going to these items, because none of my friends were going. Instead I went to items that seemed to speak to my life as a fan. So, I went along to the fan GoH speech from Jeanne Gomoll and the subsequent panel on 70s feminism which connected me back to my TAFF trip of 1988 and forward to my current interests in feminism. Then there was the talk on the SF Encyclopedia, featuring Malcolm Edwards and Peter Nicholls, who introduced me to the mind-boggling idea that you could write encyclopedias from scratch, like 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, without crowd-sourcing them. Or the two panels I was on, The Future of Fanzines which reconnected me to Roman Orszanski from Australia and Pascal Thomas from France, both of whom I hadn't seen in years, and the Post-Colonial Utopian panel which allowed me to sit on the opposite end of a panel from Kim Stanley Robinson and actually hear him agree with me. I was a bit worried that we didn't address the question of post-colonialism, but we did make a good attempt at setting the world to rights, so maybe no-one minded.

The other event I was involved with was the Fan Fund Casino, which I approached with great trepidation, but thanks to the enthusiasm of volunteer stunt-croupier Pete Crump I was able to learn to play roulette sufficiently well to assist him in running a table. That was a lot of fun, though a little long-winded once people began to discover how hard it was to gamble away all their money. Other highlights were finding myself suddenly popular at the BYO schwarma restaurant because I happened to have a bottle of wine in my bag (in case of emergencies, you know) and the room party in Lilian's hotel which was made a whole lot more challenging by having lifts that would only stop at your floor if you had the right key. I also managed to find my way past boat-building and triathlons into the party zone at the back of the Excel, and talked copyright on the balcony at Charlie Stross and Dave Clements' party, and when that wound down, accidentally walked into a room-full of people wearing orange scarves which turned out to be the Jomsborg party. Which I wasn't crashing, oh no, because I was actually entitled to be there by virtue of my time spent hanging out with Cambridge fans in my early days in fandom. And just to prove it, I was even in some of the



old photographs. And then there was the TWP get-together, where former members like Lisa Tuttle and Margaret Welbank emerged. In the end, the convention turned into something of a nostalgia-fest for me, and I began to feel quite emotional about seeing so many old friends from different eras of my life in fandom. It was like a giant reunion, or, as Jim Morrison put it, a feast of friends. So perhaps, after all, attending programme, and seeing famous authors, was kind of beside the point?

### **Novacon: Music Inflames Temperament**

This was my Novacon as a committee member. Luckily, since Doug and I had been doing a lot of work in advance of the convention, our duties at-con turned out to be relatively minor. We each had to do one shift wearing the committee waistcoat – a shiny waistcoat designed to let members know that you’re the duty manager. Doug’s shift forced him to turn down a number of dinner invitations on Saturday night, but otherwise his main duty seemed to be helping people without keys to get up to their room. There was a lot of key activity as the hotel’s key programming machine broke down at the start of the weekend, and if you were lucky, you had one key between two. If not you had to get the hotel staff to let you into your room each time (annoying, but as Laura Wheatly put it, first world problem!). My shift coincided with the convention banquet and beer festival, so I did a bit of pouring beer behind the bar (this was fun, and not so different from standing on the other side of the bench and talking to people about beer). My only concern about wearing the waistcoat was to make sure that it wasn’t the same one as Bellis had worn the previous evening, and turned into a kind of Cossack head-dress during the gig by steampunk band, the Crimson Clocks. I half-thought they’d end up playing to an empty room, given SF fandom’s general lack of interest in music, and the well-known fact that fans can’t dance. However, the hotel had set the room up with tables cabaret style (and, rather disconcertingly, left the lights on), so it didn’t take many people to fill the room, and nobody needed to dance. But Bellis, who was feeling more Greek by the hour, felt it was not possible to appreciate the music sitting down (and who’s to say he was wrong) and proceeded to boogie along from the front, blocking the view for those sitting further back in the room. If only we could call the duty convention manager to ask Bellis to dance somewhere else. Oh, but Bellis was the DCM. So in the end, we just had to accept him as part of the show. Well, I did anyway. And I enjoyed the band too, who despite the bright lights and distractions performed with verve, panache, and more importantly, a groovy range of instruments.

On Sunday I ended up on the Girly SF programme item, or as I preferred to think of it, the YA dystopian fiction panel, in place of Jaine Fenn, who along with Guest of Honour Kari Sperring seemed to be on an awful lot of programme over the weekend. Caroline Mullan was chairing and had persuaded her daughter Emjay, as a real live Young Adult to come up and be on the panel. Emjay and I had a good conversation about *Divergent*, which would have been even better if I’d finished reading all three parts of the trilogy by then, and I didn’t have to keep asking her not to talk about the end. Kari stood up for girly girls like Bella in *Twilight* who weren’t naturally strong, brave and plucky. We all lamented the necessity of “the love interest”, even when they were busy trying to save the world or overthrow the government.

So, in the end, my first experience of being on the Novacon committee ended not too badly. I certainly felt more engaged with the convention than usual. I really enjoyed Kari’s GoH interview, and had my mind officially blown by science guest John Gribbin when he explained that parallel worlds really were a thing, and that’s where quantum computing gets all its extra processing power from. I was also really excited to get the Fan Writer Nova, since with voting numbers still in decline, there might not be many more chances. And I’ve always wanted a Nova for fan-writing; however small the voting pool, it’s still nice to have that recognition.

## **Microcon: The Barns Are Stormed**

It was good to see Microcon, Exeter's long-running student convention, back after a year's sabbatical. But I'm not sure that anyone's heart was really in the organisation. The guests did their best, both from the stage and the audience, but there didn't seem much enthusiasm from any of the students. But to be fair, they probably had very little idea what was going on since there wasn't much information on the website. Time for a rethink next year, or is this the end? If so, how will we ever know if Richard Freeman's, Microcon's very own not-so-tame cryptozoologist, ever finds the Tasmanian tiger?

## **News from Nowhere: the letter column**

### ***The jury's still out on whether fandom is utopian:***

**Wolf von Witting** [wolfram1764@yahoo.se]

I believe the problem of fandom not being a homogenous group prevents us from becoming or being a utopian community. And whose idea of utopia are we talking about? The big question for every utopian community has been "How do we get people to do the dirty jobs?" The jobs that need to be done, but which are no fun, or even hazardous doing. When we think about our idea of a perfect society, I am afraid we filter out the tricky parts from our vision. Everyone wants to eat, but who wants to prepare the meal? Fandom lacks political agenda, because we do not need to address political questions. Frankly, we do not care about who takes out the trash, as long as someone keeps doing it. We revel in science, philosophy, our own history and in speculation, yet when it comes to the hard questions, we tend to avoid them.

**Lloyd Penney** [penneys@bell.net]

Fandom is utopian in that it can support creative and constructive discussions, and create amazing events and items. We can imagine utopian societies in our fiction, and deal with what may happen in that place and time. And, of course, it can be very dystopian in its politics and feuding, its oneupmanship, its arrogance and entitlement, self-aggrandizement and delusions. In short, it's just like any other social grouping. Worst of all, we learn very little if anything in our dealings. Decades ago, fans used to call themselves slans, superior beings. The wish to set up a scientific world state looked quite out of reach if we couldn't even get along with ourselves.

**Jerry Kaufman** [JAKaufman@aol.com]

SF fans (at least the ones we know) fantasize about how wonderful life will be once they retire - more time to travel, read, get back to publishing fanzines or attending conventions. And often they talk, jokingly or not, about the afterlife being that Great Convention in the Sky. (Possibly some talk about that Great APA in the Sky, but I don't recall anyone doing so.) This suggests a sort of Utopian view of fandom, does it not? It's not something that would apply to society at large, but a Utopian community somewhat separated from the rest of humanity.

**Jason Burnett** [jason.burnett@starfleet.com]

Is fandom utopian? At one time in my life I would have answered that with a loud and unequivocal "yes," but now I'm not so sure. I'd say that some parts of fandom are utopian. I'd say that fandom has (very deep) utopian roots, though some fans have lost connection with those roots. I'd certainly say that some fans are utopian. But I just don't think I could bring myself to say without reservation that fandom is utopian.

*I agree that fandom itself is far from utopian, but the standards that fans expect from fandom seem to be a different story. Why do we strive so hard for safe spaces, gender parity etc and feel so let down when it doesn't happen? We can't control the real world, but somehow feel we can control our hobby space. But then Fandom is a Way of Life, isn't it? When I first started as a fan I totally bought into the way of life*

*concept, and thought FIJAGDH showed a lack of commitment. Now I take it as a sign of sanity. It really is just a god damn hobby.*

***But [almost] everyone loves a good dystopia:***

**Jason Burnett**

Based on Doug's article and the snippet I was able to read on Amazon (FYI to your other non-UK readers: The Carhullan Army was published in the US at Daughters of the North), The Carhullan Army sounds like something Margaret Atwood could have written. (I'm currently reading The Handmaid's Tale, so Margaret Atwood is on the front of my mind.) I agree with Doug that we need more of these thoughtful, near-future books. In a similar vein, I'd recommend Brain Child and The Destiny Makers, both by George Turner. (See also the article on Turner in Bruce Gillespie's SF Commentary #85.)

**Jerry Kaufman**

Doug's description of *The Carhullan Army* has both attracted me to the book and repelled me from it - I like the idea of a book set in the Lake District that depicts the landscape well, but I may be a bit overdosed on dystopian futures that start and remain bleak.

**Gregory Benford** [xbenford@gmail.com]

"While I've heard many conversations where fans pick apart starship mechanics I've heard few bemoaning the lack of understanding in world building of landscape, agriculture, soil or weather patterns."

Bravo! I feel the same and so have seldom done much big scale world description. Nearest I came is in BOWL OF HEAVEN and sequel to come SHIPSTAR, but it's not a world, but a construction.

***Is anyone still watching the Big Bang Theory?***

**Jerry Kaufman**

We've watched *The Big Bang Theory* from its beginning, and have enjoyed the depiction of people who are somewhat like us, with interests that somewhat resemble our own, and that cracks jokes we get - making us wonder how many of the jokes the general public gets. They must understand a lot more than we expected, for the show to be a hit. Of course, the writers laugh at the characters as much as they laugh with them. What sometimes bothers me are the jokes at Raj's expense for liking musicals, clothing, cooking, needle arts, and so forth, and questioning his masculinity. Essentially, these are homophobic gags that appear to show how insecure some of the boys are in their own maleness.

**Gary Wilkinson**

Big Bang Theory... well I've tried to watch it... probably best to leave it at that

*I think I've burned out some of my enthusiasm for Big Bang Theory, now that I've caught up and have only the occasional new episode to watch. After all, with Penny going serious and Amy and Sheldon almost a real couple, what is there left to do? Meanwhile in Parks and Recreation – it's all still ahead of me...*

***Can we still call Nine Worlds the hottest new kid on the block?***

**Murray Moore**

Lilian's account of Nine Worlds is the first I have read of a convention about which I knew only its name. Lilian's description of Nine Worlds causes me to think that Nine Worlds is the future of our kind of convention. Convention 2.0; fandom rebooted, with better software and faster hardware. I would be as au courant at Nine Worlds as is Dave Kyle at Worldcon.

**Jerry Kaufman**

Nine Worlds sounds a bit like TED conferences or "Maker" gatherings I've heard about. (In Seattle, there have been two GeekGirl Cons; other cities probably have similar events.) It would not be bad to see organizers of sf cons borrowing convention structures from these events

**Gary Wilkinson** [gary.wilkinson@gmail.com]

I was one of those that only heard about Nine Worlds after the fact, at Novacon actually. It did sound interesting and I really should go to something more media fan based sometime. I've only really been to lit/fandom cons and comics cons in the past. Although it's slightly depressing that there has to be a special effort to make a non-sexist inclusive con – I've heard about some of the problems that go on over in the States at their media cons. I had hoped that wouldn't be such a problem here (or perhaps it's just my experience of the cons I've been to) but apparently not.

*I'd like to think I'd enjoy Nine Worlds, but seeing it set up as competition between the bad old ways of traditional fandom (or whatever the hell we're called) and whizzy new super cool fun fandom makes me apprehensive.*

**And, last but not least, will I ever run another 10K?****Sue Thomason** [sueandrory@sueandrory.wanadoo.co.uk]

Of course I'm most interested in your 10km (as it's an interest we both share). So... are you ever going to do another one? It gets easier, you know... Having got my brain in gear about this, I wonder if the thing that went wrong for you was starting too fast. Terribly easy to do, as even if you're very calm and centred yourself you will be picking up excitement from other people around you in the start pen -- adrenaline is contagious -- and it's very hard to judge your own speed if you're used to running alone, or in a small group, and all of a sudden you're surrounded by a thundering herd. There are various fixes for this tendency to start too fast

**Jason Burnett**

Congrats on finishing the 10K, even if your time wasn't as fast as you would have wanted. I have intermittent urges to take up running, but they always seem to occur in conjunction with weather that's totally unsuitable to running.

**Murray Moore**

Running: good for you. I can run but I lack a reason. My thought, unvoiced, on seeing runners, is 'Your knees will last longer if you run on grass'. As photographed in forward motion you look satisfied.

**Gary Wilkinson**

Back in the dim and distant past I used to be quite fit and do regular exercise. I never really got into running – more cycling and martial arts but I can certainly understand the feeling of getting lost in exercise and all your worries/problems draining away. I did a few long-distant sponsored walks which I think kinda match your racing experience (certainly the feelings towards the other competitors and officials) Really must get back into it but need to lose (more) weight so I don't trash my joints. Or perhaps that's just an excuse. Anyway that was a good piece and a reminder of what I should be aspiring to fan writing wise

*Running has gone into abeyance of late. I still go out running, but don't feel very motivated at the moment. I might try to do another 10K this year if I can find one near enough to home to be worth entering.*

**IAHF:** Caroline Mullan, Roger Robinson (both talking about the Naomi Mitchison story I mentioned) and Jennifer Steele