

The 22nd National Science Fiction Convention of New Zealand

P.O. Box 74-013, Market Rd., Auckland, New Zealand



Nominations for Best Writer

Nominee	Accepted	Blurb
Jon Preddle	Yes	For his book: 'Timelink: An Exploration of Doctor Who Continuity' (TSV Books, 2000) You can visit: www.geocities.com/jpreddle/timelink.html for some Frequently Asked Questions about the book. There should be copies available at the convention for your viewing.
Broderick Wells	Yes	
Peter Friend	Yes	
Alan Robson	Yes	
Tim Jones	Yes	
Jeena Murphy	Yes	
Lorraine Williams	No	
Miriam Hurst	No	

Note: Some authors supplied short biographies. These have been omitted in all cases since not everyone has supplied them.

Jeremiah's Teeth

by

Peter Friend

'Jeremiah's Teeth' is a children's story which has been accepted but not yet published by the NZ School Journal

Jeremiah almost never brushed his teeth.

"I hate the taste of toothpaste," he told everyone. "It makes my tongue shake and shudder."

"Your teeth will fall out if you don't clean them," said his father.

"My teeth are clean," Jeremiah insisted. "Well, fairly clean. I eat an apple after every meal."

"Apples are better than nothing," said his dentist the next day. She peered into Jeremiah's mouth and poked his teeth with long silvery tools. "But brushing is better than apples. Another two of your teeth need fillings this time. I'll have to drill them with my giant spiky drill. Don't you wish you'd brushed your teeth instead?"

"Why-wo-why-wa-way-wa-woo-way," said Jeremiah. Which meant "I don't like the taste of toothpaste," but his mouth was full of long silvery dental tools.

The dentist understood every word - she spent every day listening to patients with their mouths full. "You should try some other toothpaste flavours. I'll give you some samples."

"Wa-woo," said Jeremiah.

"You're welcome," said the dentist.

Jeremiah took the samples home. He tried the strawberry-flavoured toothpaste. It didn't taste much like strawberries, and it made his tongue shake and shudder just like ordinary toothpaste. He tried the cheese flavour and the watermelon flavour and the tomato sauce flavour, but they all tasted toothpasty too. He even tried the mud-flavoured toothpaste - it really did taste like mud, but it still made his tongue shake and shudder just like the others.

"I'll never ever brush my teeth again," he announced.

That night in bed, he thought he heard tiny little voices from inside his mouth.

"Filthy, we're filthy," they said. "We can't stand this any longer. We're leaving," they said.

"What a silly dream," thought Jeremiah, and went back to sleep.

In the morning, all his teeth were gone.

"Told you so," said his father.

"I don't care," Jeremiah said. "Now I'll neer ha to brush zem again." What he meant was "now I'll never have to brush them again", but without any teeth he couldn't say 'f or 'th' or 'v' sounds properly.

Jeremiah didn't mind sounding funny. He ate his porridge and drank his orange juice and went to school.

Some kids in his class laughed at the way he talked. He smiled his big gummy smile at them and they ran away screaming.

But at lunchtime, he bit into a toasted cheese sandwich and said "Owww!" His gums were too soft to crunch through the toasted bread. He couldn't nibble his chocolate bar either, or chew his apple. He was so hungry he had to use his pocket money to buy yoghurt and a milkshake and a banana. He hated bananas - they made his tongue shake and shudder just like toothpaste - but at least banana was soft enough for him to eat.

"It was terrible," he told Dad after school. "I can't chew anything."

"You should have brushed your teeth," Dad said. "It's too late now. You'll have to eat soft squishy things for the rest of your life. What would you like for dinner? Soup and spaghetti and jelly and ice-cream?"

"Thanks, Dad," said Jeremiah.

That night in bed, he lay awake thinking of all the yummy things that he'd never be able to eat again. "Steak," he sighed. "Chocolate chip cookies. Pizza. Toffees. Crunchy peanut butter. Crisp apples. Corn on the cob."

"Stop, stop, you're torturing me," came a little voice from inside his mouth.

"Who's dat?" asked Jeremiah.

"Your tongue, of course," said his tongue. "I refuse to help you eat boring mushy food like bananas all the rest of your life. Get those teeth back in here, or I'll leave too."

"We're not going back into that filthy mouth unless we're cleaned regularly," shouted lots of tiny little voices from under his bed.

Jeremiah turned on his bedside lamp and looked down. His teeth were marching along the floor, carrying teeny-weeny signs that read 'WE DEMAND CLEAN WORKING CONDITIONS'.

"No toothpaste," warned the tongue. "It makes me shake and shudder."

"We demand toothpaste!" shouted the teeth. "At least two brushing a day!"

"I ha an idea," said Jeremiah.

"Jeremiah! You're eating crunchy cereal!" said his father the next morning.

"Yup," said Jeremiah, and smiled a toothy grin.

"Incredible," Dad said. "I'm taking you to the dentist for a check."

"Incredible," said the dentist. "It must be that new mud-flavoured toothpaste I gave you."

"Nope," smiled Jeremiah, and bit into a huge crisp apple.

Jeremiah never told anyone what had really happened. But from then on, he locked himself in the bathroom twice a day. He still does.

If anyone asks what he's doing, he calls out, "Wu-we-why-we". Everyone thinks he's saying "brushing my teeth" with his mouth full of toothbrush.

And he is. What no one else knows is that his tongue is sitting on the edge of the sink, not shaking or shuddering, just watching as Jeremiah brushes his teeth with a toothbrush full of toothpaste that he doesn't taste at all.

The End

Seventeen Views of Mount Taranaki

by Peter Friend

'Seventeen Views of Mount Taranaki' has been printed previously in Australia but is about to be printed for the first time in America in Aboriginal Science Fiction magazine.

Alice brought us our plates, walking across the cafe with all the solemn concentration of a six year old. She stayed near our table, staring up at me unselfconsciously. I smiled, and she shyly smiled back, then reached out and touched my face, running her finger-tips along the spirals and ridges.

"Pretty. Much more pretty than before." She giggled, putting her hand over her mouth.

"Alice! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The little girl fled as her mother approached.

"Sorry about that, Jerry. She's just a kid. She doesn't understand ... you know, what's happened and everything."

"It's all right," I said. "I don't mind."

"Not that I understand either," she continued, not listening to me. "Whole world's gone crazy. Not your fault."

Alice peeped out from the kitchen doorway, and I waved. She grinned and waved back, then disappeared as she saw her mother returning.

To kids, I was just someone who'd been given a new face. It was the adults who looked away, as if I was a cripple or an idiot. Even here, a place I'd been coming for years, people looked uneasy.

"Eat up," I told Grace.

"Mmmm," she nodded, her mouth full of pavlova.

They didn't have pavlova in America, or so she'd said. In fact, pavlova was the best thing about New Zealand so far, she'd added grumpily.

"Yummy yummy?" I asked, as she scooped up the last spoonful.

She poked out her tongue at me, and licked her broad lips clean. "Don't be cheeky, sir. I may have to kill you for security reasons," she said, straight-faced. She wasn't quite what I expected when they said they were giving me a bodyguard. Not that I'd ever had a bodyguard before.

She stood, startling nearby customers with her height. "Where to?" She was already scanning the street outside.

I shrugged. "Just a walk. It's a nice day."

"Just a walk." She rolled her eyes. "Okay. You're the boss."

Outside, it was worse. Within seconds, a scruffy teenager in a Guns'n'Roses t-shirt approached and slapped me on the back. Perhaps Grace was right, maybe I shouldn't go out in public until this was all over.

"We'll get 'em, mate, don't you bloody worry," he grinned.

Grace sighed, whispered into her sleeve and reached inside her jacket.

"The pricks'll pay for this. They'll be sorry," he shouted, following us down the street. "Earth is for humans, that's what I say."

Two of Grace's anonymous dark-suited associates appeared and politely led him away.

"Nuke the bastards! That's the answer, that'll teach 'em!" he yelled.

Grace removed her hand from her jacket, showing a quick flash of bright metal - her gun probably, but I didn't like to ask.

I avoided meeting anyone's eyes, trying to pretend everything was normal. But most people studiously ignored us anyway.

At a magazine kiosk, my own face gazed back at me from the cover of Time. "American Carrier Fleet Rumoured to Arrive Today - UN Debate Continues" was the newspaper headline. The shop assistant stared at me like a frightened rabbit.

"We're attracting attention, sir." Grace kept her voice low.

I sighed. "All right, let's go."

She whispered into her sleeve again. Thirty seconds later a large car with black tinted windows pulled up beside us.

"Go," said Grace, as the doors closed behind us. The driver didn't bother asking where.

Mount Taranaki seemed much closer since the aliens had landed. Three weeks ago, it had been a dull hour's bus journey away for me - now the big car devoured the same distance in twenty minutes.

A mile from the aliens were the TV vans and sightseers; people selling souvenir t-shirts and burnt sausages; families sitting on blankets, eating ice creams, smearing sun block on whining children.

Past them all, the army roadblock. The bored soldiers waved us straight through. They'd long since resigned themselves to traffic duty and crowd control. The aliens protected themselves very well - they hadn't killed anyone since the first day.

"Watch yourselves," warned a sergeant as we left the car. "Sniper trouble a couple of hours ago. People are still jumpy."

"Why wasn't I told?" snapped Grace. "So much for international cooperation - how can I maintain Jerry's safety if you people won't even -"

"Relax," he interrupted sourly. "Us dumb kiwis dealt with it, all by our little selves. Without help from the CIA or the Marine Corps." He turned and stomped off, leaving Grace clenching and unclenching her fists.

"Actually, you didn't miss a thing," drawled a familiar voice. "Just another nut with a .303." It was Nancy Roderick, complete with minicam and the same filthy

CNN sweat-shirt she'd been wearing for the last two weeks. She proudly held out a small flat metal blob.

"See? I ran out and got one of his bullets when it hit their force field doohickey."

"After filming him first, of course," I suggested.

"Of course. Fascinating man. George something-or-other, chartered accountant from Rotorua, he said. He was explaining to me how the aliens were demons of the Antichrist, but then the grunts dragged him away - most disappointing. Still, fifteen seconds of classic video journalism. So, if you didn't know about him, why are you out here?"

Grace snorted. "None of your business, parasite."

"I live here, Nancy," I reminded her. "Besides, town's pretty tense, even worse than out here."

"Yeah, the waiting's always the worst part. The natives are getting restless." She laughed raucously at her own wit. "Let me know if anything happens, okay?"

"Sure." I wouldn't say I liked Nancy, but I owed her some favours, especially for that first TV interview. Seventeen people had died when the aliens landed. When I'd walked out, alive but changed, some people were sure I was a traitor, or a spy, or maybe not even human any more. Nancy's interview made me look like some kind of martyr, even a hero to some people. No one had tried to kill me since.

"Oh, by the way," she called back as she walked away, "that old Maori guy was looking for you. Didn't say why."

We found Hemi down by the force field, around the other side as usual, away from the crowds. He was sitting on the grass, staring in at his house.

"Kia ora, Hemi."

He looked up glumly.

"Kia ora, toku hoa." Hello, my friend. A few weeks ago, I was just a neighbour - someone to wave to, discuss the weather with, usually no more than that. But everything was different now. Out of all those who once lived here, we alone survived, for no other reason than being a hundred metres outside the force field when it first appeared.

"I been watching them all day," Hemi said. "That one you call Melting Ocean, he been going around and around all the houses. And over by the Atkinsons' tractor shed, and that blue car near the bridge, and the Hapuas' cabbage fields."

"Where all the bodies are," said Grace, and started whispering into her sleeve. Hemi shuddered and hid his face in his hands. I glared at Grace; she had the decency to look embarrassed, perhaps even to blush under her dark skin.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," she mumbled, and turned away.

Hemi wiped his eyes and looked out towards the aliens again. "Melting Ocean keeps stretching up tall, you know the way they do, and waving that big slab of a head around

at us. Like maybe he was looking for you? Well, if not you, who else? Look, there he is again, over by the bridge."

Eight hundred kilos of alien galloped towards us at alarming speed. "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry, Jerry," warbled the translator box on his back.

Behind us, cameras and microphones switched on. At a discreet distance, two surveillance helicopters rose on silenced rotor blades and hovered watchfully. Overhead, no doubt, satellites peered down through the blue sky.

A squad of soldiers jogged around the force field towards us, grimly determined to protect someone from something. They were followed by a few of the fitter journalists, then a ragged drift of sightseers, children running in front, as if the lions had just come out at the zoo.

Melting Ocean skidded to a clumsy halt in front of us, and bent his huge head down level with mine.

"You are Jerry," he informed me proudly, tendrils furiously manipulating the translator's controls. "Good news, good news."

"Uh huh," I said. His last 'good news' had been classifying 329 species of insects, news which had pleased no one but himself.

He stooped even lower, angling a row of eyes at Hemi. "You yes are Hemi?"

"Eh? Thought you couldn't recognise any of us?"

"Each day human you are here. Jerry call you Hemi on many times. You yes are Hemi?"

"Yeah, very clever."

"Come. Good news." Without warning, three long clawed limbs lashed out and effortlessly pulled us through the force field.

The sound of the outside world faded to a muffled hum. Hemi tapped his ears and frowned.

"It's just the force field," I said. "Grace told me it does something to sound waves - it's driving the military observers crazy."

He shrugged, looked back at the silently gesturing crowd, then up at Melting Ocean. "You got the others to agree, didn't you? To give us back our dead," he whispered.

"Yes, yes," nodded Melting Ocean cheerfully. "Finished all with them."

"Finished?" shouted Hemi. "What did you do to my mokopuna?" He ran towards his house.

Melting Ocean wobbled his head in confusion. "Not hurt them. No pain, they are dead, all. We make wrong again?"

I swallowed and took a deep breath. "Did you take them apart? Like you did to me?"

"Some. Much much to learn, to understand."

"And did you ... put them back together again?"

"Yes, yes. As they are just before all. As I make for you on first day. But without pattern like you."

I winced, mute with remembered agony, and started walking after Hemi.

Melting Ocean waddled after me, peering at me with alternating rows of eyes and wobbling his head. "To gift returning the bodies, a good thing, yes? Soon we are friends, yes?"

"No," I sighed. "It will help a little. I hope. Families out there have been waiting two weeks to hold funerals, to-

"The death ceremonies, yes," he interrupted, "hiding the bodies deep in the dirt, burning them. To humans, important. You explain to me and I to others all. We climb to understand. Death different for us."

"What do you mean, 'different'? Death is death. If it wasn't for your fancy force field, those humans out there would kill every one of you. You value your own lives, obviously."

"We must learn. Purpose for life, yes? To add knowledge. We travel here, for three lifetimes. You are only other planet alive we know, all ever. Many many new things to learn, to add knowledge. Death, a bad thing, yes - an ending, no more learning. But knowledge of all is thing more important, more than a life or a death alone."

"More than seventeen human lives, anyway," I said bitterly.

"Accident, accident," he insisted, flailing his limbs and tendrils. "I tell you on many times. On first day, you are unknown, we not-

"Yeah, I know, I know. You landed and wanted to clear some space, so you just exterminated everything. From bacteria upwards, all 329 species of insects, the grass, the sheep, and those seventeen two-legged creatures you never even considered might be intelligent life."

"Yes, yes," he agreed sadly. We waded through the dead grass in silence.

"Stay outside," I told him as we approached Hemi's house. "Please."

I followed the sound of weeping, and found Hemi in a bedroom, crouched over his grandson's body. Billy was lying on the bed, arms neatly folded over his chest, dozens of toy dinosaurs arranged in precise rows at his head and feet. Melting Ocean's idea, I assumed - I remembered Billy as a hyperactive eight year old who liked to sleep on the floor and knew nothing of tidiness.

"Can I call anyone for you? To tell them?" I asked Hemi.

Silence, then a sigh. "No need. My sister, Katy, she has arranged the tangi and burial and everything. She will tell the others," he murmured.

"I'll leave you alone together," I mumbled, and left.

Melting Ocean grabbed me and lifted me onto his back, as if I was just a bulky suitcase. I didn't bother complaining. Tendrils wrapped around my legs and he started loping towards the Atkinson's farm.

"Are you going to let all the families in?" I asked him.

"I say yes, but others disagree. Hemi they only allow for he live here. Was. But others from elsewhere, no. I they allow to return bodies, I alone. They say humans are not real people. They say I am wrong to pattern you. You, any of you all, not see our patterns."

"Hardly our fault, is it?" I sighed. "We're too different. Your eyes can't see our colours, not even light and dark. Beyond that we've got no idea how your vision does work - some sort of 3D radar is the scientists' latest guess."

"No, no," he protested. "Your words are true, but not problem. Patterns is problem. You not know your face."

"I understand that you can't recognise us by our faces," I said, trying to stay patient, "so you carved my face so you could tell me apart."

"No, no. Not identify you, identify you ... no, my words slide past." He wobbled his head and tried again. "Under fingers, humans has patterns. Fingerprints, yes? Patterns each different all, identify you, yes, but ... no meaning. Yes?"

"Thanks for explaining," I sighed.

Inside the rusty tractor shed was another alien, a female judging by her longer, slimmer limbs and pale colouring. She was crouched over Joe Atkinson, doing something unpleasant to his arm. The two aliens clicked and whistled rapidly at each other.

"He yet not repaired. Almost, very soon," said Melting Ocean to me. "We go to another."

Nearer the farmhouse was another corpse, a farmhand I'd met only once, called Linda as far as I could remember. Next to her sprawled body, two aliens patiently dismantled her tractor. They were most of the way through the engine, and neatly sorted piles of washers, nuts and bolts lay on the ground.

Melting Ocean picked up Linda in one of his claws, her arms and legs flopping loosely.

"You can't carry bodies around like that," I said. "Put me down a moment."

"Damage not," he protested, but bent down and lowered me to the ground. "Another death ceremony?"

"Sort of. All the humans will be watching. Hold her in your arms, claws, whatever they are, like this," I mimed with my own arms, "and walk with her, don't run."

"Inefficiency," he said. "Only carry two."

"Please, do it my way. Trust me. To us, this will be the most important thing you've done since the first day."

Back inside the tractor shed, the other alien appeared to have finished with Joe's arm. I forced myself to check him, but he looked untouched, unscarred, just like Linda and Billy. Just like me, except my face.

The female alien snatched the translator box from Melting Ocean and leapt in front of me. "What is my pattern, human?" she asked, tapping her head with a claw.

I stared at her. "I don't know."

She made the high-pitched rattling noise which seemed to be their way of laughing. "I am Fast Sky Over Tangling Vines," she sneered, tapping her head again. "You are Seventeen Views Of Mount Taranaki. What is him?" She pointed at Melting Ocean.

"What?"

She rattled again, thumping her claws on the ground. "Animals all," she said to Melting Ocean. "You seek mirage. You bring us shame of delusion." She flung the translator back at him, whirled and punched a jagged hole in the shed's corrugated iron door, then bounded away. The door shivered and rang on its hinges, slowly shaking itself still. Silently, Melting Ocean scooped up Joe.

"Bodies are correct?" he asked.

I moved Joe's left leg slightly, and brushed a lock of hair from Linda's face.

"Yes. Let's go."

We walked down to the waiting ambulances and crowds.

Two hours later, we'd carried sixteen bodies out. Each time we reached the force field, the crowd had grown bigger. More soldiers and police had moved in, but did nothing to stop people throwing the stones and bottles which bounced futilely off the force field.

"Much anger. I make wrong?"

"No," I sighed, "we're both doing our best. C'mon, we'd better go check on Hemi, he must be still back at his house."

We found him on his front porch, slouched in an old cane chair and talking into a cellular phone.

"That thing works?" I asked incredulously.

He glared at me and put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Course it does. What are you talking about?"

I laughed out loud, to the bewilderment of both human and alien. "Sorry. You have no idea how many military types out there have been guessing how to communicate through the force field."

Hemi looked at me strangely, murmured into the cell phone for a few moments, then pushed down the aerial.

"Katy's son lent it to me last week. I saw the soldiers already cut all the power and telephone lines."

"You wish me to carry Billy?" asked Melting Ocean.

"What? No, that is for me to do. But not while that bloody circus is out there. I talked to Katy - she has arranged things with the soldiers. After dark, they will bring an ambulance around. After two weeks, I can wait a few more hours."

"I'll stay and wait with you, if that's okay," I said.

"Sure, we have all had a bad day."

"Hemi, you wish to kill me?" asked Melting Ocean.

"What? Hell, you ask some strange questions."

"The humans, many, they shout for my death."

"Yeah, well, that is their opinion. I do my own thinking, thanks. Have you ever heard of utu?"

"Utu?" repeated Melting Ocean, awkward with the new word.

"Revenge killing, to restore mana. No, you do not know what mana is either, do you? More deaths, that is what them out there want. Rough justice, payback, eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, call it what you like - the same thing in any language. But what is the point? Killing you will not bring Billy back, will it?"

"No," agreed Melting Ocean. "Also others, they wish my death."

"Others? The other aliens?"

"They say I am a crime - my words are empty, I cannot prove knowledge. Then I not earn life."

"Shit, so much trouble over a few bloody patterns," Hemi sighed.

"The patterns," I said, looking up at Melting Ocean. "I just clicked. What Fast Sky Over ... whatever her name was said, what you've been telling me. The pattern on your head, it literally means Melting Ocean, doesn't it? And her pattern means her name, and what you carved on my head - Seventeen Views Of Mount Taranaki is your name for me, isn't it?"

"You not know this before?" asked Melting Ocean, wobbling his head.

"Doesn't look like seventeen views of anything to me," said Hemi, staring at the curves and furrows on my face.

"Why seventeen?" I asked, afraid I already knew the answer.

"We see mountain, it is admirable. We land. Seventeen humans die. I inspire to give you pattern. Good pattern is needed, important, for remembering. I say you are people, all, so I record each in your pattern. To give ... honour?"

"Your patterns - they are all symbols, right?" said Hemi. "A circle somewhere means one thing, a group of lines in another place means something else." He laughed bitterly. "Damned shame your spaceship not arrive a bit sooner. Two hundred years ago, us Maori were still covered in moko. Maybe, just maybe, you would have looked at our patterns and we would have looked at your patterns, and no-one would have ended up dead."

"Moko?" repeated Melting Ocean.

"Tattoos," I said.

"Tattoos!" sneered Hemi good-naturedly. "No, not your sissy little pakeha ink tattoos. Hang on a minute, I will show you moko."

He disappeared inside the house. Melting Ocean stretched out on the grass, looking like a giant sea anemone trying to eat a giant lobster.

"I been keeping this hidden since Billy came to live with me," said Hemi, returning with a bulky object carefully wrapped in a blanket. "Was going to give it to him when he got older."

He unwrapped a wooden figure covered in elaborate carved lines and spirals. "His father made this in prison. Only good thing the bastard ever did, apart from fathering Billy."

"Patterns. I can see," exclaimed Melting Ocean, pulling himself upright. "It is a human?"

"A tekoteko, a carving of an ancestor."

"Are three fingers and toes only?" Melting Ocean pointed. "Why?"

"I do not know - there are many theories, probably all wrong. I am no expert. Look at the head, that is what I wanted you to see - that is the same pattern the real man had. This is carved in wood, but in the old days we tattooed the same way - chisels into flesh. Must have hurt like hell. When it all healed, it left permanent ridges and furrows in the skin. Sort of like what you did to Jerry."

"The patterns are nothing like the same, of course, they do not mean oceans or views or anything like that. See that spiral there, with the three lines across it? That shows he was an expert storyteller - a highly respected man. The pattern on his cheeks there, under the eyes, that identifies his tribe. Up there is the rank of his father, and on the other side the rank of his mother."

"I must see humans with moko," insisted Melting Ocean. "I show others. They then understand, yes? Soon we are friends."

Hemi sighed. "Bad timing again. Moko went out of fashion a century ago. One of my great grandfathers had it. I met him once when I was five - boy, was I scared. He died, oh, must be fifty years ago. Some of the young guys get it done these days, but usually with modern ink tattoo - no good to your weird eyes. I have heard of people still doing it the traditional way, but it is very rare."

"But there is plenty of wood carving around, far better stuff than this. The marae on the edge of town, where I will take Billy tonight, they have some. And the museum. Up at Auckland museum, I went there once - they have a great collection."

"I borrow wood moko? Please?"

Hemi stared at the tekoteko, sighed and placed it in one of Melting Ocean's claws. "It is yours. Tell them it is ... a gift of knowledge."

"Gratitude," said Melting Ocean, and galloped away.

"Great," I said. "Now what?"

"Now we sit and watch the sun set. Billy liked sunsets."

Just after eight, an unlit ambulance quietly pulled up at the force field and took Hemi and Billy away. I was taken to a heavily guarded tent where a dozen politicians and army

officers spent an hour asking me pointless questions. When I left, they were still arguing with each other.

Two hours later Hemi returned, along with two army trucks with blacked out lights, and took Melting Ocean and three other aliens away.

I was dozing on Grace's shoulder when they returned. She half-carried me to one of the army caravans and put me to bed.

The sound of a loud explosion woke me just before dawn. Outside, there was a lot of shouting, and I could see flames down by the force field.

"Missile," Nancy shouted cheerfully as she ran past with her camera. "It's Baghdad all over again."

"Go back to bed," Grace told me. "Whatever happened, there's nothing you can do."

I obeyed.

Nancy was on the TV news while I ate breakfast. The captain and two officers of the USS Nemesis had just resigned over their 'accidental' firing of a smart missile. Nancy showed the damage - an impact crater nearly three metres deep, and a lot of blackened earth, but inside the force field not a blade of dead grass had been disturbed.

The rest of the news was interrupted by a frantic hammering on the caravan door. "Jerry! Get your ass out here! They're up to something," came Grace's voice.

Down by the force field, the crowd was bigger than ever. Thousands had come to see the missile crater, and to throw things at the force field, but now they watched as all twenty-two aliens solemnly marched towards them. I recognised Melting Ocean, carrying the translator box and Hemi's tekoteko. All except four of the others were carrying long hooked metal rods like giant dental instruments.

Grace hauled me up onto the caravan roof so we could see over the crowd. People started to step back nervously as the aliens got closer, relaxing only when the aliens halted about twenty metres from the force field. A quiet hum of conversation grew behind the clicking of hundreds of cameras.

"Humans," announced Melting Ocean. "You are people."

A few titters, but otherwise baffled silence. Hemi and I were probably the only ones who understood. I looked around but couldn't see him anywhere.

"We are people. We did harm you," Melting Ocean continued.

The crowd rumbled uneasily. A few jeers and shouted obscenities.

"Utu," said Melting Ocean. "Eye for eye. Justice."

Seventeen aliens grasped their long metal rods and calmly disembowelled themselves.

People fainted, ran screaming, trampled each other. I saw Nancy lying on the ground, retching, missing a news story for the first time in her life.

The dying aliens shuddered and lay still. Melting Ocean, splattered in grey blood, walked up to the force field and looked out at us.

"Now we are friends?" he asked.

The End

The New Land

By Tim Jones

"The New Land" (880 words; published in the New Zealand magazine JAAM 13, March 2000

The new land was discovered on a Thursday. The Prime Minister addressed the nation. "It's large," she said, "and damp, and all ours." She announced that an expedition was already nearing its northern shores.

The expedition waded ashore and raised the flag in a moving ceremony. The new land was covered in seaweed, mud, and the carcasses of fish. It had a distinctive smell.

The discovery of the new land had significant implications for public policy. An inter-departmental working party was set up, with representatives from all affected Crown entities. Change agents were brought in to build a team culture that would be open, proactive, and outcomes-focused.

The Government welcomed tangata whenua participation. Several tribes had fished in the seas displaced by the new land, and consultative hui were quickly arranged. The participation of the Maori Fisheries Commission Te Ohu Kai Moana, and other stakeholders in the quota allocation process, was subject to pending High Court action.

With the cooperation of public and private service providers, an intensive effort began to map the new land. Global Positioning System data revealed that it had a total surface area of 387 ± 2.5 square kilometres, based on best practice assessments. The majority of the new land was only a few metres above sea level, but there was a gradual rise towards a prominent elevation in the southwestern quadrant, which satellite measurements revealed to be some sixty metres in height. A more accurate figure awaited the arrival of a ground party, which promptly left from Base Camp One.

Together with the composition of the All Black midfield, the new land was the prime topic of conversation over the weekend. Callers to talkback radio were unsure of its potential usefulness, but a prominent life sciences company suggested that it would make an ideal testbed for experiments in plant biotechnology.

On Sunday, the nation was treated to live reports from the party sent to investigate the southwestern elevation. The gradual rise previously reported was crowned by a rocky hill, atop which were strewn large blocks of grey stone. The superficial resemblance of these blocks to construction materials excited worldwide interest. Both print and electronic media carried a number of ill-considered and poorly researched stories making allusions to Atlantis, Mu, and/or Lemuria. The Skeptics Society responded with a strongly-worded statement.

The Government acted decisively to quell speculation. An exclusion zone, to be patrolled by all three services, was established around the hill in question. Any party wishing to land in the area was required to have government

permission and pay a substantial fee. It was announced that samples from the quarantine zone would be sent to leading overseas laboratories for analysis, and that results were expected in six to eight weeks.

Sharemarket reaction, which had been muted the previous week, was strongly positive when trading opened on Monday, with the tourism, energy, and telecommunications sectors especially buoyant. Fishing industry shares suffered reverses, however, with analysts pointing to the loss of valuable fishing grounds and the uncertain future of several joint venture arrangements.

Other developments on Monday were primarily institutional in character. The Prime Minister announced that a naming rights sponsor was being sought for the new land. Major corporates, breweries, and communications companies had already expressed interest. On a less positive note, plans by the Tourism Board to brand the new land as an eco-tourism destination came under sustained criticism by environmental groups.

To widespread surprise, the new land slipped beneath the sea just after 5am on Tuesday. Loss of life was averted save for two adventurers who had illegally entered the exclusion zone earlier that night to explore the southwestern elevation. Their Zodiac pilot, who escaped, returned with lurid tales of strange lights in the sky and unearthly noises beneath the hill. These accounts were not corroborated, and the Zodiac pilot was subsequently deported to an undisclosed location.

A planned debate on the new land went ahead when Parliament resumed sitting that afternoon, but its character was much altered. The Prime Minister was put on the defensive by persistent questioning and responded with a blistering attack on the Leader of the Opposition. The disappearance was made worse for the Government because subsequent polling showed that the new land had been especially popular in the key North Island 18-45 male demographic.

After a week in which the new land showed no sign of reappearing, the inter-departmental working party was disbanded and the consultative hui cancelled. Fish stocks over the area were reported to be severely depleted, and the fishing industry pressed the Government for a compensation package. The National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research was commissioned to conduct a bathymetric survey of the newly-restored sea floor.

The new land is commemorated by two Top 20 singles, an "Assignment" documentary, and a projected TV mini-series which has yet to receive New Zealand On Air funding. A leading authority on the uncanny, now hard at work on a book about the new land, has promised to reveal a scandalous cover-up of dramatic new evidence concerning humanity's place in the Universe. If these claims are substantiated, they may yet revive public interest in the matter.

The End

Harbour

by Tim Jones

"Harbour" (2600 words; an unpublished story)

I cut the engine in the shadow of the motorway pillars and let the dinghy drift in to the Wadestown shore. The quiet of late afternoon was broken only by the squawking of parakeets. I locked the boat away in the old garage I used as a boatshed and stood for a moment to soak in the view. The setting sun was winking off the windows of drowned office blocks. To the left lay Miramar Island, and beyond it the open sea.

I turned from sea to hill and climbed the steps to the house. I found Mum sitting on the porch with a glass of wine in her hand.

"Pete strutting his stuff in the kitchen, is he?" I asked.

She nodded, her fair hair stirring against the collar of her jacket.

"Good, then I'll take his chair." I swept it clear of his junk, then flopped down beside her. "How was work?"

"Good. You?"

"Not bad. I went fishing among the office blocks."

"Surely that's all been picked over by now?"

"You'd be surprised. The last time I was there, I dredged up a pair of gold earrings. Well worth the effort."

"What did you get for them?"

"Fuel. And that book I gave you for your birthday."

"And what did you find today?"

"Nothing much. Beats working in an office, though."

She laughed. "You're so like your father."

Our companionable silence was shattered by Pete. Everything about Pete was big: big belly, big voice, big opinion of himself.

"Grub's up!" he boomed. "Hey, Stevie, my man! How's it hanging?"

"It's hanging fine, Pete. How about yours?"

"It's - hey, you're the sharp one, eh?" He raised both his hands, palm outwards, and made to slap mine. I kept them by my side.

I'll say one thing for Pete — he could cook. I wolfed down the lot, from the soup to the home-made icecream, and even found room for a mango and a paw-paw from the orchard. I was too full to move after that, and I listened to Mum talk about her work — it seemed the Reconstruction Authority was going to have its mandate extended for another two years, which bit the bippy of everyone at the Council because that meant another two years under the thumb of Hamilton. Then Pete told us in great detail about his day in the garden.

"Have you ever worked, Pete?"

"Sure I work. Look at these."

"Yeah, I can see the dirt under your fingernails. But I meant a job. For money."

"Steven ..." My mother had gone to Warning Level 1.

"No, no, Kate. Fair question. The boy's got a right to ask. So, Stevie, you think I should be earning my keep, eh?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

He looked downcast for a moment. "I'd love to, son, I'd love to. And you'd think there'd be a need for professional meteorologists, but the Reconstruction Authority doesn't agree, and they pay the bills."

"You could do something else," I persisted.

"But there's no need for Peter to work, Steven. Say what you like about my job, it does pay well. Besides, your father worked from home, too."

Until the night he woke up with his insides melting away.

We'd all got through the Drowning, that was the worst of it. I had been no more than a baby when the West Antarctic ice sheet gave way and the high tides had come, higher every day until the new seawall failed and the water crashed in on streets and shops and houses. The new shoreline had pretty much stabilised now, six metres above the old.

My father had told me all about it as he tinkered with the flotsam and jetsam of pre-Drowning Wellington. Those days, it was there for the taking along the new shoreline, and there was a thriving economy of scavenging and barter. When the shoreline had been picked clean, Dad acquired the dinghy. I spent more time on that boat than I did at school, but I was in the classroom the day the principal came in and told us all to go straight home. New Variant Haemorrhagic Fever had come to Wellington, and each household was thrown back on its own resources. Just when we thought it had spared us, my father woke screaming in pain.

Ten days later, my father lay buried in the orchard, and my mother and I were weak as kittens but alive. When the plague had passed, she went back to work and I went back to school, but ours had become a silent house. I spent more and more time in Dad's workshop, tinkering with his pet projects, and soon quit school altogether. When my mother found out, she was furious, and she hit me. I ran from the house and spent three nights living rough. I was as thin and wordless as a feral cat when I returned. I moved my bed into the workshop, and Mum did not try to stop me. A photo of my father stood beside my bed; I gazed at his dark, unsmiling face as if into a mirror.

That was four years ago. Ten months ago, ten long months ago, Pete came for dinner, and before I knew it he'd taken over the place — my father's boots, my father's chair, my mother's bed. I wouldn't let him have my father's workshop, though.

"... wouldn't you say, Stevie?"

Whatever inane question Pete had asked, he was waiting for an answer. "Depends," I said, "depends."

"Damn, boy, you should move to Hamilton and become a politician!" He laughed, his white teeth gleaming expensively. Pre-Drowning dental work, that. Everything must have been better then.

I wrenched my attention back to the conversation. Mention of his old job had set him off, and he was deep into an explanation of why the weather was so much cloudier since the Drowning, why we got so few northerlies nowadays, and what had happened to the Roaring Forties. "More like the Purring Forties now," he said.

"So you're an amateur meteorologist these days, are you?"

The mask of bonhomie slipped for a moment, and he stared at me with cold eyes. "No, I'm a professional meteorologist who's out of a job." He smiled again. "But yeah, I keep my hand in. You've got your workshop — I've got the garden shed. And I keep up, you know, on the Feed. When the power's on, that is."

"So what have you got in the shed?"

"That's my business, boy."

"I'll show you the workshop," I offered.

It was a calculated risk, and it worked, though it took a nudge from Mum to make him say yes. I flashed her a rueful smile and followed him to the shed.

"Shit, what is all this stuff?" I asked as I stood in the doorway.

"This takes the readings from the anemometer — that little thing with the cups on the roof? This is a multimeter — hygrometer, barometer, thermometer and so on, connected in to the Feed — I guess I am an amateur meteorologist at that, because I feed these readings in to the automated station over in Kelburn. Then over here I've got my GPS — you know what a GPS is, Stevie?"

"Can't say I do," I lied.

"Global Positioning System receiver. Tells you exactly where you are on the planet. They were nearly as common as cellphones once, but now you can't get them for love or money."

"Why not?"

"Portable Feed boxes took over, or to put it another way, cellphones turned into portable Feed boxes, and you could get whatever you wanted on them. Who wants to go out of Feed range any more? But I like these old things." He turned the little marvel over in his hand.

"Can I try it?"

"Sure."

I pressed the touchpad, and a digital readout told me I was standing in the garden shed. "Looks good to me," I said. "It sure would come in handy when I'm out in the dinghy."

"Sorry, Stevie. Lose this overboard and there's no telling where you could find another."

"OK." I gave him a prospective-stepfather-grade smile. "How about I show you the workshop tomorrow? Mum will be wondering where we are."

Back at the house, Mum and Pete fell to reminiscing about old times again. Pete was holding forth about the Drowning, about how ice cores from Greenland had shown that this wasn't the first time the sea level had changed radically in the space of a year or two, about how it could all change again just as quickly.

I would have to take my chances with that. I excused myself and headed down to the workshop. I'd done most of my packing the previous night, but I opened my bags and went through it all again. If I forgot anything, there would be no second chance.

That used up twenty minutes. I skimmed through the many books I would have to leave behind. I wrote a note for my mother. I prowled around the workshop, trying to decide whether any of my father's trinkets, as familiar and treasured as my mother's face, would be of use or ornament. I chose his compass. That might serve as both.

"Well, Dad," I said to the empty air, "I guess this is it. Someone else will get your stuff now. Maybe Pete will find a use for it." I paused. "I guess she could have done worse." Then I hefted my bag and closed the door for the last time.

Pete was snoring in their bedroom. Good. I tiptoed out into the garden and set to work. You don't make your living from the Drowned city centre without learning a thing or two about locks. I pocketed the GPS and some spare batteries and headed for the water's edge.

I didn't dare risk the motor, but I soon realised I should have practised more with the oars. My back ached, and halfway to my destination I was forced to rest. I let the boat drift into the deeper shadow of the old Railway Station, between the two wings that faced east, and slumped back for a few moments' rest.

A splash woke me. I was still looking around for its source when the boat rocked and someone began to haul themselves aboard. I reached for the oar and brought it down hard on the intruder's fingers. She cursed and her hand let go. I was still off-balance from the stroke when the second intruder pulled himself aboard, and it was all I could do to avoid toppling overboard. Then we were fighting at close quarters, wrestling in the bottom of the boat while it rocked in its own private storm.

My attention was divided between fighting off the intruder and trying to protect my precious gear. Before long, I was forced back against the bow, and when two hands seized my shoulders I knew I was done for. I slumped with fear and frustration, and it saved me: I felt the blade of the one remaining oar against my hand. I smashed it into my assailant's groin, and before he could recover, I used the oar to lever him off the boat. Then I hit him on the head. There was no sign of the woman.

Shivering, I fumbled with the outboard. The motor caught, and I made my way out of the artificial bay, skimming over abandoned platforms and drowned wagons. There were lights, shouts, and the splash of something heavy

hitting the water behind me, but I ignored them. When I judged I was safely out of range of my attackers, I pointed the boat in the right direction, cut the motor, and took stock.

If the motive was robbery, my assailants weren't very good at it, because the only thing missing was one of the oars. My bag was intact, but the GPS had slipped into the bilgewater. Heart pounding, I picked it up, shook it gently, and pressed the touchpad. It worked! Praise the Lord and pre-Drowning technology. I packed it into my bag, restarted the engine, and hurried onwards.

I was over the old Harbour now, the Drowned towers receding to starboard. I would leave their secrets for others to discover.

Before me, my destination loomed just as dark: Te Papa was our place now. Years ago, the glass of the second-floor windows had been removed, and now the cavernous space within made a fine boat harbour, the gloom of which disguised our comings and goings — Trey was paranoid about being discovered. The outboard motor was loud between the echoing walls, but I had what we needed, so that no longer mattered.

I tied up by the stairs. Losi and Trey were waiting for me. I endured their complaints, then said "But I've got the GPS, you ungrateful bastards. I found out where he kept it, and I stole it. So why don't you stop whining and say thanks?"

That shut them up. I followed them up the stairs and across to the other side of the building. They let down the rope ladder, and there she was, enjoying her first night out on the open waters for almost two years. "She looks great," I said.

The Tangaroa was a cruising yacht which had capsized during the Drowning and lost much of her gear. Trey had inherited the yacht from his father, who had used it as a diving platform. Trey wasn't interested in diving — he had a longer trip in mind. One night, he took down her masts and manoeuvred her into the gutted and abandoned museum. He sought his crew among water-rats like me, and slowly the project took shape. Replacing the electronic equipment had been the hardest part. With the Feed inaccessible on the journey, and with the skies so often cloudy, a working GPS was vital. Trey acquired one on the black market, but it started playing up almost as soon as he got it back to the yacht. It seemed the voyage might be over before it started, till one of Pete's half-remembered boasts swam to the surface of my mind.

We stood in the cabin and looked at the GPS. "It's not very big," Losi said. "Are you sure it will do the job?"

"Are you sure the hull will do the job?"

She scowled and turned away. Engineers hate doubt. The West Antarctic ice sheet might have melted, but there was still a lot of ice floating around down there. We would have to be very careful.

Food was going to be the other big challenge. We'd installed fishing gear, and our precious cargo of seeds, sperm, and eggs was tucked safely in the freezers. The

cold-tolerance we had paid extra for would soon be put to the test.

All fourteen of us were on board. We were ready, as ready as we'd ever be. Silently, we cast off.

My navigation skills wouldn't really be needed until we hit the open water. Trey could handle the harbour. As we rounded the northern tip of Miramar Island, I went aft to take a last look backwards. Had Mum found my note yet? I would call her when I could, when we had found a way to hook into the Feed.

The sunken office blocks of the Drowned city gazed back at me in smug incomprehension. The rich waters and virgin shores of Antarctica lay ahead. I made my way forward to greet them.

THE END

Let Me Explain That Joke

A bit of a jape with Broderick Wells

At BIG SIG, we'll talk about just about anything. Sex, religion, politics; these are topics that are fair game. They may have been sacred cows once, but we've slaughtered them and dined on the beef for months. We'll even slip in the odd discussion of SF, provided no-one can think of anything lewd to say in its stead. And once in a blue moon (i.e., last October) Fantasy will get the once over, before being thrown back for being under-sized.

What is it about Fantasy that makes most hard SF fans shudder? The more eagle-eyed of you will have spotted the deliberate capitalisation. This is, hopefully, to avoid the hoary old argument regarding the taxonomic primacy of fantasy over Science Fiction. (Fantasy (lower case f) wins hands down, as all fiction is fantasy: it's not real, it's a tissue of lies. Fiction gets categorised into its various genres, including Fantasy and SF. These in turn have their own sub-genres, and so on and so forth.) Back to the topic, the deliberate avoidance of Fantasy, and High Fantasy in particular, by a large percentage of Hard SF fandom.

Actually, I have no evidence of this, other than the anecdotal. The Triffid, in one of his more lucid moments between drinks orders, declared his aversion to the genre as a whole, one or two exceptional authors excepted. I too find that the average Fantasy tends to be the American beer of speculative fiction; insipid, over-produced, and it takes an awfully long time for anything to happen, except get up and go to the toilet. Why?

Most of the blame can be laid at the feet of J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of The Rings* is a damn fine story, pitting a few doughty heroes against an evil vaster and more ancient than I'd like to meet. Because of the swept of the action, and because Tolkien was serialising it for his son, it stretched out over three volumes. Nothing wrong with that. Wilde takes shots at the three volume novel in *The Importance of Being Ernest*. The trouble starts with those that followed.

Every successful act has its imitators. It may be the sincerest form of flattery, but few publishers had the expertise to separate the wheat from the chaff. Fantasy had turned into the hottest thing since sliced bread, and everybody needed to have a product on the market. Most of the new authors didn't have the depth of vision to produce something novel. They simply took *The Lord of The Rings*, and added their own paint job. Terry Brooks, with the *Shannara* series, has managed to devastate eight forests, and God alone knows how many trees will fall to Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* epic. (As an aside, Mr Brooks is improving as an author, and is now shopping outside of Tolkien for his ideas. I don't know if Mr Jordan is.)

If you ignore a certain lack of art or style, what are the major failings of modern High Fantasy? Too numerous to catalogue in this short column, but I'll hazard a shot at

them. Firstly, there is a certain sameness to the plots. The World must be saved from Ultimate Evil. Meanwhile, in a small village, formerly out of harm's way, but in one chapter's time the front-line, lives an adolescent male of adoptive parents. Birth details to be supplied later but the bookies no longer give odds on him having an inheritance coming. Ultimate Evil gets wind of this and goes for the half-cocked pre-emptive strike. Nett result, he's an orphan again, picking up survival skills quicker than ever and has a whole bunch of new friends who are death on a stick. The intervening story is a glorified version of hide and seek. In the penultimate chapter, Ultimate Evil buys the farm and everybody lives happily ever after, except the bad guys, who get to enjoy one or two sequels before cashing in their chips.

Secondly, everybody has escaped from Central Casting. If there are Elves, they are invariably long-lived, wise and aloof. They are tree-huggers extraordinaire, but can do things with silver a master jeweller would give not only his bollocks, but also his first-born, his soul and one or two other things beside, for. The Adventurers are given one for free. Dwarfs are dour, doughty, long-lived, have keen axes, love gold and digging really artistic holes in the ground. They've also developed carrying a grudge into a lifestyle, and don't much care for Elves, so the Adventurers get one for free too. The complimentary Wizard comes with his own staff (wooden, just like they writing), and an age somewhere between geriatric and dead. He's also the fittest chap in the party. The Nominal brains behind the Adventurers is either a Guard Captain down on his luck (he's in the book, so QED) or is another Rightful King travelling incognito. Anybody else in the party is a spear carrier, and bound to die. The villains are either despicable, depraved humans trafficking with the Forces of Darkness, or some poor benighted troglodyte race trying to carpetbag the Dwarfs out of their mineral claims. These trogs are always physiognomically challenged, produce inferior goods, have the brains of a chicken coupled to the cunning of a fox and a tendency to drip ichor in these presence of sharp objects. They also have the curious ability to breed like rabbits, produce offspring of great stamina, and all on a diet a Biafran would reject as inadequate. All dispute resolution is by combat, preferably armed and mortal.

Thirdly, the landscape is all the same. Peasants live a life of bucolic splendour, heedless of disease, rapacious barons, plagues, famines, foul weather or taxes. The average Medieval peasant, transported to Fantasyland, would believe him or herself to be in Heaven. Everybody has a plough and an ox to drag it, the hut doesn't leak, and the tavern has a stew with meat in it. You can travel. The roads may not have a centre line, but they may as well have, there's that much traffic. Everybody speaks the same language so well you don't need a translator two counties over. He'd also recognise most of the technology, though he'd wonder where the rust went. The average knight would get more of a surprise. Renaissance plate mail, Damascus steel, horses capable of two weeks hard riding, all available at reasonable prices. The Invisible Hand of Adam Smith has been banished, along with technological

progress. The world is one great and glorious Medieval Golden Age.

Finally, there is the matter of religion and other social behaviour. Tolerance, notably lacking throughout human history, becomes the by-word for everybody. Slavery exists, but only under Ultimate Evil. He's the only player who slept through Democracy, the Rule of Law, Free Speech and Environmental Risk Management for the Enlightened. Magic, though officially discouraged, is bound to be bloody useful (unless it's the only weapon of Ultimate Evil, in which case there will be a roasting of certain people at the end of the series). Why else has the party got a wizard?

Of course, these faults are not the only ones to blight Fantasy. But they seem to be the most popular. I have a few personal bugbears; any book promoting the Welsh as heroes, or trying to appeal to the minuscule fraction of Celtic ancestry I may have, is fit only for pulping into fresh paper for new books. But are they really that bad?

Probably not, unless that's all you read. Fantasy (capitalised) is an escapist fiction. The worst is truly abysmal, the best sublime. A great author can take the generic plot and scenario and turn it into a masterpiece; a hack can take a fresh and new idea and write utter drivel. The question arises, how to identify the good ones? And the answer is, with great difficulty.

First read the blurb and the publicist's puffery. One sure-fire condemnation is the line "comparable to Tolkien at his best". The inference is that this writer is superior to Tolkien. The reality is that the correct translation of the line is "this writer, at his best, has strung together words in a way Tolkien might have used for *aides memoire* for lectures." Another warning, to be heeded at great peril to your wallet, is the declaration that this is the start of a bold/great/exciting new serial or trilogy. If both these phrases appear on the same cover, buy this gobbler be disappointed, be very disappointed. I missed these none too subtle clues on front of the first Stephen Donaldson trilogy. In my haste to find something to follow *The Lord of The Rings*, I ended up with three very nice pieces of cover art and not a great deal else.

So that's bad Fantasy, what should one look for in good Fantasy? The same as in any good writing, style. Open the book to a page at random and read it. If the author has a fluency with words and language, and the story grips you, buy it. Read the plot synopsis: chances are that if it isn't a rehash of every major Fantasy published in the last thirty years, it'll be a worthwhile read. Ask the opinion of dedicated Fantasy readers. Actually that last suggestion was pretty stupid. Anybody with a High Fantasy addiction has probably lost some critical faculties.

I have a list of authors I trust (some of the time): H. Rider Haggard if it's still in print (he did die in 1925); Tanith Lee is variable but not frightened to introduce a little eroticism into the mix; Jack Vance is a magnificent stylist, painting the most brilliant verbal pictures, though sometimes I wish he'd shut up and get on with it; Glen Cook's serial of the Black Company (mercenaries on the wrong side in a civil war) is delicious, as are his detective

Fantasies; Tim Powers writes damn fine fiction and I'll read anything he puts out, along with the writings of Terry Pratchett. Fritz Leiber's "Swords" series is the acme of swords and sorcery genre, and Mary Gentle's *Grunts* has to be the last word in military fiction. Those with a classical education have probably read *Inferno* by Niven and Pournelle, pity they never reworked *Purgatory* and *Paradise*.

Time for the anecdote. At the latest BIG SIG, the Triffid and I were congratulating each other on the size of our columns, their length, quality and so forth (not that they fall down) and how great it is to have a column, when some killjoy whose name shall not be mentioned drew our attention to Alistair Cooke. Mr Cooke is about ninety years old, and still gets his column up every week. It runs to about 2000 words and he's been doing it for sixty years, minimum. Puts us in the shade, now doesn't it?

What I Got For Christmas

It's always the same, never a bottle of Scotch,
says Broderick Wells

Once again, the Festive Season has descended on us. This year, it seems to have done so with the same indecent haste as the Assyrian did on Babylon, and to much the same effect, or so my wallet tells me. I swear my nearest and dearest are trying to bankrupt me. If they do, then they won't get their hands on my fortune (they can't anyway, IRD has beaten them to it).

Christmas and New Year is the traditional time for reflecting on what the previous year has brought, and then fervently praying that the new won't bring a subtly reworked repeat dose. This means that regular columnists, such as myself and the Triffid, can trot out stock columns from the archives, file the serial numbers off and hand them over to the long suffering Editor Phlegming and hope he doesn't spot the antique "best before" date. So here goes nothing.

Of course, part of the joys of Christmas is deciding what to get the rellies. It's a stressful business, hand-picking those gifts so everybody you value can murmur, "Gosh, it's just what I've always wanted," with just the right amount of disappointment. If you're going to give a gift that sucks, it has to suck in just the right manner. Socks and undies don't cut the mustard; much too useful. I spent all of December making discrete inquiries as to what everybody wanted. But the buggers had grown used to that approach. Silence was the resounding reply. So I tried the direct method: a spotlight in the eyes and white hot nails to the soft, squidgy bits. I'll say this about my family, they're tough. Even my sister refused to crack. So, like half of Christendom, I put off buying presents until inspiration struck, which was about 4:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve. Judging by the cries of despair, I'd have to say that the old ways are still the best. However, I was in no state to enjoy them, as I was up until six the next morning wrapping their presents. Whoever gave me the last graveyard shift of the year dies a slow and painful death, just as soon as I've walked off Christmas dinner.

However, Christmas wasn't all joy, as I learnt that a good friend had suffered a heart attack. The poor boy had just moved from Khandallah to Upper Hutt (for those of you North of the Bombays, the equivalent of moving from Panmure to West Auckland, and about as far). I think it was his body revolting at moving into a really bogan suburb. Still, he did have a quiet and relaxing day at home. He had to, doctor's orders.

As work has slowed from the mayhem pre-Christmas to the post calm, I've managed to get along to the cinema. Best show on offer has to be *Chicken Run*. This is a glorious piece of lunacy from Aardman Animation, the creators of Wallace and Gromit. Just transpose *The Great Escape* to a chicken farm, and you get the basic plot. *Chicken Run* even pays homage to *The Great Escape* with one excellent little scene. Don't expect to laugh all the way through; like all good comedy, the humour is leavened

with pathos. My only advice with this film is don't leave as the credits start rolling, else you'll miss the animated coda, which still has me giggling. I'm sure Richard Scheib has reviewed *Chicken Run*, either recently or in this 'zine, so I won't bore you all with reiterating all the cast and crew details.

One film I won't be seeing is *Little Nicky*, because it stars Adam Sandler. Can't stand the man. Brendan Fraser, on the other hand, is an actor who seems to be getting better with each film (and so are the movies). This puts his latest, *Bedazzled*, with Liz Hurley, high on the must see list. I remember the original with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore as being bloody hilarious, with lots of humorous, ancient gags delivered absolutely straight. The big question, of course, is whether the Americans have adopted the understated, hand-crafted villainy of Peter Cook's *Devil*, or has poor Liz been given a more slapstick version of *Old Nick*.

The really big event that occurred just prior to Christmas was the engagement of young Les Barrett and the even younger Jenny Howard. I suppose it had to happen, and it couldn't have happened to a nicer couple. All the best, guys. Of course, getting engaged implies that Les has matured, which means he's open to all sorts of ageist jokes. Not that I shall be running a competition to pick the best. From what I hear, he's a dab hand with his zimmer frame.

The only other thing that happened in my life was new neighbours. The old ones moved out, taking their two cats with them. That was a week before Christmas. Ten days later, and one of the cats had found her way back. Right pleased with herself she was too. Carried on like she'd never been away (her typical behaviour; You love me? I love you, where's the food?). So I did the only sensible thing, plopped her in the car and drove the kilometre back to her new home. Tiddles was not chuffed to get a car ride at five in the morning.

So what can I expect in the New Year? More visits from the ex-neighbours' cat is high on the list. One kilometre by car is only 400m as the cat walks. I'd also better get an invite to Les and Jenny's engagement party. There's bound to be a whole heap of people with tales of failed marriages to keep them fired up (and me amused).

Of course, there will be the first of the Keep the Charming Broderick Wells Drunk for Christmas parties. The BIG SIGGERS, through assiduous application of the Card, have managed to propel the available tab up to a respectable \$200. Everybody who bought a round on the Card will be invited along to the inaugural bash. The venue is known, as is the timing. The only question to be settled is the date. As one key participant lives out of town, it involves a modicum of co-ordination.

I expect I'll continue to waste money on the essentials of life; books and records. There are too many good ones of each not buy at least one every month. Unfortunately, this will mean getting more bookshelves. The 14 linear metres I have are filled to beyond capacity. And the CDs are starting to overflow their modest stands. I fear I have subscribed to philosophy: he who dies with the most toys,

wins. At the moment, I'm not winning, but I'm looking well placed as a medal prospect.

I also need to get the CD player serviced. The poor old thing is starting to have trouble recognising various CDs. If they have more than 60 minutes of music, chances are it won't play them. And if, by some miracle, it does decide it can find track one, the result is not good. The music comes out with more snap crackle and pop than a bowl of rice bubbles. If I wanted my recordings to sound that bad, I'd get the cat to sleep on them. For a week. Minimum.

Also high on the rejuvenation list is the computer. It may only be six years old, but in terms of this form of consumer durable, it's antediluvian. With a 486 processor and a single speed CD-ROM, I do find it a bit limiting. There's all those neat games out there I can't play because the boiler's don't generate enough steam. The big debate is between up-grading to a CD writer or a DVD player. Decisions, decisions. It will run under Microsoggy, unless I can find some quick and grubby UNIX fix. Apple may have a better GUI, but they charge like wounded bulls. My wallet can't stand the goring they would give it. But one thing it will have is a modern keyboard. Even Editor Phlegming, for all his trumpeting of improved technology, is labouring under the yoke of nineteenth century design. The QWERTY keyboard was designed to prevent manual typewriters from jamming. It's meant to slow you down. So this year I'm going hunting: for a Dvorak keyboard in an ergonomic shape. I expect this will cost my right penis, but if that's the cost of not being normal, then so be it.

One thing I won't be skimping on is BIG SIG. At the penultimate SIG, a follicly challenged member regaled us with the perils of retiring to bed after several large whiskies. The up shot was he gave his flatmate a free peep show, twice woke in places that were not where he remembered going to bed, and made the discovery that the toilet seat is there for your comfort and convenience. I didn't think I could improve on this inspired piece of revelry. But on the way home that night, I discovered I was wrong.

Instead of taking the last bus, as I later decided I should have, I decided to walk home. My reasoning had been excellent: to wit, it was fine, calm, there hadn't been rain for several days and I needed the exercise. Besides, with a little exploratory short cutting, I could reduce the distance to under five kilometres. Even accounting for the fact that two of these were uphill, I was sure I could do it in less than an hour. I get to Tinakori Hill, and the pavement has less and less appeal. I want to feel the earth beneath my feet (a bit of artistic licence, my shoes weren't coming off just yet). There are some lovely walking tracks through the bush. Did you know there are glow-worms on Tinakori Hill? I found a delightful spot with a dozen of the pretty beggars about ten metres from the main road. Wrapped in the joys of nature, I pressed on. Half a minute later I'd lost the path. No problem, there was a road somewhere ahead. I knew exactly where. It was up. Scramble, slither, stumble, stand upright and wait a minute, I've just lost my glasses. The world went from dark to dark and completely out of focus. To use an expression, Mission Control, We have a problem.

At this point, I made a startling discovery; I had matured beyond instant panic. This was of great comfort to me as I grovelled around in the leaves, waving my lighter, and my nose, mere inches above the dirt. I did not drag the cellphone out and dial 111. Neither did I ring the flatmate and demand he come to my rescue instantly. Instead, I checked my watch to see how long I would have to wait until the sun came up, tried to get some sleep, and wondered whether the bank would lend me a few hundred for a new pair of specs. I spent five hours contemplating the stupidity of vain exercise. Did you know there are tuis on Tinakori Hill? Buggers kept me awake half the night. When the sun finally condescended to shed sufficient illumination on my little corner of paradise, I'd almost forgotten what I was waiting for. The next round of blind-as-a-batman's bluff took much less time, and I won. I still had to get down on hands and knees to do it, though. The remainder of the walk home was accomplished without incident. Did you know there are some disgustingly cheerful people about at 5:30 in the morning?!

wot I red on my hols

by alan robson (praematurus)

Early Warning Systems

If I have a fault (which I do not) it is that I am always early for appointments.

It all began on the day that I was born. I was four weeks premature, and the psychological scars that circumstance gave me remain unhealed even today.

As a child I attended a small primary school at the other end of the village. It rejoiced in the name Withinfields County Junior Mixed, but to us it was just school. Because many of the children lived in the village, we mostly went home for lunch. Those of us who lived at the far end of the village (as I did) had a special dispensation to catch an early bus at 12 noon (the next one left at 12.15 and it was generally agreed that it was too late to get us home, fed, and back to school by 1.00pm). However it was not unknown for the teacher to get so carried away by whatever she was teaching that she lost track of time, and so we would sometimes miss the bus. I hated it when that happened.

One day, feeling hungry, and feeling anxious about missing the vital bus I raised my hand.

"Please can I go and catch the 12-o'clock bus now?"

The other children in the class began to snigger, but I ignored them. I had a bus to catch.

The teacher looked puzzled. "But it's only 11.30," she said. "The bus doesn't come for another half an hour."

"I can wait at the bus stop," I said.

The whole class erupted into hysterics at this remark. Even the teacher appeared to be having a hard time controlling her giggles. "No, Alan," she remarked patiently, "I don't think that's a good idea."

I subsided, but remained bewildered. I simply couldn't understand why I couldn't go and wait for the bus and I had no idea why the rest of the children were laughing so hard at me. It all made perfect sense from my point of view.

As I look back on the incident forty years later, I still fail to understand the attitude of the teacher and the other children. My request to go and wait for the bus still makes perfect sense to me (though others appear not to agree). I felt then and I feel now that you should always be early for everything in life. After all, when you are early, you can wait. When you are very early you can read a book while waiting (an advantage in itself). When you are late you are in the poo and the situation simply cannot be rescued. Surely this is self evident?

Apparently not.

Walk in Hell, and **Breakthroughs** are two more instalments of Harry Turtledove's ongoing history of an alternate World War One which takes place on the American continent. Episodic, with a vast number of

characters, the books really do paint on an enormous canvas. They held me enthralled from the first page. Indeed, I bought **Breakthroughs** in hardback as soon as it appeared. I simply couldn't bear to wait another year for the paperback. That's how good these books are.

By now the war has settled down into a war of attrition. Networks of trenches cross the battlefields and advances are measured in yards not miles. Huge land ironclads (known as barrels in this history, though we called them tanks in ours) are giving a limited success in battle. However official doctrine requires that they be spread thinly across the front and used only in support of infantry advances. General Custer thinks this a foolish idea and amasses a large force of barrels which he uses to spearhead a drive through the confederate lines. It succeeds beyond his wildest dreams and for the first time the stalemate of the trenches is broken. To their credit, the general staff soon realise that the original doctrine for deploying the barrels was flawed and it isn't long before the confederate lines are pierced all along the front. US troops advance in triumph, the confederacy is broken and the war ends in 1917.

The parallels with our own Great War are fascinating. We used the same spread out deployment of tanks and as a result their success was limited. There was only one really decisive tank battle, at Cambrai where the allied troops really did break through "...to the green fields beyond". However the success of the breakthrough took everybody by surprise and there were no troops in reserve to take advantage of it. The Germans managed to regroup and counter attack and the status quo of stalemate was soon re-established. In our universe the war dragged on until late in 1918. Turtledove's books ask a heart-breaking "what if" question (as does all the very best SF). How much needless slaughter could we have avoided if we'd learned the lesson of Cambrai? We'll never know for sure.

With **Down to Earth** Turtledove returns to his other major alternate history series where the Earth was invaded by aliens during World War Two. The series is six books old now and if you have read the others then you know how brilliant it is and you will race out eagerly to buy this instalment. If you haven't read the earlier books, go out and do so **IMMEDIATELY**, and then read this sixth book.

Talking about ongoing series that are umpteen books old, **Callahan's Key** is the latest novel by the pun gent Spider Robinson. It is the mixture as before. As always, I failed to understand at least half the puns (I suspect the references are far too American and they just pass me by) but there were sufficient left over to make me groan. If you like the Callahan stories you'll love this, if you don't, you won't.

I've given up on Tom Holt. His latest so-called humorous fantasy novel **Valhalla** is just the pits. Attila the Hun is trapped in the afterlife, condemned to spend eternity watching paint dry. He escapes and is reincarnated as a child on Earth. He meets a reincarnated Joan of Arc who is still hearing voices in her head. They turn out to be television commercials exhorting her to buy Fairy Liquid. She has thousands of gallons of the stuff buried in pits all

over the country just waiting for the day the voices tell her what to do with it. Meanwhile...

Oh I can't go on. I've told you the only good jokes in the entire book, so now you don't have to read it. Believe me, it is dire.

If you want something truly funny, read the cartoons by Illiad. **User Friendly** is a cartoon series by a geek and is mainly for geeks to read. Prior to these books being published, you could only read it on the web (quite appropriate for geeks, of course). Now we can all read it, and if you have even a nodding acquaintance with computers, then these books are for you. You will recognise all the stereotypes that inhabit the IT department in your organisation and find out what makes them tick. If you are a geek yourself, I defy you not to find yourself in here. The essence of successful satire is a deep knowledge of (and sometimes love of) the subject being satirised. Illiad is a truly great satirist and these are rib-tickling, rib-breaking cartoons, shot through with dark humour, cynicism, wit and wisdom.

I spent my honeymoon in Fiji. I lived in Wellington at the time and the honeymoon therefore involved a trip on the overnight train to Auckland, from where we would catch the plane to Fiji. As the afternoon progressed, I became steadily more nervous.

"Shall I call the taxi?"

"Not yet." My wife shook her head. "The train doesn't go for ages."

My stomach began to knot with tension. There was only one train. If we missed it we wouldn't get a second chance. The honeymoon would be over before it began. I made a cup of coffee. I plucked a book at random from the shelves and opened it. It was upside down, but I didn't notice immediately.

"Can I call the taxi now?"

"No."

I tried to read my book, but the words made no sense.

"Now?"

"Oh all right. If you really must. But it's cold and draughty on that station platform. We've got plenty of time, you know."

I rang the taxi and we waited for it to come. And waited. And waited some more. I rang the taxi company again. "He's on his way..."

We waited.

I rang again. "He won't be long..."

We waited.

The taxi arrived an hour and a half after I'd first rung. The driver ambled into town at least 10kph below the speed limit. I could have walked faster. My palms were clammy with nervous sweat and excess hydrochloric acid production in my stomach was eating holes in my feet. Geological aeons later we finally arrived at the station and got on the train.

Thirty seconds after we boarded, it pulled away from the platform on its long journey to Auckland.

"See? I told you we had plenty of time!"

It was our first and fiercest marital disagreement.

I read very few short stories these days. Collections and anthologies are few and far between and I seldom see the magazines. However I never miss Gardner Dozois' annual anthology for it is definitive. He always chooses from strength, and this year his choices are especially strong. I particularly enjoyed the new Heechee story from Frederik Pohl and the new instalment of the Company tales from Kage Baker. But really it is hard to single out individuals – all the stories are good ones.

I think Kim Newman is one of my favourite authors. His stories dig deep into the collective psyche of English youth (Biggles, Dracula, many hours spent alone in dark cinemas watching second rate films, Sherlock Holmes, comic books, crap television serials, the great days of Empire). It is a heady mix and his stories are rife with nostalgia as well as being completely up to date in terms of theme and character and plot. Deuced skilful!

Unforgivable Stories is a collection of arcana in which we find the real truth of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, what happens when zombies invade Russia, what Dracula did as a tourist, and what happens in the wild, wild west of Bristol, where there is no law but the gun and the iron horse. The stories are odd, surreal, and yet firmly grounded in reality. But what they mostly are is great fun.

The current furore over J. K Rowling has raised a lot of interest in the whole area of children's fiction, something which often passes many of us by. Several people whose taste I trust have recommended the novels of Philip Pullman to me, so I determined to investigate. **Northern Lights** and **The Subtle Knife** are the first two novels of a trilogy. The third novel is due out towards the end of this year.

Northern Lights is set in a world similar to but different from our own. It tells the story of Lyra who lives at the university in Oxford. One day she hides in a cupboard and overhears a meeting between her Uncle and many influential men in the college. Trouble is stirring in the far frozen north of the world.

Meanwhile, throughout England, children are vanishing. Lyra's friend Roger is one of the victims and her quest to find out what has happened to him, combined with the secret knowledge she overheard in the meeting lead her to a secret encampment in the ice where horrific experiments are taking place.

The second novel, **The Subtle Knife**, opens in our own world. Will is twelve years old and has just killed a man. Now he is on the run. He discovers a window into another world where he meets Lyra, still following the quest she began in the first novel. This world is strange to both of them and as they probe its mysteries it proves to be very dangerous, Soul eating spectres haunt the cities and towns and high in the sky flocks of angels follow their own mysterious purposes.

These books are sold as children's books, but I'm not convinced that they are. They deal with frightening concepts, terrifying ideas. There are no heroes and villains, no black and white, only an enormous spectrum of grey. Moral choices must be made and the choosers are fallible and their motives are mixed. The depth of the ideas that the books explore is immense. Both ethical and scientific thoughts are exposed in all their glory and subtlety and absolutely no allowance at all is made for the fact that many of the concepts are likely to be way over the heads of the target audience. I think it would be much fairer to describe these as books for adults that happen to have children as protagonists.

They are extremely powerful and moving books, beautifully written and immaculately plotted. My only cavil is that towards the end of the second volume an explicitly Christian theme emerges and overt religious parallels are drawn. If the third book turns into a tract and Philip Pullman is revealed as C. S. Lewis in a skin, I for one will be very disappointed.

Wild Angel is Pat Murphy's Tarzan novel. It is set in nineteenth century California. Sarah McKensie is three years old. Her parents are murdered and she is adopted by wolves. She grows up in the wilderness, a perfect young savage. But she is not completely without human contact. Max Phillips (who found her parents' bodies all those years ago) has never given up searching for the child. Eventually he finds her and builds up a friendship with her. Over the years she rescues several people from the dangers of the wilderness, and the legend of the wild angel spreads. When Professor Serunca's Travelling Circus arrives with Rosy the Elephant, events come to a head and Sarah finally confronts the murderer of her parents.

It's a wonderful tale which will bring out the child in you all. I read all the Tarzan books when I was young (and so did you and so did Pat Murphy and so did Gore Vidal; we're in excellent company) and this is a straight down the middle of the road genre adventure tale. Magnificent stuff!

Stephen Brust made his reputation with his Taltos stories, but before these there was **To Reign in Hell** which has now been republished and is available again for the first time in years. It tells the tale of the revolt of the angels in heaven (and it also tells the tale of the founding of heaven). It is an ambitious novel – probably far too ambitious for I feel that ultimately it fails. The grand theme becomes trite when stretched to this length and omnipotence and omniscience are not all they are cracked up to be. He grafts all too human vices and virtues on to the heavenly host and it demeans them.

The habit of being early has carried over into my working life. I commute between Auckland and Wellington at regular intervals. In order to make life more pleasant I carry a card which allows me entry to lounges of unbridled luxury wherein free food and drink is poured into my unresisting body and dusky maidens indulge my every whim. Thus I have even more motive than usual for arriving early and so I do. But sometimes I turn up excessively early even by my standards.

"Hello. I've got an electronic ticket for the 4.30pm flight to Wellington."

"Hello sir," said the helpful lady at the check in desk. "Would you like me transfer you to the previous flight? It will be boarding in about an hour."

"No thank you. I'll stick with the 4.30 flight please."

She checked me in with a puzzled look and a muffled giggle, and as I made my way to the lounge she made spot-the-loony faces to her colleague on the next desk.

Robert A. Heinlein – A Reader's Companion lists all of Heinlein's stories and novels together with brief notes putting the work into context and discussing any relevant details that spring to the author's mind. It is a little bit of a grab bag of goodies. There is not much here that is new to the Heinlein aficionado, though one little snippet did intrigue me. It seems that the early novel **The Puppet Masters** was reissued in 1990 in a considerably expanded form. Apparently the original manuscript was heavily cut for the first publication. Gifford contends that the complete version makes the tale much stronger, and rates it as one of Heinlein's best. Since I have very fond memories of the original novel (it was always one of my favourites) I immediately raced off to amazon.com and ordered a copy. I'll be interested to compare the two versions...

The book is not a critical discussion of Heinlein and neither is it a bibliography, but it succeeds in the task it has set itself, and who could ask for more than that?

Voodoo Science concerns itself with the fringe areas where science turns into mysticism, public relations and sometimes fraud. The Pons and Fleischman debacle over cold fusion, for example, and various attempts to overturn the second law of thermodynamics, and to cure cancer through the application of quantum theory. The book is at one and the same time exhilarating and sad. Exhilarating because of the enormous gusto with which Robert Park explains and debunks the pseudoscience, and sad because he found it necessary to do so.

He Shall Thunder in the Sky is the latest instalment in Elizabeth Peters' history of the Emersons. Amelia Peabody and her archaeologist husband, her son Ramses and her adopted daughter Nefret become deeply involved in events in Egypt at the opening of the first world war. Ramses has expressed profoundly pacifist views and has been presented with several white feathers as a result. There is a coldness between him and Nefret which was caused by the machinations of their dastardly cousin Percy.

Turkish troops are massing by the Suez canal and an invasion seems imminent. The nationalist guerrilla leader El Wardani is fomenting revolution and when he escapes from a police trap thanks to the intervention of Amelia and her husband, the whole family is placed in a precarious position. This worsens when Amelia becomes convinced that the chaos in Cairo makes an ideal opportunity for Sethos the Master Criminal to plunder the archaeological treasures of Egypt.

Ramses, it would seem, is playing a dangerous game of his own and the tension mounts as Amelia, Ramses, Nefret, Sethos, El Wardani and Percy circle around each other.

Intrigue piles upon intrigue, plot upon plot and the denouement that unravels all these tangles threads is eminently satisfying. This is one of Elizabeth Peters' best books, and the revelations cast an interesting light over many of the previous books in the series. Motives and incidents and people that you thought you understood prove to have hidden depths. Nobody and nothing is quite what it seems to be on the surface.

Just when you thought the Sherlock Holmes genre was dead, stifled in repetitive minutiae, stuck in a rut, someone comes along to refresh it and finds a whole new way of looking at Sherlockiana. The beekeeper of **The Beekeeper's Apprentice** is, of course, Sherlock himself and his apprentice is Mary Russell a fifteen year old orphan living with her aunt on the Sussex downs. Out walking one day in 1915, she literally bumps into Sherlock and from that inauspicious beginning a strange friendship develops. For Mary is at least Sherlock's intellectual equal (and perhaps surpasses him in some areas).

Under Holmes' tutoring, Mary sharpens her deductive reasoning and hones her talent for disguise. It isn't long before she is helping him with his cases, first as an apprentice, but later on as a complete partner. Soon the two sleuths are involved in a dangerous game for it seems that perhaps a new Moriarty has arisen, a new Napoleon of crime. Does Holmes' nemesis rise again in every generation?

The novel is by turns funny, touching and scary. The interplay of character between Holmes and Mary is fascinating and the growth of Mary's character as she reaches maturity is superbly handled. It is an episodic novel (though some of the episodes are more closely connected than you might at first think), and I found it to be utterly irresistible. There are four sequels; I can't wait to read them.

Laurie R. King is an American writer. As is so often the case when Americans write about British things, she makes the occasional error – nothing that gets in the way of the plot, but errors nonetheless. My favourite is a scene where a character grumbles that he has been short changed by a shilling. So he is given 3 pennies, a ha'penny and six farthings. Now if you do the arithmetic, that adds up to 5 pence (5d) which is a whole 7d short of a shilling! However in modern (post decimal) British currency, 5 pence (new pence – 5p as opposed to 5d) DOES equal a shilling. It seems obvious from this that the writer has confused the currency of 1915 with modern decimal currency and has become utterly bewildered by the whole thing. I was actually quite happy to see this. British currency has always been expressly designed to confuse Americans and even though the currency has now gone decimal, I am pleased to see that it still fulfils its traditional function!

Sometimes the effects of being early rebound upon me. Recently I concluded my business in Wellington by lunchtime and so I made my way out to the airport intent on catching the first flight home.

"Hello. I'm booked on the 6.30pm flight to Auckland. Is there any chance of rebooking me on to an earlier flight?"

"Let me see." The lady did arcane things with her computer terminal. "Yes that's fine sir." She handed me a boarding pass for the 1.30pm flight. I had about half an hour to wait. Just enough time for an interlude of orgasmic delight. I made my way to the luxury lounge and rang home then I rang the taxi company and arranged to be met at Auckland airport at 2.30pm. I settled down to pour vile fluids into and out of my body. Then an announcement came over the speaker system.

"We regret that flight 726 to Auckland has been delayed. We expect to make a boarding call at approximately 1.45. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause."

Oh well, it was only a quarter of an hour delay. I placed an order for another batch of dusky maidens. Then they delayed the flight again by another fifteen minutes. Cursing, I rang home and after that I rang the taxi company again to warn them about the delay. I called for caviar, champagne, fresh monkey brains still warm in the skull, and a clean spoon.

"We regret to announce that flight 726, the 1.30pm flight to Auckland is now scheduled for departure at 3.30pm. Could any passengers in the lounge who wish to transfer to the 3.00pm flight please come to the reception desk."

I got there first, and changed my ticket yet again. I rang home, rang the taxi company (who were sick of my voice by now) and drank a bottle of Chateau D'Yquem and ate quail eggs in aspic. Then I called for a cask of Amontillado, and muttering "For the love of God, Montresor," I staggered to my plane as the boarding call was made. When I passed the departures display screen, I noticed that my original 1.30pm flight had now been completely cancelled.

I sat myself in seat 17G and stared gloomily out of the window. It was almost 3.00pm. Had I caught the early plane I'd originally planned for, I'd have been home by now. Time passed.

"Sorry for the delay in taking off," came the pilot's voice over the tannoy. "We're just doing the final paperwork and then we'll be taxiing to our take-off position."

Ten minutes later we pulled away from the airbridge and trundled slowly towards the runway. Then we stopped, engines idling. The pilot spoke again.

"Sorry ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, but Air Traffic Control have requested a small delay. It shouldn't be too much longer..."

We finally took off nearly 45 minutes late and we must have had an uphill wind because we didn't make up any time at all on the journey to Auckland. We were so late arriving that all the airport gates were already occupied by well-disciplined aircraft that were sticking rigidly to their schedules, and so we taxied to an obscure corner of the airport, disembarked via the portable stairs and then walked for miles towards the dimly visible airport buildings on the horizon. There we walked through a maze of little twisty passages, all alike, with strategically placed airport staff to indicate the correct route when the choices got too confusing. Eventually I emerged through a door I'd never noticed before to find myself immediately behind

my taxi driver who was staring hopefully at the stairs down which travellers from Wellington usually appeared.

"Hello," I said.

He jumped in shock. "Oh, hello sir."

We collected my bags and set off for the taxi. "Where to sir?"

I gave him my address.

"Where's that, sir?" I could tell that I was having one of those days and it wasn't over yet. I gave him directions to my house, he nodded thoughtfully, and we set off into the slowest moving traffic jam I've ever seen.

"Sorry about this sir..." By now it was a familiar refrain.

I eventually arrived home only about two hours before I would have done had I caught my original 6.30pm flight. Sometimes the excessively early bird gets the worm with the hangover from last night's party.

Harry Turtledove	The Great War: Walk in Hell	Del Rey
Harry Turtledove	The Great War: Breakthroughs	Del Rey
Harry Turtledove	Colonization: Down to Earth	Del Rey
Spider Robinson	Callahan's Key	Bantam
Tom Holt	Valhalla	Orbit
Illiad	User Friendly	O'Reilly and Associates
Illiad	Evil Geniuses in a Nutshell	O'Reilly and Associates
Garner Dozois (Editor)	The Year's Best Science Fiction 17 th Annual Collection	St. Martins
Kim Newman	Unforgivable Stories	Pocket Books
Philip Pullman	Northern Lights	Scholastic
Phillip Pullman	The Subtle Knife	Scholastic
Pat Murphy	Wild Angel	Tor
Steven Brust	To Reign in Hell	Orb
James Gifford	Robert A. Heinlein – A Reader's Companion	Nitrosyncretic Press
Robert Park	Voodoo Science	Oxford University Press
Elizabeth Peters	He Shall Thunder in the Sky	Morrow
Laurie R. King	The Beekeeper's Apprentice	Bantam

wot I red on my hols

by alan robson (*unctissimus sanguis*)

Heartache

Several months ago, during a routine medical check, it was revealed that my cholesterol levels were abnormally high. I was measured at 9.0. The average is about 4.5 (that's expressed in mmol/L. Some countries report results in mg/dl - to convert, divide by 0.02586). I was so far over to the right hand side of the bell curve that I was single-handedly increasing the national average. I got three stars on the report that came back from the path lab. Something, it was made clear to me, would have to be done.

I reported the test results to a friend who thought she had high cholesterol until she heard my Olympic record breaking figures.

"Gosh," she said, impressed. "You're the only person I've ever met with solid lard circulating in their veins. Did it clog up the syringe when they took the blood sample?"

I had to confess that there had been no such effect. The blood was still liquid with a distinct absence of lumpy bits. Mind you, the rainbow effect as the sunlight glinted off the layer of oil on the surface tended to give the game away. I think I might be a national resource. They can attach my circulatory system to the inlet valves of the Marsden Point oil refinery. New Zealand will never have to import crude oil again; we can be completely self sufficient. Perhaps I'll get a medal.

On Writing is an odd little book by Stephen King. It is partly an autobiography, partly advice to the would-be writer and partly a discussion of the rules of grammar (with a diatribe against the adverb). The autobiographical chapters are the most interesting. They shed a lot of light on the character of the man behind the books; his strengths (willpower, talent, a huge love for his wife) and his weaknesses (alcohol and hard drug addiction). The chapters that describe the accident that almost killed him last year when he was hit by a car while he was out walking are particularly harrowing. The pain and the seriousness of his injuries were much more severe than was generally reported at the time. His long, slow struggle back to (comparative) health, and his initial inability to sit and write without suffering crippling pain make for uncomfortable reading.

The chapters on how to write for publication don't say anything that hasn't been said a thousand times before in a thousand other books. However he has two invaluable lessons to impart. He shows us the first draft of two pieces from his typewriter; one fiction and one non-fiction. Then he shows how the second draft looks and talks us through all the edits he made and discusses exactly why he made them. These two examples are worth the price of the book all by themselves. They are a perfect tutorial; a thoroughly practical guide to the art of writing; a justification for the title of the book.

To combat the dread cholesterol, a daily pill was prescribed and a strict low fat diet. Much of the savour left

my dining table and I began to live on chicken and fish, cooked in sauces based on fruit juice and cornflour. Surprisingly these turned out to be tastier than you might think and mealtimes perked up a bit. I investigated interesting things to do with vegetables. I ate breakfast cereal that claimed to be 99% fat free and I anointed it with non-fat milk. I drank my tea and coffee black (this was no hardship – I've always done that). I stopped spreading grease on my bread. The only taste on my toast was a thin layer of jam, the only lubrication in my sandwiches was pickle, the only fillings fat-free ham, salad and fruit. When I went away on business I lived exclusively on raw fish from Japanese restaurants. I grew a dorsal fin and had to strongly resist the urge to swim home rather than fly.

Exercise (*yuck!*) was highly recommended and so I bought a second hand exercycle. The advert was irresistible ("late model, low kilometres"). I pedalled every day. Not surprisingly, I lost weight.

But I didn't lose any cholesterol.

Initially the levels dropped slightly. But then they climbed up again as my liver, appalled at the lower levels it was finding, began manufacturing cholesterol at ever increasing rates and pumping it into my blood. My body, it appeared, was determined to die of a heart attack, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do to stop it.

This month I've over-indulged in Joe R. Lansdale, a writer I have just discovered. He has a style rather like Carl Hiaasen crossed with Joseph Wambaugh crossed with Hunter Thompson and seasoned with a soupçon of Harlan Ellison. He writes thrillers, with the occasional foray into science fiction. But no matter what the genre, he puts his own unique stamp on the material. He writes about serious subjects but he uses humour to make his serious points. His books are gross and disgusting, vicious and violent and belly-laugh-out-loud hilarious.

The first five books in the list at the end of this article form a continuing series. Hap Collins is white and heterosexual. His best friend is Leonard Pine who is black and gay. Despite the incongruity of the mixture it works well, mainly because neither Hap nor Leonard give a rats arse about those kinds of things. The early books in the series are thick with plot and short on character development and it takes a while before Hap and Leonard really start to stand out from the page. When they do the people start to take over and the plot thins down a lot (as so often happens when a writer gets really interested in the characters). Rumble Tumble has almost no plot at all worthy of the name, just a series of incidents along the way. Nevertheless it is my favourite of the novels, perhaps for exactly this reason.

Given the nature of the protagonists it comes as no surprise to find that the books concern themselves with race and violence, sex and violence, drugs and violence and just plain violence. Sometimes I didn't know whether to laugh or be sick, so I laughed. It doesn't make as much mess on the carpet.

Freezer Burn concerns a rather unsuccessful armed robber called Bill Roberts. His mother has died and is slowly

decomposing into the sheets on her deathbed. Bill finds the smell somewhat distasteful (though a strategically placed electric fan blows most of it out of the back door), and she is turning an ugly colour. Even wrapping her up in garbage bags doesn't help much. They leak. He has a drawer full of welfare cheques that he can't cash because he can't forge her signature well enough. So he decides to rob a fireworks stand. The raid goes horribly wrong and Bill escapes into the marshes. Evading snakes, alligators and a homicidal deputy, and wearing a face full of mosquitoes he eventually comes across a travelling freak show. He takes refuge among the pinheads, pumpkin heads, bearded ladies and dog men. Initially he is so disfigured by mosquito bites that they consider him to be one of their own; perhaps a new star attraction for the show? No, he could never replace the Freezer Man. The bulk of the novel chronicles Bill's adventures with the freak show. No taboo is left unbroken, nothing is too revolting to describe. Eventually the plot comes full circle and the little matter of his dead mother and the bungled robbery are resolved in an unexpected way.

The Drive-In is an omnibus volume of two short science fiction novels. In the first novel, a group of friends go to a Saturday night drive-in movie theatre. There are five screens, and each is showing a horror flick. Half way through the show a comet crosses the sky. After it passes, the drive-in is completely cut off from the world. It is surrounded by darkness, there is no way out. The audience must live off popcorn, chocolate and coke. Anarchy reigns and real horror comes to the drive-in as the horror flicks continue to screen in never ending loops (oddly there is still power coming in). A new God is born and demands worship and sacrifice. There is only one possible source of real food whether for gods or for people. The population thins out dramatically.

The second novel in the omnibus explores what happens after the drive-in is reattached to the world. It proves to be a mixed blessing. For one thing the tyrannosaurs out there have a huge appetite. Dark, deadly and utterly deranged, The Drive-In has to be one of the most grotesque books I've ever read. It says much for Lansdale's talent that he can turn such silliness into an enthralling tale, that he can make you willingly suspend your disbelief and accept the weird things that happen on the page. I don't think his tongue actually poked out of his cheek, but his cheek didn't half bulge a lot.

Mind you, given that one of the short stories in *Writer of the Purple Rage* concerns a baby's nappy (diaper) that is possessed by aliens, I suppose he can make anything believable.

Shrine of Stars is the third book of *Confluence*. As seems to be traditional in quest stories, the company was broken apart at the end of the second book and the third book explores their several separate adventures. Without the uniform point of view that held the earlier books together, this one seems bitty and fragmented. Yama's quest loses its urgency and a lot of earlier history is re-examined. I found it much less powerful than the previous books and ultimately it was disappointing (and more than a little overwritten).

An appointment was made for me to see a cardiologist and an ECG examination was scheduled so that we could all find out how much damage had already been done. I was instructed to bring shorts and running shoes for they intended to put me on a treadmill and measure all the different ways my body didn't cope with the pressure.

Fully equipped, I turned up at the appointed time.

The lady in charge of the ECG equipment told me to get changed. "Bare chest, shorts and running shoes, please."

When I was ready, she took my blood pressure. It was normal. Then she produced a razor. "I have to shave your chest, so that we can get a good contact for the electrodes."

"OK," I said.

"I'll try and keep the pattern symmetrical," she said, "so that nobody will laugh at you when you take your shirt off in public."

I brightened up a bit. This began to have possibilities. "Can you write your name instead?" I asked. She gave me *The Look* – you know, the one that means they are beginning to have serious doubts about your sanity. I was starting to enjoy myself.

"Now we have the sandpaper." She scrubbed vigorously at the freshly shaved areas then she dabbed an electrically conductive adhesive on the patches of bare skin. I began to feel like a plank of wood that had been planed square, sanded smooth and smeared with glue. Perhaps I'd end up as part of a coffee table. These ambitions died as she attached electrodes to the adhesive. She hung wires on the electrodes.

"Oops," she said.

"What's happened?"

"I stuck one too many electrodes on you," she said. "I thought they looked a bit unsymmetrical." She pulled the extra one off and threw it away and then she rearranged the wires, frowned and rearranged them again. The wires came together in a belt which hung loosely round my waist. A single, rather fat cable led from the belt to a machine that stood by the treadmill. A screen showed the peaks and troughs of several graphs that marched implacably across it from right to left in response to mysterious electrical activity inside my body. In the top right hand corner of the screen was a glowing green number.

"That's your pulse rate," explained the technician. We stared at it. It was normal.

There was a keyboard attached to the machine and she typed a few commands on it. The graphs changed shape slightly as the scale altered. "I'll go and tell the doctor you are ready," she said. "He has to give you the once over before we put you on the treadmill. We don't want you dropping dead on us."

Ferney is James Long's first fantasy. His earlier novels have been minor thrillers and *Knowing Max*, the book he wrote after Ferney is a completely naturalistic mainstream novel. But Ferney stands head and shoulders above the competition. If this one doesn't move you, excite you,

make you laugh, make you cry then you are an emotional cripple and I pity you.

It is hard to describe the story without giving spoilers, but I'll try. Gally has had a miscarriage. She has suffered great depressions and nightmares all her life long, but this tragedy has made them worse. She dreams of the boilman, the burnman and wakes screaming in the night. Her husband Mike loves her to distraction, but he is powerless in the face of these strong emotions.

One day, out exploring, they discover a derelict cottage deep in the wilds of Somerset. Gally falls in love with it and insists that they buy it. More for her sake than for any other reason, Mike agrees. The cottage needs extensive renovation. While the builders ply their trade, Mike and Gally live beside it in a ramshackle old caravan.

Gradually they become involved in the life of the village, meet the local people, learn something of its history. Ferney is an old countryman to whom Gally takes a special shine. He seems to know everything there is to know about the history of the village and the history of their tumbledown old cottage. But there are closer connections between Ferney and Gally than she realises. Sometimes he frightens her. Did he really make her dream of a time long ago when the rebellious Duke of Monmouth, fleeing from the victorious armies of the King, turned up at the cottage? Did Monmouth really reward the lady of the cottage for her help with his ring, and did she bury it beneath the front doorstep, fearful of the danger of discovery?

Gally digs beneath the doorstep and sure enough the ring is there. What mysterious hold has Ferney got over her life and why does she both fear it and long for it? Who are the boilman and the burnman? Ferney claims he knows.

The novel is utterly engrossing. It is a love story and a hate story; a story of the ages. The reality of the connection between Ferney and Gally is breathtakingly audacious, but James Long pulls it off perfectly, never missing a trick, never losing control. The ending is a superbly done double whammy that will leave you gasping in shock (and fearful for what comes next – the implications are terrible). You will read this one in a single sitting, for its spell cannot be broken.

On the strength of Ferney, I just had to read *Knowing Max*, and so I did. It contains not a trace of the fantasy elements that give Ferney its power, but I still found that it exerted the same magic spell and I couldn't stop reading. (At one point, as the hero sneaks through the woods towards his lady love hoping to take her by surprise, he is confounded when she informs him that he is making so much noise that he sounds like the Ents marching on Isengard. So perhaps there is a fantasy reference after all).

As a child, Miles Drummond is fascinated with racing cars, with speed. He visits the speed trials at Brighton where he becomes involved with a beautiful woman who lets him help her prepare her car for the trials. The next year, Miles returns, hoping to meet her again. But tragedy strikes. The very car he had helped with the year before crashes and burns, killing her.

Years later, in an old trunk bought on a whim at an auction, he finds a photograph that takes him back to that tragedy. As he goes through the papers in the trunk he finds himself exploring the life of its owner, Max Owen, perhaps a thief, perhaps a war hero, perhaps a friend and confidante of Royalty. Perhaps a liar. There are unsuspected connections between Max and Miles. The tragedy at Brighton was one incident that they shared which has alarming repercussions, but there are other places where their lives have crossed as well. And as Miles comes to know Max more intimately as he follows up the clues from the trunk, he also begins to know a lot that he had never before suspected about himself.

The cardiologist came in and listened to me with a stethoscope. He read my notes and said, "Hmmm. You've been referred to me by your GP."

"Yes"

We discussed my complete lack of any symptom other than the high cholesterol itself. "I feel remarkably well, in fact. That's what makes the whole thing so ridiculous," I complained peevishly. "It wouldn't be so bad if I felt ill, but I don't."

"I've never had a patient who complained about not feeling ill," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if it's a new syndrome?"

"It's probably all my GP's fault," I explained. "I think she must have put the cholesterol in there when I wasn't looking"

He agreed with me that it was a distinct possibility

He turned to the keyboard and played with it for a while. A window opened on the screen and displayed mysterious figures and the graphs ceased their stately progress. Something went *beep*. "I think I've broken it," he said. "Damn computers. I hate them."

The technician glanced across. "Press Escape," she said.

He looked puzzled. "What?"

I decided to intervene. "Top left hand corner of the keyboard," I said. "It's a key with the letters ESC on it."

He found it and pressed it and the machine started working again. "Thank you," he said, greatly impressed. "How do you know so much about computers?"

"It's what I do for a living."

The technician stood me on the treadmill and attached a blood pressure cuff to my left arm. "The test will last for 12 minutes," she explained. "Every three minutes the speed will increase. I'll be taking your blood pressure at each increase. We're going to get your heart rate up to 144 and then work you hard for a little while. If you feel faint or get chest pains, tell me and we'll stop immediately."

The treadmill began to move and I started to walk.

"Relax," said the technician in soothing tones. "Stop being so tense. You've got a poor technique. Don't grip the handlebar. I don't want to see any white knuckles." In the top right hand corner of the screen, my pulse rate began to

increase. The ECG machine began to excrete paper as it made a permanent record of the graphs that marched in such a stately fashion across its screen.

"Three minutes," said the technician. The blood pressure cuff gripped my arm briefly and the treadmill got faster. The belt around my waist that all the wires led to felt loose. I wondered if it would fall off. I hoped not. I'd hate to have to start this all over again.

"Six minutes." Again my blood pressure was taken and the treadmill increased its speed. I was starting to feel it now. My legs were aching and I was beginning to pant. My pulse rate was up to 140. As I watched it reached the magic figure of 144. "Oh good," I thought. "Maybe we can ease off now." No such luck.

"Nine minutes." This time the speed increase seemed out of all proportion to the previous ones and I really had to hurry so as not to fall over. My body was leaning at a 45 degree angle as it fought against the treadmill that was trying to make it fall over in a heap. Try as I might, I couldn't get vertical. Looking in the mirror on the wall, I could see that I had turned distinctly pink. I was panting quite hard now and my pulse was racing at 168. The technician was looking anxious. "Are you feeling OK? Any chest pains? If it gets too much, just say and I'll stop immediately."

"I'm OK," I said, in between gasps. "Let's keep going." My thighs were on fire and I was sucking air deep into my chest. Apart from a hammering heart that was giving the distinct impression that it wanted to leap out of my chest and go for trip to the seaside where it could eat fish and chips, drink beer and attempt to pick up women, I felt great.

I watched my pulse hit 183 just as the technician said, "Twelve minutes." The treadmill decelerated and soon came to a complete stop. I hung on to the bar and panted and listened to the rapid thumping inside my chest. "Come and lie down for a moment," said the technician.

She led me to a trolley and I stretched out and looked at the ceiling while she removed the electrodes. There were several cartoons stuck to the ceiling. In one, a sorry looking man lay on a bed. He was covered from head to foot with enormous zig-zag surgical scars crudely sewn together with huge Frankensteinian stitches. A doctor was saying, "You'll be pleased to hear that the exploratory surgery found nothing wrong."

Another showed an enormously fat man swimming in the sea. Two sharks circled below him and one was saying to the other, "I was tempted, but I thought he might contain too much cholesterol."

Once everything had calmed down and I was slightly less pink, I got dressed. The technician took the huge roll of paper that the machine had regurgitated off to the cardiologist.

Asta's Book by Barbara Vine is compulsively readable. I was half way through it when I got the new Terry Pratchett novel, but I put Pratchett aside because I just had to finish Asta's Book first. That's how good it is.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Asta and her husband Rasmus and their two little boys have emigrated from Denmark to England. They live in London, in a poor suburb. Rasmus is constantly away on business, seeking his fortune. He has an obsession with motor cars, convinced that they will soon be in common use. His wife thinks he is silly.

It is at this time that she starts to write a diary, a diary that she will keep at irregular intervals for most of the rest of her life. Long after her death, the diaries are edited and published by her daughter Swanhilde and they become runaway best sellers. When Swanhilde dies, her niece Ann continues to edit the remaining volumes.

Swanhilde's motives were mixed. Late in life she came to suspect that she was not her mother's natural daughter. When she questioned Asta about this, Asta either shrugged it off or claimed to have forgotten the details or simply refused to talk about it. When Swanhilde found the diaries after her mother's death, her first thought was that perhaps they would tell her the truth about herself. Now that Swanhilde herself is dead, Ann takes up the task on her behalf.

From clues scattered through the pages of the diaries, Ann learns details of a man called Roper who was charged with the murder of his wife, but was acquitted. Who was the murderer? What happened to his daughter who disappeared the day after the murder, never to be seen again?

The secrets are nearly a century old, but Ann is a trained researcher (something Swanhilde was not) and eventually, after a lot of work and investigation, the past begins to reveal its secrets. And they are surprising ones.

The writing is superb, the plot is intricate and (to quote a review on the back of the book) red with herrings. The diary extracts are fascinating; the book is superb.

The Truth is the 25th Discworld novel. The dwarves have learned how to turn lead into gold the hard way. They have a printing press and lots of lead to turn into letters. When William de Worde comes across them he is struck by a brilliant idea (and the letter R).

Soon the first edition of the Ankh-Morepork Times hits the streets. Foul Ole Ron (bugrit!) and sundry companions (millennium hand and shrimp) are recruited to sell the paper.

"Hoinarylup!" they yell. "Squidaped-oyt!"

The patrician buys a copy but finds no mention of hoinarylup or squidaped-oyt! How curious. But soon he has more important things to worry about. It would seem that he has attempted to kill his secretary and abscond with much of the Ankh-Morepork treasury. And his dog Wuffles has vanished. The Watch are called in. But what is really needed is a proper investigative journalist.

Unlike a lot of Discworld novels, this one has quite a good plot as well as the usual funny touches. The combination of the two is unbeatable and this book is a superb addition to the series. The bits of business are wonderful. For example there is Otto the vampire (who has taken the

pledge – nobody say the b-word please). He is a photographer who is allergic to bright light and screams in agony when his flash goes off. If it goes off too brightly, he tends to disintegrate into a pile of dust.

It's an -ing good book.

After the cardiologist had analysed the results of my ECG, he summoned me to his office.

He said, "Regrettably..."

(Oh shit!)

"...your ECG is completely normal. I can't find any evidence of damage at all." He looked glum at the thought of all the money I wasn't going to pay him.

We examined a chart that correlated my age (ancient), blood pressure (normal), whether or not I smoked (no), and whether or not I had diabetes (no). It seemed I had a 5% to 10% chance of a cardiac related event (heart attack or stroke) over the next 5 years. The longer I continued with a high cholesterol level, the greater the chances of fatty deposits blocking the arteries to the heart, and the higher the likelihood of such an event. I had been lucky so far. This probably wouldn't continue.

Given the nature of my new diet, and the fact that I've always eaten a fairly low fat diet anyway, it seems likely that I have a genetic predisposition to high cholesterol. It is a completely symptomless disease, apart from the rather extreme symptom of the heart attack that appears one day out of the blue and kills you. However some people with astronomically high cholesterol start to deposit fat in unlikely areas of the body and often they will have a white fatty circle around the iris of the eye. My father had such circles around his eyes. I remember noticing them as a child and thinking how odd they looked. At the moment my body seems quite tolerant of its high cholesterol and that too is probably genetic. But I can't continue to rely on it for protection.

The doctor and I decided that I was a prime candidate for one of the new statin drugs. These, he explained to me, would cut through my cholesterol like a hot knife through butter (apt analogy there, I thought). I will have to take the drug every day for the rest of my life.

In the short term (i.e. the next few months) I probably don't have much to worry about. In the long term I should be able eventually to reduce my chances of a cardiac related illness to something more reasonable. The future looks hopeful, as long as I continue to eat sensibly and generally take care of myself. "What I suggest you do now," said the doctor, "is go and have a celebratory lunch. Perhaps a cheese and cream sandwich. Deep fried, of course."

As I left, he shook my hand. "I hope this handshake guarantees that a large part of your computer expertise will rub off on me," he said.

"Oh yes. But you have to WANT to change..."

Stephen King	On Writing	Hodder and Stoughton
Joe R. Lansdale	Savage Season	Indigo
Joe R. Lansdale	Mucho Mojo	Mysterious Press
Joe R. Lansdale	The Two Bear Mambo	Mysterious Press
Joe R. Lansdale	Bad Chili	Warner
Joe R. Lansdale	Rumble Tumble	Warner
Joe R. Lansdale	Freezer Burn	Warner
Joe R. Lansdale	The Drive-In: A Double Feature Omnibus	Carroll & Graf
Joe R. Lansdale	Writer of the Purple Rage	Carroll & Graf
Paul J. McAuley	Shrine of Stars	Millennium
James Long	Ferney	Harper Collins
James Long	Knowing Max	Harper Collins
Barbara Vine	Asta's Book	Penguin
Terry Pratchett	The Truth	Doubleday

TIMELINK

By Jon Preddle

The following Frequently Asked Questions are taken from the Timelink website.

<http://www.geocities.com/jpreddle/timelink.html>

These have been used because of the sheer impossibility of showing the whole book to you. There should be copies of the book available at the convention for your further viewing.

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS TIMELINK?

TIMELINK is a non-profit venture, and is totally unauthorised by the BBC. The book is 324-pages, soft-cover with a plastic binding, A4 size, 8 point text. It covers various aspects of **Doctor Who** continuity, specifically taking all the references and quotations and trying to link them all together. The book contains a chronology covering everything from the Big Bang to 10,000,000 years in the future.

The ISBN is 0-473-06853-2

Only the stories broadcast on TV are used as the base material - the book does not include the novels, audios, comics or other media. Most fans are familiar with the TV episodes, most of them being readily available on video or broadcast on stations around the world, which is why this limitation of the canon has been used.

Here is a list of the Chapter heading and a brief description of the questions they examine:

The N-Space Universe - Is Gallifrey located in the same galaxy as Earth? What is Alternative Time? Is History fixed, or can it be changed?

Timeline - A Chronology of the Doctor Who-niverse - from the Big Bang to the destruction of Earth...

Gallifreyan History - How old is the Time Lord race? Do all Gallifreyans have the ability to regenerate? What is Gallifrey's relative time in relation to Earth's? What is the First Law of Time? Why do the Doctor and the Master always meet one another 'in sequence'?

The Doctor's Age - When was the Doctor born? How can the Doctor's age jump from 759 in Season 15 to over 900 in Season 23?

Life On Gallifrey - How old was the Doctor when he left Gallifrey? Where is his family? Why did he leave Gallifrey? How old is the TARDIS? Is 'Doctor Who' is real name? Is the Doctor really a doctor?

An Enigma Called Susan - Who is Susan? What is her real relationship with the Doctor? Is Susan a Time Lord?

Half-Human? - Has the Doctor always been half-human, or is it only his eighth incarnation? How many hearts did the first Doctor have?

More Than A Time Lord? - Was the Doctor a contemporary of Rassilon's? Where did the Hand of

Omega come from? What is the Time of Chaos? What is the secret that the Nemesis knows? Whose faces appear during the mind-bending contest with Morbius?

Cyberman History - Is *Revenge Of The Cybermen* set before or after *Earthshock*?

Dalek History - Is *The Evil Of The Daleks* the final Dalek story? At what point in Dalek history does the Master's trial in the 1996 TV Movie take place?

The UNIT Years - Are the UNIT stories set in the 1970s or the 1980s? Is Sarah Jane Smith really from 1980?

Name-Dropping - What does the Doctor keep in his pockets? Who are all the famous people the Doctor says he has met? How many adventures did the Doctor have before he left Gallifrey?

Storyfile - All 158 stories broadcast between 1963 and 1989, plus *K9 and Company* and the 1996 TV Movie are examined, listing continuity links, real-time story durations and explanations for the Timeline dates. Questions asked and analysed include where did the Valeyard come from? Which Doctor launched the Nemesis into space?

And much much more!!

The following mini-interview with Jon Preddle appears in TSV #60:

What is the background to TIMELINK?

Jon: I had read Jean Marc Lofficier's Earth chronology in the first hardback edition of his *Programme Guide* back in 1981. This covered the stories only as far as Season Eighteen. In 1987, after seeing in an American fanzine a list of dates that went up to Season 22, I started to work on my own timeline including the seasons missing from Lofficier's. I completed the notes for this in 1989 once I had seen Season 26. Originally I was thinking of presenting my chronology as a series of separate timelines in *TSV* (the acclaimed New Zealand Doctor Who Fan Club fanzine) covering each Doctor, and various foes like the Daleks, Cybermen and the Master. But I also wanted to include notes and observations about certain continuity elements, and it just grew and grew from there.

Once I had started putting everything together in the early 1990s I adapted some of the information into several short test articles for *TSV*, plus the odd *Doctor's Dilemma* solution. It got to the point where I realised that to do this bit by bit, chapter by chapter in *TSV*, it would take several years to achieve, and that was not the best option. The only way to do it any justice - especially given the amount of time I have spent on it - was to do it as a separate book.

Why has it taken you ten years to complete the book?

A variety of reasons, really. There have been many external influences that have caused delays, such as overseas holidays (I've been overseas six times in the last ten years!), moving house twice, and generally getting on with life! Besides, this was a project that I could work on only in the evenings and weekends, or as time permitted. In 1993 Lofficier updated his Earth chronology in *The Terrestrial Index* so I lost interest in the project. A few years later I resurrected it, but by late 1995 Lance Parkin's

A History Of The Universe was announced, so everything was put on hold yet again! The Paul McGann movie was on the horizon also, and Marvel was still running their telesnap series. I stopped further work on the book until such time that all the telesnaps had been published.

Many fans have read *The Discontinuity Guide*, as well as the afore-mentioned chronologies in *The Terrestrial Index* and *A History of the Universe*, and therefore might be reluctant to buy another book that covers the same ground. What has TIMELINK got to offer that these books don't?

Quite a lot, actually. There are, of course, bits that are the same - that's only to be expected - but there is more that is new. [Refer to the Chapter list above.]

The Earth History in Jean Marc Lofficier's books is heavily flawed; it lacks consistency because he only covers stories that are set on Earth, or feature Earth colonies. Besides, Lofficier doesn't offer full explanations for the dates he uses; as far as I'm concerned the explanations are the most important part of any chronology guide.

The invaluable *Discontinuity Guide* is predominantly a summary of continuity elements, with little square-bracketed sections or box-outs discussing awkward anomalies. Also, they only brush over dates under the Location heading, and in many most cases they don't offer a date if one isn't known.

A History Of The Universe (AHOTU) on the other hand, is chiefly a book of story synopses with short notes explaining the dates. Take out the synopses and you've got probably a 150-page book. I don't have synopses, and my timeline runs for only 25 pages!; it is my explanations that form the bulk of **TIMELINK**. **TIMELINK** is well over 260,000 words, whereas *AHOTU* is around 135,000.

In terms of new stuff, **TIMELINK** has the advantage of being more up to date by covering the Paul McGann movie, which screened after the other books were published. And while Parkin's book includes dates from the Virgin novels and radio plays, I have only used the televised stories; I have included *K9 And Company*, but not *Shada*. (My reasons for this are explained fully in the book.) About half of my dates are different from those suggested by Parkin. For example, I have set *Dragonfire* in 1987, whereas Parkin sets it 2 million years in the future! *AHOTU* has over 20 events that Parkin has been unable to give a date to due to lack of clues. I have been able to suggest dates for many of these.

The way in which the information is presented is very different; I have separate chapters covering various topics, all of which point towards the timeline. For example, I have two chapters dedicated to establishing how the Gallifrey stories can be dated. In *AHOTU* Parkin keeps all the Gallifrey stories separate from the main timeline because he couldn't work out a way to fit Gallifrey in. I believe I have found a way.

One of my favourite chapters is **Name-Dropping**, in which I have listed what I feel is a complete list (a bold claim!) of all the non-televised adventures and encounters with famous people mentioned by the Doctor. I've never

seen such a comprehensive list in any other publication, so that is something new for readers.

TIMELINK also includes story durations, which is another thing I have not seen in any other publication. I have broken the adventures down into the number of days they last in terms of real-time for the characters. While it originally took several weeks to tell the story by watching it on TV, what a lot of people forget is that the adventures take place over a much shorter period of time.

So, yes, there is a lot in **TIMELINK** that is new and has never been written before - at least not that I've seen anywhere else. If this doesn't convince you to buy a copy I don't know what will!

R Story

By Jeena Murphy

Chapter One

The students of Riverrow Comprehensive School could talk of nothing else but the reward the city council had offered. Every corridor and classroom was abuzz with theories and schemes of how to solve the situation, the R situation, and then claim the big reward.

Briar Redfern and her friend Jenny Morrison were no different to any of the other students. Their thoughts never strayed too far from the reward money and the fact that letter Rs rained down on their town.

Every morning Briar opened her bedroom curtains, she remembered the sight that greeted her six months ago. Her front garden, and the street beyond, was strewn with letter Rs. Briar still thought it was weird that a letter of the alphabet had decided to sprinkle itself across her town for half a year. She still marvelled that the Rs were every colour of the rainbow and every font imagined. When it was still the in thing to do, she'd got together a very nice collection of fuzzy purple Rs, some with spots and some without.

Briar would have breakfast with her mother Amanda and wait for her friend Jenny's knock on the front door of their home in Rewa Drive.

When Jenny arrived, Briar, a petite whirlwind of shoulder length wavy brown hair and green eyes, would kiss her mother Amanda goodbye and rush out the door. She'd slow half a step to admire the large Norfolk pine in their garden. Some of the multi-coloured letter Rs were caught high in its branches. The letters glittered and shone in the early morning light, giving the impression of a badly decorated Christmas tree.

Briar loved walking to school with her friend Jenny, an energetic and athletic girl. She was about 15cm taller than Briar, with brown eyes and spiky sandy hair. Jenny kept her hair short so it didn't get in the way with her one true passion – horse riding.

"We need to win this reward Briar." Jenny told Briar for the 50th time.

"I just don't think I'll be allowed to. Not with Mum being the Mayor."

"We can enter under my name."

"They'll still think it's rigged."

"The stables are going to sell Georgia. I'll never get to ride her again."

"You'll really miss her if she goes."

"I love her Briar." Jenny had almost stopped walking. "I don't know if I could go on."

"Oh Jenny, she's only a horse."

"Only a horse," Jenny shouted outraged.

"It's not like your father...not like me. I haven't seen my Dad in six months."

Jenny nodded. "I suppose. Would you visit your Dad with your reward money?"

"Sure would. Once a month."

"What would your Mum say?"

"She might be the Mayor of Riverrow but she can't stop me seeing my Dad."

The girls walked on in silence. Briar thinking about her father and Jenny about her horse Georgia.

Briar's father had split up from her mother and moved to another town about the same time the Rs arrived. She still hadn't found a way to blame the Rs for this, but she was sure there had to be a connection.

Chapter Two

The second subject of the day was Science. Mrs Johnson had just started the lesson on plant biology when Fergus Whelan put up his hand.

"Would the Rs be considered plant matter?" He asked.

The class groaned and a cheeky grin spread across Fergus' freckled face.

"Must everything be about the Rs with you Fergus?" Mrs Johnson sighed.

"No, but are they plants?"

"No Fergus. They are some sort of plastic polymer."

"Why do they stick together?"

"Their surfaces are roughened. So they sort of act like Velcro."

Briar thought again about seeing her Dad and stuck up her hand. Jenny just about fell off her chair.

She mouthed, What are you doing?

Briar shrugged.

"Yes Briar."

"Why do the Rs move about?"

"I don't think they're animate Briar."

"No I mean why are there lots of Rs in one part of town one day, and then they are raining down somewhere else the next day?"

"I'm not sure Briar. Perhaps they are attracted to something."

Mrs Johnson made sure the rest of the lesson was dedicated to plant biology, although Fergus tried to ask a couple more questions about his passion.

Briar did wonder why some days their footpaths were strewn with Rs and other days they were empty.

She'd been like everyone else when the first Rs appeared. She'd built R men, collected font types and had R ball fights with other children. The novelty had worn off once

the streets had flooded because the Rs clogged up the drains, or clumps of letters fell from trees and stuck to you.

Then the R situation took up more and more of her mother's time. Not only did she miss her Dad, she hardly saw her mum now.

As they filed out of class, Fergus pushed his way up to Briar.

"Why are you so interested in the Rs?" He asked Briar.

"I was just curious."

"You're going for the reward money, aren't you?"

"No," Briar and Jenny said in unison.

"Oh yeah, I get it." His eyes lit up. "You're trying to solve the R situation. Eh. Yeah that's right."

He beamed, pleased with himself for discovering the mystery. His face going about as red as his bushy hair.

"So what if we do?" Briar snapped.

The girls glared at him.

"Let me in on it. I'll help."

"No," the girls cried in unison. They were both thinking about the dwindling reward money.

Fergus tried another tack. "I've got a very rare purple, green and red spotted copperplate Gothic font R to swap. What have you got?"

"We don't swap Rs any more Fergus. We've got more important things to think about," Jenny turned around and grabbed Briar by the arm.

"Shall we decorate a bush? We might get on TV. Sixty Minutes is doing a programme on Riverrow."

"Sorry Fergus," Briar called as they walked away.

The girls sat down in a corner of the playground during recess to draw up an action plan.

"I'm glad you've got serious about this Briar. I know we can solve it."

Briar held the notepad in one hand with pen poised in the other while they racked their brains about what to do next. They came up with a lot of umms and errs. Then Briar had a brainwave.

"Why don't we go up to the University and have a look around. They should have some answers up there."

Jenny agreed and they decided to go after school. Jenny knew the bus routes because she'd been there with her older brother. Briar's father used to work there too, but she'd only ever travelled there by car.

The rest of the day was rather long as they couldn't wait for the school bell to ring.

The University was a bus ride away in the next suburb. As the bus wound its way up the hill to Cargill University, the Rs became more prolific. Their bus kept slowing down to pass the parked charter buses, and avoid camera

wielding tourists standing in the way of on coming traffic to get the perfect shot.

The footpath where the bus dropped them off by the University was a gaudy mess of colours. The multi-coloured piles of Rs assaulted Briar's senses and her stomach squirmed.

This must be the source, thought Briar.

Great mounds of Rs were everywhere in all sorts of colours and shapes they hadn't seen before. Outside the Languages Department was the worst. The students could hardly get in through the doors. University staff were sucking up the letters with big industrial vacuum cleaners, probably made to suck up the leaves in autumn. As soon as one big pile was sucked up, more letters would drift down out of the Languages tower or waft out of a group of students walking towards class.

The girls scouted around the campus. None of the other Departments had as big a problem as the Languages. The Science buildings were getting cluttered but they didn't need the heavy artillery there yet.

The girls bought an ice cream each from the cafeteria and sat down in the campus courtyard to ponder what they'd seen.

"It's so much worse around Languages," Briar started.

"But Sciences is quite bad too," Jenny added, taking a lick of her ice cream.

"Nothing much around Business or Information Technology."

"Why Languages?"

"Yes why."

It was as if a light bulb had gone off inside Briar's head.

"I've got it!" she said, jumping to her feet.

"What? What?" Jenny asked excitedly. She had visions of her horse Georgia racing towards her.

"They must be coming from our words."

"What do you mean?" Jenny's horse was fading again.

"Well if the biggest amount of Rs are around the Languages, it must be because they are mispronouncing words."

Jenny understood. Georgia was galloping towards her again, her pale mane blowing in the wind across her dappled coat.

"You mean they're not saying their Rs properly."

"Yeah." Briar was jumping up and down with excitement. "They're saying propah instead of proper and the letters are dropping off."

"Let's try it."

The girls raced out of the courtyard and found a quiet spot with no students to interrupt them. They gathered up all the Rs scattered on the ground, piling them around the

corner, until the alcove they were standing in was clear of letters.

“Think of all the words you can with Rs in the middle that we don’t pronounce.”

“Okay” Jenny sighed.

“Propah, propah, propah, Septembah, Sataday, supah, dupah, rivah, cleva, stoppa, hoppa, parkah, staht, cah, stah.”

At the same time Briar said, “suga, computah, Rivarow, Cahgill, singah, lightah, savahry, writahs, blightahs.”

The Rs began to float down around them. Small ones with glitter, orange ones with black fuzz, large green ones with candy stripes. The girls laughed and hugged one another.

“Why didn’t we realise before?” Briar shook her head at their inattention.

“I knew.” Fergus’s red, bushy head popped around the corner, followed by his freckly body.

“You horrible little spy,” Jenny shouted at him. “You didn’t know at all. You just overheard us.”

He grinned, his cheeky face giving away the fact that Jenny was right.

“Now what are we going to do?” Jenny turned to Briar in exasperation.

Both girls stared at Fergus’ earnest freckled face. They turned to each other. Briar shrugged.

“He might be of some help.”

Jenny snorted.

“He’ll stuff things up.”

“No I won’t,” Fergus pleaded. He was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “I’ll be able to help.”

“We’ll have to decide,” Briar said. “Wait over there.” She pointed to a wall at the end of the alcove where Fergus would be out of earshot. He dutifully trotted over to wait for the girls’ verdict.

“You can’t let him in,” Jenny exploded in an attempt to whisper.

“Look, he knows now and he could go off on his own and get the reward money.”

Jenny bit her lip.

“It’s better we say yes to him so he’s with us.”

Jenny didn’t look convinced.

“I know it means less reward money for us, but at least we’ll get some.”

“I don’t suppose we have a choice.”

“No we don’t really.”

Jenny still wasn’t very happy.

“He better keep his act together or he’s out.”

“Okay.”

They called him back over. Fergus whooped when he heard the good news.

“I won’t let you girls down.”

“If there’s any temper tantrums or stuff ups, you’re out. Okay?” Jenny warned.

“You don’t have to worry.” He assured them.

Briar looked at her watch. It was after 5pm.

“I’ve got to go. Mum’s actually home early tonight.”

The group filed onto the bus. The ride back to Riverrow was a quiet one for the trio. Each locked in their private thoughts of spending the reward money and how they’d be town heroes.

Chapter Three

Briar trudged down Rewa Drive after the bus dropped her off. It was getting dark and she had to watch where she walked. Some parts of the footpath were chocker with Rs. She turned the bend and the lights of her home radiated warmth straight into her heart. It was unusual for her mother to be home before 10pm during the week. It was “meeting after bloody meeting” according to her Mum. She’d thrown herself into Council work when Briar’s Dad had left.

“Hi Mum.” Briar called as she walked in the back door of their turn of the century villa.

“In here dear,” her mother Amanda called from the kitchen. She was sitting at the kitchen table, a raft of papers strewn in front of her. A yellow marker pen in hand and her glasses balanced on the end of her nose. Her shoulder length blond hair was all over the place and Briar knew she’d been working for a couple of hours. She had the habit of constantly running her fingers through her hair.

The kitchen was warm and full of cooking aromas. Amanda was a good cook and she was making Briar’s favourite, salmon quiche.

Mrs Bellamy from 3 doors down usually looked after Briar during the week. Her cooking was pretty basic, but Briar figured it was better than starving.

“What are you working on?” Briar asked her mother after she’d given her a hug.

“Papers for the next Council Meeting.”

“The R meeting?” The box of orange juice froze in the air over her glass.

“No, that’s next week.”

"So are you talking to people who think they can solve the problem?"

"Yeah." Amanda looked up from her papers. She was looking at Briar like she'd only just seen her.

"So how many have you got?"

"A few." She was tapping the magic marker against her hand.

"Can we go to the beach this weekend?" Briar decided she'd use a diversionary tactic to keep her mother off the trail.

Amanda frowned. "I don't think so love, I've still got too much work on."

"You care about the Council more than me." Briar growled.

"I'm not going to get into an inane conversation, so you may as well stop now."

Briar banged the juice down on the bench and glared at her mother.

"Time for tea."

Amanda packed up her papers while Briar set the table, her bustling causing ripples in the uneasy silence.

Amanda attempted conversation. She talked to Briar about Council business and amusing happenings during the day. Briar just grunted, torn between her anger at her mother's constant absences and her self disgust at behaving so badly. These conflicting emotions tightened her chest and froze her vocal cords until she thought she might choke on her dinner.

"Go to your room," Briar's mother told her after tea. "I'm sick of looking at you sulky face."

Briar stomped up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door. She kicked her study chair and burst into tears, guilty and frustrated by her appalling behaviour.

The next day at school Jenny and Fergus hustled Briar into their empty classroom. Jenny held up a newspaper cutting calling for submissions on the R situation to be heard the following Wednesday night.

"You call the number Briar," Jenny ordered.

"What will we call ourselves?"

"I know," Fergus started to giggle uncontrollably.

"Well?" Briar tapped her foot, but she was smiling too.

"The Short Rs." He laughed some more.

"But that sounds like arse." Jenny said.

They all burst into fits of laughter.

During lunch, they went to a payphone near the school. Briar gave their group name The Short Rs, and almost had to hang up when the council worker asked her to spell the name. She managed to control her giggling.

"Okay guys," she said to the other two. "We're on at 8:30pm for 20 minutes."

"Couldn't you have made it earlier, 8:30 pm's my bedtime." Fergus complained.

"You'll just have to sneak out." Jenny snapped.

"Look, what's more important is what we're going to say during our slot."

They all nodded.

"What's the exact wording of the notice?" Briar asked.

Jenny pulled the notice out of her bag.

"It reads, The Riverrow City Council invite presentations to solve the R situation currently experienced by the borough. The solution, when implemented, which rids the area of its R situation will gain its inventor/s a substantial reward."

"What's wrong with them? Why can't they say it simply?" Fergus shook his head.

"You know what they're like. Why use 1 word when you can use 20."

Briar wanted to get them back on track.

"Let's go to my place after school and start working on this."

"Yeah, it's going to have to be good. We haven't got a hope otherwise. Who's going to listen to a bunch of kids."

"Before we get onto that though, I think we need to get to the bottom of the problem," Fergus cautioned.

"What's the problem. We know what's causing it," Jenny dismissed him.

"Actually we don't. We know why."

"But we don't know how," Briar interrupted.

"Yeah," Fergus continued.

"I knew you'd be trouble," Jenny growled.

"He's right Jenny. We don't know what's causing it."

"I picked up a lot of different types of Rs when we were up at the University." Fergus pulled out an envelope from his backpack, opened it and gently eased out a bunch of Rs.

"These are very rare Italic Helvetia fonts. Red, green and violet." He paused for effect. Getting nothing but stunned silence from the girls, he continued.

"I've never seen these before. I've been collecting Rs since they turned up. There's something fishy about this."

Briar made a decision. "We need to go back to the University after school and have another look around."

"Damn right we do," Fergus nodded enthusiastically.

Chapter Four

When the children got off the bus, the University was even more cluttered with Rs.

"Let's split up and scout around," Fergus said.

"Who put you in charge?" Jenny snapped at him "You're only here because of us."

"Stop it you two." Briar tried to keep the peace. "I think we should have a look around Languages. It's always been worse there."

She turned and walked towards the Languages block. When they got there, the trio stood in unbelieving silence. The Rs were now piled up in 2 metre high drifts. A path had been cleared to the building's entrance but this was filling up fast. Rs were spewing out from the top of the 10th floor building.

"It wasn't like this last week," Jenny said, staring up at the waterfall of Rs.

"Let's go up to the top when we get in." Briar suggested.

The others agreed and rushed at the door, struggling to open it. With the help of some other students, they squeezed through the jammed up doorway and looked around for the lift.

Fergus held back, scanning the floor directory.

"Tenth floor is Linguistics and the English Department."

"What's Linguistics?" Jenny asked.

"Something to do with words, I think," Fergus replied.

"Good one Fergus, even I could work that out."

"Stop it ... just stop it." Briar had had enough. "We've got to work as a team if we want to solve this."

Jenny dropped her head and scuffed at a couple of Rs with her foot.

"Sorry Fergus," she muttered.

The lift ride up to the 10th floor was quiet and the atmosphere strained. The doors opened and the trio exited along with the older students.

They stood in front of the floor's noticeboard, wondering what to do next.

Briar motioned they should follow the students along a corridor to their left. They walked along at a slower speed, reading names on closed doors and peering into open ones. Most of the open rooms were offices for staff. The rooms were lined with books, and the rooms' occupants were hunched over their computers. The names on the doors showed they were Doctors or Professors.

The older students had turned into a classroom on the right.

As they walked past, Briar thought it didn't look much different from their classrooms at Riverrow Comprehensive, except the desks were arranged in a rectangle rather than lined up facing the blackboard.

The corridor veered left again. All the doors down this stretch were closed, apart from one at the end. The open door beckoned the trio, even though the corridor was a dead end. There would be no escape if someone caught them snooping around. They walked down to the room

and peeked inside. The sign on the door said Professor Routerbortyrblar. Fortunately he was nowhere to be seen.

They peered into the ordered, tidy room. Two walls were filled with the Professor's books. His desk was immaculate, papers and files in neat piles beside the computer.

"How do you pronounce that?" Fergus snorted.

"Rootabotyblah I think," Briar tried, giggling at her attempt.

"No it's Rottybotyblah," Jenny suggested.

"I know it's Rottybotybluck." Fergus sang gleefully.

They clutched the walls, hands over their mouths, trying not to laugh out loud.

Fergus straightened up, moaned and rushed into the room. He swooped on a clear plastic cube sitting on the bookshelf. Inside was an ornate gold letter R, like one you would find in an old medieval manuscript.

"Oh," Fergus crooned, "It's so beautiful." He cradled the cube in his hands, turning it this way and that admiring the R inside. He held the cube up for the others to see the R.

The R flattened itself against the side of the cube closest to girls. It bounced up and down, firing itself back across the cube attacking the side nearest to Fergus. He yelped with surprise and dropped the cube.

It bounced on the desk, knocking over a pile of files then fell on the carpet. The jolt slid the lid slightly ajar and the R tried to squeeze out the small gap. Fergus threw himself on the cube.

"I've never seen an R move before." Fergus pushed the curved part of the R back inside, while trying to slide the lid shut.

"Don't let it out Fergus." Briar fretted.

"I'm trying to get it back in."

The R was putting up a fearsome fight.

"It's a feisty one." Jenny exclaimed, after Fergus got it back into the cube.

Fergus held the cube close to his face. The R was vibrating, like it was humming.

"It's weird. It's like its alive," he breathed in admiration.

"Don't you think it's strange though?" Jenny asked.

Feeling nervous Briar glanced up the corridor. They would be in plain view if the Professor or someone else came back.

"We should go, before we get caught." Briar urged.

Fergus opened his backpack and carefully put the cube in his bag.

"You're not taking it are you?" Briar was horrified. "That's stealing."

"I've got this gut feeling it's important. I'd rather we had it than this guy."

Briar hastily swept up the spreadeagled files on the floor, trying to straighten out the papers. A photograph fluttered out onto the carpet and Jenny picked it up.

"Briar, isn't this your father?" She asked as she handed her the photograph.

Briar instantly recognised her father. He was smiling into the camera with his arm was around another man. It was a recent shot because his beard was just starting to grow in. He only given up shaving six months ago because he thought a beard made him look more intellectual.

"Quick," Jenny urged. "I can hear something."

Briar stuffed the picture in her bag and dumped the files on the Professor's desk. The corridor was still empty as they hurried back down it. Turning the corner, they passed the classroom where the students they'd journeyed up with were. They were halfway down this hallway when they heard the lift door open. A distinguished looking man in a suit was walking along the corridor towards them. Fergus and Jenny avoided looking at him but Briar's curiosity got the better of her. She looked up and his pale blue eyes were boring into her. His moustache hid the line of his mouth. Her heart started beating faster and she felt her cheeks reddening. She'd just read his nametag - Professor Rooterbortyrblar. He was the man in the picture with her father.

Chapter Five

When they reached the lifts, Fergus pressed the down button. Briar gave in to the desire to look behind her. She was relieved the Professor had turned the corner and she knew it didn't give them much time.

"That was him." There was an edge of hysteria in her voice.

"The Professor." Jenny's eyes widened.

Fergus hit the down button a couple more times. They heard a shout coming from the direction of the professor's office.

"Quick, let's go down the stairs," Briar pushed open the exit to the stairwell.

Fergus hesitated as the lift pinged and the doors to their ride to freedom slid open.

"Fergus, this way. He's coming." Briar's voice was getting higher pitched.

He looked down the empty corridor. At any moment the Professor would appear striding down towards him demanding his beautiful R back. He pushed past Briar and bounded down the stairs, after Jenny.

She let the door go quickly and followed her friends down flight after flight of stairs. She thought her pounding heart would jump out of her chest when she heard a door above them open. She looked up to see a stream of chattering students swarm into the stairway. Feeling a little more

secure, in the presence of the other students, the trio slowed down.

"Do you think he's following us?" Jenny asked.

"He saw us," Briar said in a low voice. "He noticed the R was gone, and I guess he'll want it back."

"I told you he was going to stuff things up." Jenny glared at Fergus.

"I can't explain it but I know he shouldn't have it. It's safer with us."

"Yeah but we're not safer with it." Jenny snapped.

"Shh...." Briar warned. They walked down another flight in silence and Briar led them out onto the second floor. There were some students nearby waiting for the lift.

"Okay, I think we should wait for a few minutes in case he's gone down to look for us."

"No, I think we should make a run for it," Fergus said.

Before they could really start arguing, the lift door opened to their left.

Briar gasped. She spotted the Professor standing at the back of the crowded lift. His face creased with anger when he saw Briar and he struggled to get past the other passengers.

"Quick." Briar rushed back into the stairway, followed by the others.

Briar bolted down the stairs two at a time, almost tripping when the Professor's voice boomed,

"Children stop. I need to talk to you."

His voice was amplified by the shaft's close walls and echoed long after he'd finished talking.

The children ran faster, and burst out of the stairwell into the ground floor lobby. They ducked and dived between milling students and pushed their way out of the main doors.

Running through the piles of Rs was worse than trying to move through snow. Briar felt she was in a nightmare where time had slowed down and she was fleeing as fast as she could, but she wasn't gaining any ground. The Rs stuck to her legs like biddy-bids, their velcro-like surfaces clung to each other forming large clumps, almost dragging her over. Fergus and Jenny were ahead of her, struggling just as much through the Rs. At any moment she expected a hand to crash down on her shoulder and pull her back into the tower. She risked turning and saw no sign of the Professor. Her skin went cold and prickly when she saw how little distance they'd covered from the front doors.

They struggled along until the Rs began to thin. They were able to move faster and raced through the campus, checking from time to time if the Professor was following them.

They got to the bus stop and tried to merge with the other students. Fergus was jiggling on the spot and Jenny was nervously peering around the bus shelter in search of the

Professor. Briar decided she'd stare straight ahead and pretend everything was okay.

The bus arrived in record time. Briar realised she'd been holding her breath and had to take big gulps of air as the trio jostled to the front of the queue. They scuttled down the aisle where they huddled on the back seat. Briar thought she was about to explode from the tension. The last person got on and Briar willed the bus to start moving. The door closed with a hydraulic hiss and the bus pulled away. Briar turned to watch the University disappear and her face went cold. On the pavement stood Professor Routerbortyrblar. He made no attempt to stop the bus. He just stood stiff and straight, his pale blue eyes staring intently at Briar.

He continued to stand in the same place, a doll-like unmoving figure as the bus trundled down the road and turned the corner. Briar realised she didn't feel scared any more, just a little sad and guilty, the same feeling you got when you were mean to a little kid.

"Phew, that was a close one." Fergus grinned.

"Can't believe he just stood there at the end like a big dummy." Jenny laughed rather loudly.

It worked as a tension breaker and they were all giggling.

"Why did he just stand there though?" Briar frowned. "It seems strange."

Jenny laughed again, "As if letter R's falling from the sky isn't."

Briar pulled out the photograph of her father and the Professor from her bag.

"This is also weird," she said, peering at the picture.

Jenny and Fergus leaned over to get a better look. Briar's father beamed out at them. His warm brown eyes sparkled and his enjoyment of life shone through, even in this captured slice of time. But the Professor was staring straight ahead, his eyes solemn, a hint of a smile played on his lips. Both were wearing T-Shirts and there was a glimpse of the river in the background.

"What does your Dad do again?" Jenny asked.

"He's a scientist. Works with particles and atoms. He's actually a physicist."

"They look like they're friends." Fergus said.

"Did the Professor ever come to your house?" Jenny asked

"No. I've never seen him before. Dad must know him when he worked up at the University."

"Where's he working now?" Jenny asked quietly.

"Mum says he's working for the Government. I haven't seen him much since he left. We haven't really talked about his new job."

Fergus opened his bag and pulled out the cube. A look of love flickered across his freckly face. He sighed and would have kissed the R if the girls weren't there.

The children jolted along in the back of the bus looking at the R, locked in their private thoughts.

Chapter Six

The next day Jenny arrived at Briar's place for school earlier than usual. Her cheeks were flushed from the brisk ten minute walk between their homes.

The girls sat out on the sunny patio in the back yard, sipping orange juice and eating cheese and pineapple waffles in the early morning sun.

"Briar," Jenny said through a mouthful of waffle, "I'm really worried about us having the R and that Professor. He might know who you are. He had a picture of your Dad."

Briar stopped mid bite. She hadn't thought of that. "Do you think he'll come here?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you should ask your Dad about the Professor."

"If I do, we'll have to tell him about taking the R. I can't do that."

"No I guess not." Jenny picked up another waffle and chewed on it.

The girls continued eating until their worried silence was broken by the doorbell's shrill ring.

Briar jumped in fright and flew out of the patio chair. She stood frozen, not knowing what to do next.

"Briar, Fergus is here," her mother called.

Briar clasped her hand to her mouth in relief and slumped back into her seat.

"You gave me a fright, you little toad," Briar chuckled when Fergus walked out on to the patio.

"Ooh, I'm so scary. I'm the evil Professor." Fergus had grabbed a couple of handfuls of his bushy hair and was pulling it up in imitation of a mad professor. He held his hair so tight it pulled on his scalp and contorted his face. Fergus kept up his impersonation until he spotted the waffles.

"You know it was really strange," Fergus said through a mouthful of food.

"What?" the girls asked in union.

"When we woke up this morning, the house was covered with Rs."

"What's so strange about that?" Briar asked.

"Well, there was more, lots more than usual. It's not usually that bad around here. But this morning it was like up at the University."

"Just around your house?" Briar asked.

"Yeah, and in the garden."

"But not out on the street?"

"No."

"It must be that R you took," Jenny concluded, giving Briar a knowing look. Fergus fossicked in his bag and pulled out the cube. He'd duct taped the cube shut, in case the R escaped while it jiggled around in his bag.

"You must be the key," he said in a squeaky voice that you'd use with a small child or puppy.

"Isn't it lovely, Fergus has got a new pet," Jenny quipped.

Fergus shot her a dirty look but even her jibing couldn't destroy his happiness at having the ultimate R.

"Come on you kids, time to go to school," Briar's mother called.

The walk to school was slower because there were more Rs around than usual. Younger children were dawdling and playing with the letters on the footpath, getting in the trio's way. Fergus also kept stopping and checking on the cubed R in his bag.

"Why are you bringing it to school anyway? It might escape," Briar warned him.

They turned into the gates of Riverrow Comprehensive just as the bell to assembly rang. The trio went straight to the hall, instead of putting their bags and coats away in their lockers.

They hurried to the three rows that their form class was allocated half way down the wooden hall. They squeezed on the end of a row, the other students having to wriggle along to make room for them.

They'd just got settled when the teachers filed up onto the stage, led by their formidable principal Mrs Rodderbury. She stood in front of the podium, her clear, intelligent green eyes scoured the students, as the teachers shuffled in behind her taking their rightful seats.

"Good morning school," she began, her head, a helmet of dark hair swivelled left and right ensuring she missed nothing happening in the captive audience before her.

"I have some disturbing news. Some Riverrow Comprehensive students were seen up at the University, allegedly taking an item that did not belong to them. There will be a spot check of bags and lockers when you return to your form rooms. Please go there directly after assembly."

The school stood up and the piano tickled out the introduction to the school song. Under the cover of everyone singing, Briar whispered, "He must have recognised our uniforms."

The others nodded.

"What should we do?" Fergus whispered back.

"Fergus, you've got to ditch the R."

Fergus' eyebrows knitted together and he bellowed out the song's lyrics deliberately avoiding any more attempts Briar and Jenny made to talk to him.

The trio rushed out of the assembly hall as soon as the last chords of the piano died.

"Have you still got your duct tape Fergus?"

"Yeah." He answered suspiciously.

"We know you won't part with the R, so let's just ditch the cube and keep the R."

Briar grabbed Fergus by the arm and dragged him towards the nearest girls' toilets.

"I'm not going in there," he squawked.

"Do you want to keep your R?"

Fergus allowed himself to be led into the girls' bathroom. Fortunately there was no one in there. The three squeezed in a toilet cubicle and shut the door.

"Get the R out and pass me the duct tape." Briar commanded.

Fergus passed the duct tape to Briar and took the cube from his bag. He carefully eased out the letter and held on firmly to its struggling form.

"You've been taking it out and playing with it, haven't you?" Jenny said.

Fergus chuckled guiltily.

"It could have escaped," she continued.

"But it didn't," he grinned.

"Okay Jenny, you lift up his jersey and shirt." Briar said, pulling out a length of duct tape.

"What?" Fergus tried to back away which was hard to do with three people squeezed into a toilet cubicle.

"What are you doing?" Fergus attempted to keep his voice calm, while leaning away from Jenny's grasping hands.

"We're going to duct tape the R to you. That way it won't be spotted during the inspection."

Fergus calmed down and allowed Jenny to lift up his jersey and shirt. He pressed the wriggling R to his abdomen and Briar wrapped the tape around him.

"Do you think it will hold?" Jenny asked.

"We'll tape it as tight as we can. How does that feel Fergus?" Briar wound another length of tape across the R.

"It tickles."

"The tape?"

"No, the R."

"Are you sure it'll hold? We've just about finished the roll." Jenny fretted.

"Yeah, she'll be right," Fergus said with more confidence than he actually felt.

They could see the R's impression struggling under the tape but it looked like it would hold.

"It'll have to do. If we don't get to form class now it won't look good for us."

Jenny threw the empty cube in a rubbish bin as they hurried through the school.

“You might have to eat your lunch early Fergus.”

“I don’t mind. Keeping the R safe is more important.”

The trio were last to enter their classroom. Their form teacher Mr Rovey

frowned at them but said nothing.

“Mrs Rodderbury is checking lockers now. Please put your open bags on your desk.”

The students did as he said and the classroom door swung open to reveal their school principal and Professor Routerbortyrblar. He scanned the room and walked straight over to where the trio sat.

“That’s them.” He was pointing at Fergus, Briar and Jenny. He nodded at Fergus’ lunchbox and Fergus popped the seal, peeling the lid off. The professor turned out its contents onto the desk. He poked through Fergus’ bag and then emptied out Jenny’s and Briar’s onto their desks.

Briar tried to discreetly look at Fergus’ abdomen without drawing any attention to it.

The principal’s voice jolted her back to their predicament.

“Come with us.” Mrs Rodderbury opened the door and shoed the three into the corridor.

“You think it was these three?”

“I know it was,” said the Professor. He was staring intently at Briar.

Briar felt sick and looked at her shoes. She hadn’t polished them for a while.

Pull yourself together, she told herself, how can you be thinking about that at a time like this.

“Children, the Professor thinks you took something that belonged to him.”

Briar took a deep breath. “We were up at the University but we certainly did not take anything that didn’t belong to us.”

Briar tried to include Jenny and Fergus. They nodded vigorously but seemed unable to speak. Fergus was gripping his stomach. Briar thought it looked convincing, seeing their situation.

“Why were you up at the University?” Mrs Rodderbury asked impatiently.

“We were researching an assignment for science about the Rs. There’s masses of them up there,” Jenny explained, her voice quavering.

Mrs Rodderbury’s frown softened. “Oh, you children are mad to win this competition. That’s all I hear, Rs, Rs, Rs.”

“But they...,” the professor sputtered.

“I think we’re not going to discover anything more here. Back to class children.” The principal said, cutting the professor off.

Briar had to fight hard to keep a smile bursting across her face.

The professor scowled at them as Mrs Rodderbury led him away.

Every pair of eyes was on them as they entered the classroom. The rumble of suppressed questions threatened to explode but Mr Rovey quietened the class with a stern frown.

Jenny, Briar and Fergus quietly retrieved the contents of their bags and packed things away as their teacher talked about an inter-class competition.

Briar couldn’t concentrate on what he was saying. The bell finally rang and the trio rushed out of the classroom and back to the girl’s toilets, squeezing into the same cubicle.

Fergus whipped up his shirt. The R had moved up his abdomen and was almost at the top of the duct tape.

“Phew we got it in time.” Jenny whispered.

Fergus gave her his small pocket knife and she cut gently through the tape around the wiggling R, while Fergus’ clapped his hand over it. Briar stood waiting with the lid off Fergus’ plastic lunchbox. Jenny sliced through the last piece of tape binding the letter to Fergus.

The R bucked and twisted as Fergus thrust it into his lunchbox. Briar slapped the lid over his hand.

“Ow!” Fergus moaned.

“Sorry.”

He eased his hand out slowly and Briar squeezed the lid down. He pulled the rest of the tape from his body and wrapped it around the lunchbox.

They slipped back out of the toilet, hoping no one would see them. There was only one girl at the wash basins. Jenny and Briar tried to shield Fergus from her, but Briar suspected she’d seen them and thanked their lucky stars the girl wasn’t a blabber mouth.

They hurried to their next class and the day dragged by, occasionally interrupted by a curious home study student wanting to know why their bags got searched. Finally the last bell rang and they trailed out into the school grounds and out the street.

“Look,” Fergus pointed at a new silver car parked opposite the school’s main entrance.

Professor Routerbortyrblar glared back at them from the driver’s seat.

The trio scuttled back into the school grounds. “He’ll follow us home.” Briar squawked.

“We can’t let him know where we live.” Jenny rubbed her hands together.

A wicked grin spread across Fergus’ face and he pulled out a notebook from his bag.

“Briar, have a look at his number plate.”

She stared at him a moment, then ducked down the driveway. In a few seconds she raced back, puffing slightly.

“It’s XR5653.”

Fergus wrote it down.

“What’s the car’s make?”

“Oh, why didn’t you ask first.” Briar moaned but she trotted back down the driveway, looked up the road and darted back to her friends.

“It’s foreign – a BMW.”

Fergus wrote this down too and closed the notebook “Okay, follow me,” he said, and walked towards the school office.

Fergus held the door open and waited for Jenny and Briar to enter.

“What are you up to?” Briar whispered.

Fergus smiled at her then walked to the counter.

“Can I use the phone please?” He asked the school secretary. “Sure it’s over there. Do you have a card?” Fergus nodded and led the others over to the pay phone. Fergus dialled a number and waited.

Briar heard the click as the other party answered.

“Yes. I’d like to report some suspicious activity outside Riverrow Comprehensive School.” Fergus had tried to lower his voice so the school secretary couldn’t hear.

“There’s a man in a silver BMW, registration XJ5653, and he’s been approaching children coming out the school.”

Jenny’s eyebrows almost shot off her face and Briar clapped her hand over her mouth so she wouldn’t whoop out loud.

“Yes, yes, thank you.” Fergus rang off.

“Oh, you wicked, wicked boy,” Briar sang, once they’d left the office. Fergus giggled and Jenny clapped him on the back.

“Let’s wait behind the fence. It can’t take long.”

About two minutes later a police car pulled up behind the professor and the officers began questioning him.

Fergus beckoned to the girls and the three strolled past him. Briar had to use all her willpower not to poke her tongue out at him. The professor pretended not to notice them walking by. He was busy elaborately explaining something, with lots of arm waving and enthusiastic nodding, to the two policemen.

They ran round the corner and broke into gales of laughter.

“Come on, he might be able to explain his way out of things. We should get moving.” Briar gasped out.

The Professor didn’t show his face around the school for the rest of the week. The friends were taking no chances and scouted around the boundaries before leaving for home everyday.

Chapter Seven

On Saturday Jenny gave up her horse riding and arrived around at Briar’s just before Fergus. The three spent the afternoon planning their presentation for the council meeting.

Briar would be the first speaker explaining what they had discovered. Fergus would show the letter.

Jenny would demonstrate how it made Rs. Finally, they’d end by showing how saying words properly with every R stopped the letters being created.

After dinner that night Briar’s father called.

“Hi Dad, how you doing?”

“I’m fine Love.”

“When are you going to come and see me?”

“You’ll be pleased to know I’m coming this week.”

“Are you?” Briar bubbled inside with excitement.

“Is it work?”

“Yes it is.”

“Is it something to do with the Rs?”

He sighed. “Yeah, we’ve got to get to the bottom of it.”

“Will you be at the council meeting?”

“I might but I thought we could spend sometime together then. I know your Mum will have to be there.”

Briar thought quickly. “I was going to go too.”

“Great, we’ll go together then.”

“Yeah, great.” How were they going to get out of this now, Briar thought.

“I saw a picture of you the other day,” she said changing the subject.

“I haven’t been in the paper lately”.

“You were with this University Professor. I think his name is Routerbortyrbah.”

He chuckled. “Close enough, yeah old Router hates it when people don’t say his name right.”

“It’s a funny name. How’s it said?”

“Router-bort-er-blah. You’ve got to say all the Rs or he gets really annoyed.

“He sounds really picky.”

“Oh, he’s an okay guy really. We used to go fishing together and worked on a couple of projects.”

“How come you asked about him?”

Briar thought quickly, “Umm, I saw his picture in the paper and he had a funny name.”

“Yeah, it is a funny name.”

"I miss you Dad."

"Me too, see you next week."

On the way to school on Monday, Briar told Jenny and Fergus about the conversation with her father.

"How are we going to do our presentation with your Dad there?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah, it's bad enough your Mum's the Mayor."

"I think it's okay really. I'll just tell him we're doing it when we get there."

"Then he'll stop us."

"Nah, he still feels stink about leaving."

"I'm impressed you really know how to handle him." Jenny gasped, her eyes shining with admiration.

"Anyway Dad said Rottybotty hated people not pronouncing his name right. I think he made the R for that reason."

"Could be." Jenny agreed.

"So he's created this big mess because he couldn't hack a few missing Rs. What a wally." Fergus sneered.

"Don't see you giving the R up though." Jenny teased.

"It's mine now."

"Oh Fergus, don't get too attached to it." Briar cautioned.

"Why not?"

"You'll probably have to hand it over after the meeting."

Fergus was quiet for a while as the girls talked about the meeting.

"Actually, it is getting a bit of a pain." He stopped talking and his brow creased with worry lines.

"It just keeps making Rs all the time. Everytime the little kids open their mouths, there's piles of Rs everywhere. I think Mum and Dad are getting suspicious."

"Shall we find somewhere else to put it?" Briar suggested.

"I know, we'll hide it at the riding school."

"Would it be safe there?" Fergus fretted.

"It'll only be for a couple of days."

"Let's move it after school."

The children fidgeted through maths, wriggled through English and jiggled during science. At least the last period of the day was PE and they let off some steam with a vigorous game of volleyball. They checked outside the school for Routerbotryrblah and jumped on a bus, which went past the riding school.

Jenny's haunt was on the outskirts of Riverrow. A series of pleasant wooden buildings set off the road down a tree lined driveway. There were a number of children there already grooming and feeding horses.

Jenny strode into the stables, greeting every person they met and walked to the second stall from the end. She

kissed the nose of a dappled horse with a pale mane and fed her an apple, while the other two hung back.

"This is Georgia. Isn't she beautiful?"

Briar and Fergus agreed loyally, although Briar could never see the appeal of these hulking animals with large soulful eyes.

"Jenny, there seems a lot of people here."

"Only after school."

"Where will we hide it then?" Fergus hugged his bag tightly.

"I've got a locker here." Jenny led the trio through the tack room, weaving through horses and gear. The others followed less sure, dodging snorting animals and hoping not to get clonked by a hoof.

At the end of the building, a set of lockers had been built into the wall. Jenny undid the combination pad-lock on locker 36. Inside was all her riding gear, a bag of carrots and a poster of her dream horse.

Fergus gently lifted the lunchbox from his bag. He placed it on top of Jenny's riding helmet.

Jenny shut the locker before Fergus could change his mind.

On the way home every second car seemed to be a silver BMW driven by a middle-aged man with a big moustache.

Jenny had a riding lesson the next afternoon. Briar and Fergus were waiting with her outside school for her mother to arrive. The three children piled into the Barlow's van, along with Jenny's four younger brothers and sisters and two Labrador dogs. The van was a moving din machine. As the smaller children screeched and the dogs barked, Briar happily disembarked at the riding school. She didn't even mind the six-foot tall hoof and teeth monsters clopping past them on the driveway.

Briar and Fergus skilfully dodged Mrs Barlow's curiosity about their sudden interest in riding.

As they entered the courtyard, Briar realised with horror the staff weren't shovelling hay, it was Rs. To make matters worse, a TV camera crew were filming two stable hands.

"Never seen the likes of it," said a stable hand. "Came in the morning and the whole grounds were covered. Even all the way out to the road."

It just doesn't stop. The more you shovel them up, the more there are."

The children hurried by and walked the length of the building to the lockers. The drifts of Rs slowed their progress.

"I thought you said it'd be okay here," Fergus grumbled at Jenny.

“She wasn’t to know Fergus. Maybe the horses make sounds like mispronounced Rs.”

“Jenny, you have your lesson Fergus and me will get the R out of here.”

Jenny handed the lunchbox to Fergus who possessively stuffed it in his pack.

“Should never have let it out of my sight,” he muttered.

Jenny put on her riding gear and walked back with the others to the courtyard. Briar and Fergus said goodbye and walked down the driveway.

“What shall we do with it now?”

“I’ll take it back home again. It’s only one more night.”

“Oh no Fergus look!”

A silver BMW was creeping up the driveway towards them. Briar tried to find somewhere to hide. The car was too close and the fences too high to jump.

“Let’s go back.”

Briar nodded. They turned and walked quickly up the driveway. The BMW accelerated and passed them, then screeched to a halt.

Briar felt sick with anxiety. She forced herself to look at the driver. She wasn’t surprised to see Routerbortyrblah climbing out of the drivers’ seat.

Briar grabbed Fergus’ arm and held her ground as the Professor approached.

“You have to give it back,” he urged.

“No we don’t,” Fergus leaned forward threateningly.

“It’s malfunctioning more. Look at the mess this place is in.” The Professor gestured to the R-strewn fields surrounding them.

“You’re not getting it back. We’re taking it to the council meeting tomorrow.” Briar said quietly.

“I’ll fix everything up if you give it back.

“You didn’t before.”

“I didn’t know what to do.”

The Professor’s shoulders drooped and he lowered his head.

“I’ve got a solution now to fix thing”

“No. You’re not taking all the glory for solving it. We’re going to get the reward not you.”

“I rather think I’ll get some punishment rather than a reward.” Routerbortyrblah smiled sadly and Briar almost felt sorry for him.

“Leave us alone or we’ll call the cops and tell them you’re an Uncle Pervy,” Fergus yelled.

The Professor’s face darkened. “This isn’t over,” he threatened as he got into his car. He turned the vehicle around and drove away without looking at the children.

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“Don’t care as long as he doesn’t mess with me and my R.”

Fergus was too attached to the R, Briar thought. Attached enough to do something silly.

“We need to be careful with the Professor. Who knows what he’s capable of.”

“Nah, he’s a pussy.”

But Briary couldn’t help thinking they’d not seen the last of Professor Routerbortyrblah.

Chapter Eight

Fergus arrived at school the next morning looking tired and drawn. He pulled out the empty lunchbox and showed the girls where the R had tried to burrow through the plastic. It was very thin and the plastic sat up in strips like it’d been chewed.

“Where have you got it now?”

He extracted a jam jar from his pack and held it up. The golden R fluttered against the glass like a trapped moth.

“I’m at the end of my tether. It just keeps making more and more Rs. Mum and Dad are getting really hacked off.”

“It’ll all be over today.” Jenny said.

As Briar watched Fergus find a place in his locker for the golden R, she felt disturbed by it’s life-like appearance. Unlike Jenny, she didn’t think it would all be over today.

At lunchtime the trio went to check on the R. When they arrived, they gazed in silence at the great mounds of Rs piled in front of the lockers. Fergus kicked at the huge clumps and took the jar out of his locker. He pressed it against his face.

“Oh no.” His face crumpled.

“What?”

“It’s started vibrating again.”

Briar put her hand on the jar and tried to pull away after the unpleasant sensations assaulted her senses.

“It started that last night and it made heaps more letters.”

The R was exploring the jar lid, probing and testing it. It braced itself and unscrewed the lid ½ a turn.

“Did you see that?” Fergus exclaimed, screwing the lid back on. “This is what I have to put up with.”

“It’s becoming more alive,” Jenny concluded.

They all stared at the glass jar and the glistening gold letter.

“Maybe we should give it back to the Professor,” Jenny suggested.

“No way. He’s not getting it back.”

“But we can’t control it. It’s getting worse and worse.”

“We’ll hand it over after the presentation.”

The trio went over their presentation again during the remainder of the lunch break and agreed to meet outside the City Council Chambers at 7.00pm.

Briar’s father John came to pick her up from home at 5.30pm. She gave him a big hug and he helped her load the flip charts for the presentation into the car.

“What’s all that for?”

“It’s for the meeting tonight.”

“Oh. Does your Mum know you’re presenting something?”

“I doubt it.”

John laughed. “She’s in for a surprise then.”

Briar smiled and was happy she’d read her father well. He wasn’t going to make a fuss about their presentation.

The pair went to Burger King for tea.

“How’s your work with the Rs going?”

“Not as good as I hoped. We’ve run into a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ve lost a vital piece of equipment and if we don’t find it, we’re in trouble.”

Briar had a good idea what he was talking about and quickly changed the subject.

By the time they had to leave for the meeting, Briar felt happy and content. There was the nagging issue of the R though.

Jenny and Fergus were waiting outside the Council buildings when Briar and her father arrived in the car park.

They came over and Briar couldn’t help noticing the twinkle of amusement in her father’s eyes as he watched them unpack the car.

“My goodness, you’ve got enough stuff there, are you presenting for everyone?” He joked.

Jenny and Fergus turned bright red but Briar just laughed, enjoying her father’s company.

Just as they were organised and about to make their way into the Council buildings, someone called out her father’s name.

The group turned and much to the children’s horror Professor Routerbortyrblah was hurrying towards them.

He faltered when he recognised the children and a nasty grin spread across his face.

“Oh, I’m so glad you found them John.”

“It wasn’t too hard,” Briar’s father quipped.

“These are the ones we talked about.”

John’s jaw dropped and he looked the three children over.

“We’ve been looking for that device.”

“They’ve been deliberately hiding it from me.”

“Is that true?”

Briar squirmed under her father’s fierce gaze.

“We didn’t think he should have it.”

“Yeah, he hadn’t done anything about fixing the situation,” Fergus added.

“It’s highly unstable. You all could have been injured.”

The Professor nodded smugly in agreement.

“I think you better give the device to me.” John said.

Fergus looked at Briar and she indicated he should do as her father said.

Fergus reached into his bag and brought out the jar. He had taped the lid on.

“It’s going to ruin our presentation,” he said.

“Oh I think we can let you borrow it when your turn comes up.”

The Professor glared at John but said nothing. John held his hand out towards the jar. Fergus took a couple of steps forward to reach his outstretched arm and promptly tripped over. The jar flew out of his hand. Everyone leapt forward to try and catch it. Briar and Jenny banged heads together, reeling backwards stunned. John managed to touch the jar but it angled away from him, hit the ground and smashed. Shards of glass skidded across the footpath and the R lay in the ruins, struggling like a waterlogged moth. It wriggled out from under the remnants of the jar and rose into the air.

Briar’s father and the Professor were hopping around trying to grab it as the R fluttered just above their reach. It shot straight up, stopped and hovered a moment, then continued upwards toward the sky, the light reflecting on its golden curves.

“What will happen now Dad?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got no idea what the device will do now.” John said, still looking up into the cloudy sky.

“Why did it make all those Rs?” Fergus asked as he helped Briar and Jenny clear up the broken glass.

“We made it as a linguistic device.”

“A what?” Fergus asked.

The Professor addressed him this time.

“I asked John to help me design the device to help people pronounce words properly in foreign languages.”

“How come it only did Rs then?” Fergus asked.

“It never really worked for any other letters, just Rs. That’s why we made it into an R shape.”

The Professor’s eyes narrowed, and he hissed at Fergus, “If it weren’t for your stupidity we’d still have it.”

Fergus dropped his head and looked like he was about to cry.

“Steady on Prof, don’t give the kids a hard time.”

John put his arm around Fergus. "Tell you what, when it's your turn to speak, you can ask me to come up and talk about the device."

"Won't you get into trouble for making it in the first place Dad?"

"It should be okay."

John picked up the fallen flip charts and led the group up the stairs into the council buildings. Jenny was walking behind the professor and made a face at Briar. Never in a million years had she expected him to have joined their group.

Chapter Nine

The Council Chamber was off to the left side of the building's marbled entrance way.

The trio walked through the Chamber's large wooden double doors. Briar had been there heaps of times when her mother couldn't find a babysitter and took her along to meetings. So she didn't falter when entering the grand room, unlike her two friends. She was used to the enormous carved, wooden mayoral chair with its red velvet fabric that squatted on a four-foot tall dais. The chair towered over a dark-stained, u-shaped table. Around it were beautiful carved wooden chairs, which had unicorns and stags embroidered on the upholstery. This was where the council members sat.

The public sat in slightly raised balconies, following the line of the U-shaped table.

Briar led the way to the public gallery, selecting seats on one end where it would be easy for them to reach the chamber floor to speak.

"Where will we stand when we speak?" Jenny asked.

Briar pointed to a microphone beside the enormous Mayoral chair. A staff member was setting up a white board and another was fiddling around with audio-visual equipment.

When she thought about standing up to speak, Briar's heart beat faster and her breathing fluttered just like the trapped R.

Members of the public were streaming in and Council Members' chairs were filling up fast. The room was buzzing with anticipation which increased noticeably when Briar's Mum, Amanda, entered and sat in the Mayoral Chair. Briar's father squeezed her hand and she smiled at him.

"Oh she looks great." whispered Jenny. Briar nodded. She had to admit she did. Her mother's black robes accentuated her blonde hair and light sparkled off the heavy golden Mayoral Chain she wore across her shoulders and round her neck. She hadn't spotted Briar yet, and that suited her just fine.

Mayor Redfern started the meeting and a timetable of speakers appeared on the overhead computer. The children's presentation, The Short Rs, was fourth.

Arthur Thumblestone was called up first and a small balding man, carrying six large rolled up charts, hustled his way up to the microphone. He erhmmed loudly into the microphone causing everyone to cringe.

In a monotone, he began explaining his plan to crop dust the whole area with a chemical to melt plastic and this would dissolve the Rs.

Mr Thumblestone's plan was shot down in flames when one of the Councillors pointed out how much of the town was made of plastic; car bumpers, out door furniture, and roofing material to name a few.

"What a clown," whispered Fergus. "He makes us look like brain surgeons."

They tried not to laugh out loud. Briar was particularly keen not to catch her mother's attention.

The next presentation proposed a giant nuclear powered vacuum cleaner to suck up all the Rs and projectile them into space.

A Councillor said that Riverrow was nuclear free and it wasn't solving the creation of Rs.

Linda Trean was next up, a neatly dressed woman in her 30's.

"I have an idea for a giant wind machine."

She had made a nice Power Point presentation for the computer. It showed lovely graphics of how the machine would blow all the Rs away.

"Right into us," called out an irate citizen from the neighbouring town.

"Oh, we will blow them in the other direction," Linda explained.

The kids smiled at each other, knowing they were still in the running.

When the Council attendant called for The Short Rs, the room erupted in laughter but quietened quickly when the children stood up and walked to the dais.

Briar risked glancing at her mother. She looked surprised and annoyed.

Too bad, she thought, setting her jaw as she climbed the steps to the microphone. Fergus followed her carrying the flip charts. Jenny was behind him holding a display board covered in all types of letter Rs.

When they were all on the stage, Briar adjusted the microphone with the help of the Council attendant.

"Good evening everyone," Briar began. "We are here to present our solution to the R situation." She paused for effect, but in reality she needed to take a couple of deep breaths, and have an opportunity to stop the noise in her head.

“We discovered there were more Rs up at the University than anywhere else. So we went up there and had a scout around.”

Briar stopped, realising she'd been shouting and the noise she'd been responding to wasn't in her head at all. It sounded like a large high revving engine that was getting closer every second.

In through an open window near the Council Chambers ceiling, Briar caught a glint of gold. At first she thought it was a leaf, then she realised as it fluttered further down, it was their R.

Fergus saw it too. Forgetting where he was, he jumped up and down, shouting and pointing at the letter. Everyone looked up and was in time to see a column of multi-fonted Rs spew through the open window like a swarm of bees. The swarm swirled around the gold R, which fluttered in one place above the Council members' table.

Suddenly the R charged towards Professor Routerbortyrblah and Briar's father. Part of the swirling mass of Rs swung around into an orderly column and followed in the wake of their leader.

People jumped from their seats trying to run from the menace. Their screams and yells began to warp and merge into the ominous revving sound made by the swarm.

Briar, Fergus and Jenny dived behind the white-board, arms covering respective heads. Although there was a lot of noise, Briar realised none of the letters were hitting them. She dropped her arms and watched the clump of Rs circling above the children's heads.

“Look”, she tried to say, but it didn't sound right. As soon as she opened her mouth, the Rs dive-bombed her. She covered her head waiting for the attack but it never came. She dropped her arms again and watched the circling letters above. She tried speaking again and the same thing happened. The letters dive-bombed her and what she uttered was distorted. She decided to speak a third time. However she would listen carefully to how her words sounded.

I want to say, what's going on, she thought.

“WRhRaRtR's gRoRiRnRg oRn?” she said aloud. The Rs flew towards her, then some had disappeared, and her words were completely unintelligible. Then it clicked. She shook Jenny and Fergus and beckoned them to follow her to the front side of the white-board.

Try and speak, she wrote.

“NRoRoRnRe cRaRn uRnRdReRrRsRtRaRnRd uRs.” Fergus said.

“TRrhRaRt'Rs rRiRgRhRt”, Jenny agreed.

They both shook their heads in puzzlement.

The Rs are filling up your words, Briar wrote.

They both gasped and Fergus raised his hand to high five Briar. After a round of hand slapping, Briar banged on the microphone until most of the room was looking her way.

The Rs are not attacking you. They are filling up your words, she wrote on the whiteboard.

She passed the pen to Jenny.

The Rs are here because they are falling out of your words, she wrote.

You've got to say them properly.

She underlined the er of properly to emphasis it.

You can't say propah, you must say proper.

Fergus took the pen from Jenny and cleaned down the board. He wrote:

It will take sometime until all the Rs are used up. It's really important you don't create any more. You've got to say all your Rs.

Briar's mother and father came up together gave her a huge hug.

Have they worked this out correctly? Amanda wrote on her notepad and showed John.

John nodded and gave Briar another cuddle.

The Short Rs high-fived again and had their own group hug.

It took three weeks before people in Riverrow could understand each other again.

But there was no denying the Council and the town considered Briar, Jenny and Fergus local heroes.

The Council agreed The Short Rs were entitled to the reward.

Jenny bought Georgia, the beautiful horse she rode from the riding school. The reward also meant she could pay for full board and grazing for three years at the stables.

Fergus got a motorcross bike. He also invested in a telescope, binoculars and butterfly collecting equipment.

Every so often there would be a report of letter R showers or speaking disorders in a nearby town. Fergus would rush over with his equipment hoping to re-capture his precious R.

Briar decided that she wanted to spend a weekend a month with her Dad. The reward money would pay for her airfares for the next couple of years.

Things went back to normal, but there was something different. The people of Riverrow had changed the way they spoke. Outsiders said they now rolled their Rs, but Briar, Jenny and Fergus liked to think of it as emphasising them.

The End

Here Be Dragons

By Jeena Murphy

Marama and Rangi never went home after school if they could help it. The brother and sister would meet at the end of their street after saying goodbye to their friends. Then as a united force, 12 year old Marama and 10 year old Rangi would stride purposefully along Taiaha Lane, past their own blue and white bungalow. Marama struggled more with their decision not to look at their home. She was haunted with the image of her mother standing at the window waiting for them. Not that that ever happened now.

All Rangi thought about was the cakes and orange juice they'd soon be ingesting. Marama always had to fight to keep herself from turning into number 12. Instead the pair walked past their home and turned into the driveway of number 14. The children couldn't help smiling everytime they saw their Aunty Hydra's house, even though they came here nearly every day. Hydra had painted a rainbow across the front of the house. It ran up to the roof of the second storey. At the top she'd added little elves, fairies and dragons. Hydra loved dragons. All through her busy, colourful garden were statues of the beasts. Even her name meant dragon and that's why the kids figured she was gaga over them.

Rangi burst in the front door first. He rushed into the kitchen where Hydra was working at the table.

"Aunty Hydra, I'm starving. What's there to eat?"

"What, no hello for your Aunty?" She grabbed Rangi and hugged him. Her short, spiky, bright blue hair caught the light and created a halo effect around her head.

Marama kissed her Aunty, marvelling at how different she was from her sister; the children's mother. Marama could never see her mother dying her hair, wearing trendy clothes or painting rainbows on the house.

Rangi rushed into the lounge and plonked himself in front of the TV, while Marama helped Hydra prepare afternoon tea.

"Have you seen Mum today?" Marama asked as she arranged some biscuits on a plate.

"I saw her hanging out the washing and called out to her."

"She's still not speaking to you?"

"Actually, she did today"

"That's good."

"Only to tell me I was polluting your young minds"

Marama snorted. "Do you think she's bonkers?"

"No...It's more complicated than that."

Hydra poured out the glasses of orange juice and put them on the tray.

"Take this through. I have to run some simulations and send them off today."

Hydra ran a pyrotechnics company and held fireworks displays. She worked out the displays for her clients on her computer.

Hydra went into her study and closed the door, while Marama took the tray into the lounge and sat down in front of the TV beside Rangi.

"Hydra's gone into her study to run simulations." Marama told him. "She'll be there for a while."

"We could go up to the attic," Rangi said with a mouthful of biscuit.

Marama could see he was torn between TV and the attic. Their mother had destroyed their TV. It was in the backyard with a potplant inside it. Consequently they only watched TV at Hydra's.

"Come on."

Rangi reached to turn off the TV and Marama signalled not to. The pair crept down the hallway and up the stairs, careful not to stand on the creaky stair halfway up. Marama could hear Hydra's explosive sound effects emanating from the study. They got to the attic door and Marama eased it open. Rangi closed it softly behind them and they climbed the final few steps until the attic opened out before them.

It was a treasure trove of papier-mâché costumes from past fireworks displays, pieces of ancient machinery, toys from Hydra and their mother Ongdra's childhood, trunks stuffed full of old fashioned clothes, books and photographs. The children loved to rummage around up here but weren't officially allowed to unless supervised. So they'd make the most of any window of opportunity, like today.

"Marama, the book's gone." Rangi had a special book he loved to look at, full of dragons and knights.

"Where did you leave it last?"

"On there." Rangi pointed to a dusty table under the skylight.

"Hydra probably moved it."

Something glittered on the other side of the attic and Rangi went to investigate.

"Here it is."

He held up the book to show Marama. She could have sworn the emerald eye of the gold leaf dragon curled across its cover closed, then opened again. Not to dissimilar to a wink.

"I don't know why you read that book anyway. Half the pages are missing."

"Yeah but the story still makes sense."

He took the book back to the table and settled himself in a chair. Marama was poring through the contents of an unexplored trunk. The children were each absorbed in their respective activities for a few minutes.

Rangi let out a yell and leapt out of the chair, causing Marama to jump.

“You gave me a fright. Be quiet or we’ll be heard.”

“The pictures in the book moved.”

“Don’t be silly,” Marama told him.

“They did... the dragon and the kids.”

“I’ve read that book, there’s no kids in it.”

“There is now. That’s why I like reading it, the stories change.”

“Give me a look.”

Marama and Rangi approached the book and the pictures were indeed moving.

The children sat down, sharing the same chair and watched as the emerald-eyed, gold dragon cruised around the border of the text.

He looked like the dragon on the book’s cover.

There was another picture on this page of two blond haired children who were playing in a garden that had a stone wall around it. This picture was moving too.

Rangi thought he could hear the children talking. But that couldn’t be right.

He just about pushed Marama off the seat when a voice boomed.

“Some people were sad to see us leave and others were joyous.”

“Stop playing around Rangi,” Marama grumbled.

“I didn’t do it.”

“No. I have been speaking.”

The children gasped, as the picture of the dragon appeared to swell and fill out.

“Cool, a hologram,” Rangi breathed.

“I am Landor, the last of the Cleifton Clan of Europe.”

“I didn’t know dragons had clans.” Marama still thought this might be a joke Rangi had set up.

“My clan mates are all gone now. But there are still members of some clan families left.”

“Where are they?” Rangi asked.

Rangi couldn’t be pulling a swifty on her, Marama thought. The dragon’s voice echoed around inside her head like she had a set of headphones on. Landor’s mouth moved while he spoke and his emerald eyes twinkled, his body rippling and shimmering against the page.

“Some are asleep and the land covered them. Some, like my brother are trapped in Abaddon.”

“Are you there too?”

“I am, Rangi.”

“How do you know my name?”

“This book is a link between our worlds and I can see your world through it. That’s how I know your name.”

While they had been talking to Landor, the two children in the picture had stopped playing catch and were looking around like they could hear the dragon talking too.

“Last time I read this book, those kids weren’t in it.” Marama wanted to get a few things straight.

Landor looked directly into her eyes. For an instant her face burned white hot like a flame had caressed her. She pulled away from the book.

“I will not harm you Marama. On the contrary I wish to help you.”

“How can you help us?”

“I know your life at home is troubled.”

“That’s none of your business,” Marama shouted at him. “Close the book Rangi.”

“Marama” Landor implored. “I meant no offence.”

The dragon was now at the bottom of the page and appeared to be standing up, off the parchment.

“I just wanted you to meet the other children. You have much in common with them, as you will discover.”

“I’d like to meet them Marama,” Rangi said, still staring at the book.

“Okay,” she said reluctantly. “Just a few minutes then we’ll have to go.”

Landor nodded and raised his forelegs, balancing on his haunches and tail. He spoke some words that were not in English. The little picture of the children began to expand and grow to cover the page, spilling out of the book and rising up until it rushed past Marama and Rangi, encompassing them in the scene.

Marama swung around in a panic as the attic disappeared to be replaced by a stone walled garden with a long green lawn. At one end of the lawn a thatched cottage squatted, surrounded with fruit trees and berry bushes.

The blonde haired children from the book were at the other end of the lawn near the wall. They were walking towards the new arrivals. Marama wondered what they would think of these two dark haired, dark skinned children who had appeared in their garden. Now the children were smiling and running towards them.

“Hello, hello,” they cried in strange accents.

“Giddyay,” Rangi called. He was irrepressibly friendly.

“I’m Lewis and this is my sister Diana.”

Lewis was older than Diana. Marama estimated they were the same age as them.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“You’re in our garden in Pwlllelli.”

“Where’s that?” Marama asked as she picked and broke a twig off a nearby tree. It felt real.

“It’s in Wales silly,” Diana chuckled. “I see Landor didn’t tell you anything.”

“You know Lander?” Rangi asked, as he jiggled with excitement.

“Of course,” Lewis said matter of factly. “How else do you think you got here?”

“Catch.” Diana threw her ball at Rangi and he caught it. He laughed and threw it back. The ball went back and forth a few times before Marama lost the plot.

“How can we be in Wales? We were just in our Auntie’s attic. It doesn’t make sense.”

“We thought that too the first time Landor took us anywhere.” Lewis indicated Diana should throw the ball to him. She swung it under arm, curving it across the sky.

A car door slammed and the four children stopped and listened as feet crunched across gravel and a door opened in the distance.

“Kia ora Hydra, small ones.”

The garden receded back into the book, leaving Rangi and Marama squeezed on the same chair in their Auntie’s dusty attic.

“Giddy Dad,” Rangi bellowed so loudly it hurt Marama’s ears. He bounced out of the chair and charged down the stairs still shouting to their Dad. Marama followed at a more sedate pace, trying to digest the afternoon’s events.

“Oh Marama, have you been up in the attic again?” Hydra had come out of the study her eyes twinkling with mirth. The ache in Marama’s stomach eased. She wasn’t in trouble, at least not so far.

“Time to go home for some kai.” Marama’s father Waka wrapped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

On the way back, Waka told them a story about one of his work mates at the Ministry of Maori Affairs. Its Maori name is Te Puni Kokiri.

Rangi was laughing away but Marama barely listened. The ache in her stomach had returned and was getting deeper the closer they got to home.

The kitchen of their house was shadowy and dark, in complete contrast to Hydra’s. The curtains had been drawn and their mother Ongdra had lit lots of candles. She’d cut out pictures of Jesus, Mary, Indian animal headed gods and Saints. She’d plastered them all over the wall. Marama thought it was creepy the way their eyes jiggled and moved in the candlelight. Ongdra was on her knees praying in front of the oven. She’d taken the oven door off and had built a little shrine inside to Saint Christopher. The oven had been intact when the family had left this morning.

“Come and pray with me,” Ongdra called to them. “Saint Christopher wants you to fall on your knees and pray with him.”

“Ongdra, the children are hungry. They’ll say their prayers tonight before bed.” Waka stood beside their mother and put his hand on her shoulder.