



Mumblings from Munchkinland --
the only West Australian
fanzine published in India!

INVASION FROM OUTER SPACE
(or)
2001: OUR ODYSSEY SO FAR

Welcome to another Mumblings from Munchkinland. The land in question this time is not, as predicted last issue, Oz, but India. I am typing in a computer "gymnasium for the mind" in the center of New Delhi, just one of the many surprises we have come upon in this country. And I'm using an unfamiliar word-processing system, so please excuse some of the faults.

The other night I was sitting in a fast-food restaurant near here called Wimpy. It was identical to any Wimpy's or McDonald's you'd be familiar with, right down to the neon lights, disposable cups and napkins, and young, uniformed staff working behind electronic cash registers. I was munching a hamburger almost identical to those of the above places (it was mutton instead of beef). Around me, a crowd of other tourists and locals did likewise, as Madonna and Michael Jackson hits alternated over the sound system.

I couldn't help comparing this scene to that of the first thali restaurant Megan and I ate in after arriving in Southern India. The thali place, too, was a large eatery, though with ordinary lightbulbs illuminating mostly Indian families. All of us ate off of banana leaves, upon which rice cakes and crispy pompadoms were placed, to be topped with a selection of delicious curries and curd. At the end of our meal, our tab was scrawled on a bit of paper. I have no doubt as to which of these meals was more nutritious: the thali was also much cheaper.

Later that night I was reminded of this by reading an article in an Indian newspaper. Entitled "Invasion from Outer Space" (and what sf fan could ignore a title like that), it was written by an Indian woman concerned at the effect that satellite tv is having on her young children. She's worried that her children now ask for Pepsi instead of lassi (a local drink made with yoghurt) and that they have taken to using expressions like "Hey, dude!". What, she wondered, does this presage for the future of India?

What indeed? The article struck a chord in me, since in our time overseas -- approaching two and a half years -- we have witnessed the introduction of satellite tv in several Asian countries, and noted some of the effects ourselves. A clash of cultures was most obvious when CNN began transmissions to Pakistan. It was very popular and the government quickly made arrangements to rebroadcast it from ground stations. So more Pakistanis could see it? Well, yes -- but also so the licenced ground stations could edit the satellite broadcasts in several ways. The first was simply to cut international ads for local ones; the second was to "pixelize" the screen

whenever something unacceptable appeared. As Pakistan is an Islamic country, this includes any scenes of alcohol being consumed or women unsuitably attired. It was hilarious, actually, to see a familiar fashion ad suddenly turned to pixels because of a bare arm or neckline. While I don't agree with this censorship, I can see that some Muslims might be offended by such exposures. Of course, those that can afford their own dish can still "see all".

The Gulf War presented a more serious example of the influence of satellite tv, judging by the criticism CNN attracted for showing only the American perspective of the conflict. Whether this was fair, I don't know; we didn't watch much of their coverage. And whether or not satellite tv will become an instrument of global monoculturization (oh, all right, Americanization) we shall have to wait and see. It should, contrary-wise, present great possibilities for the sharing of cultures the world over. Having now seen some of these other cultures during our travels, I certainly hope so.

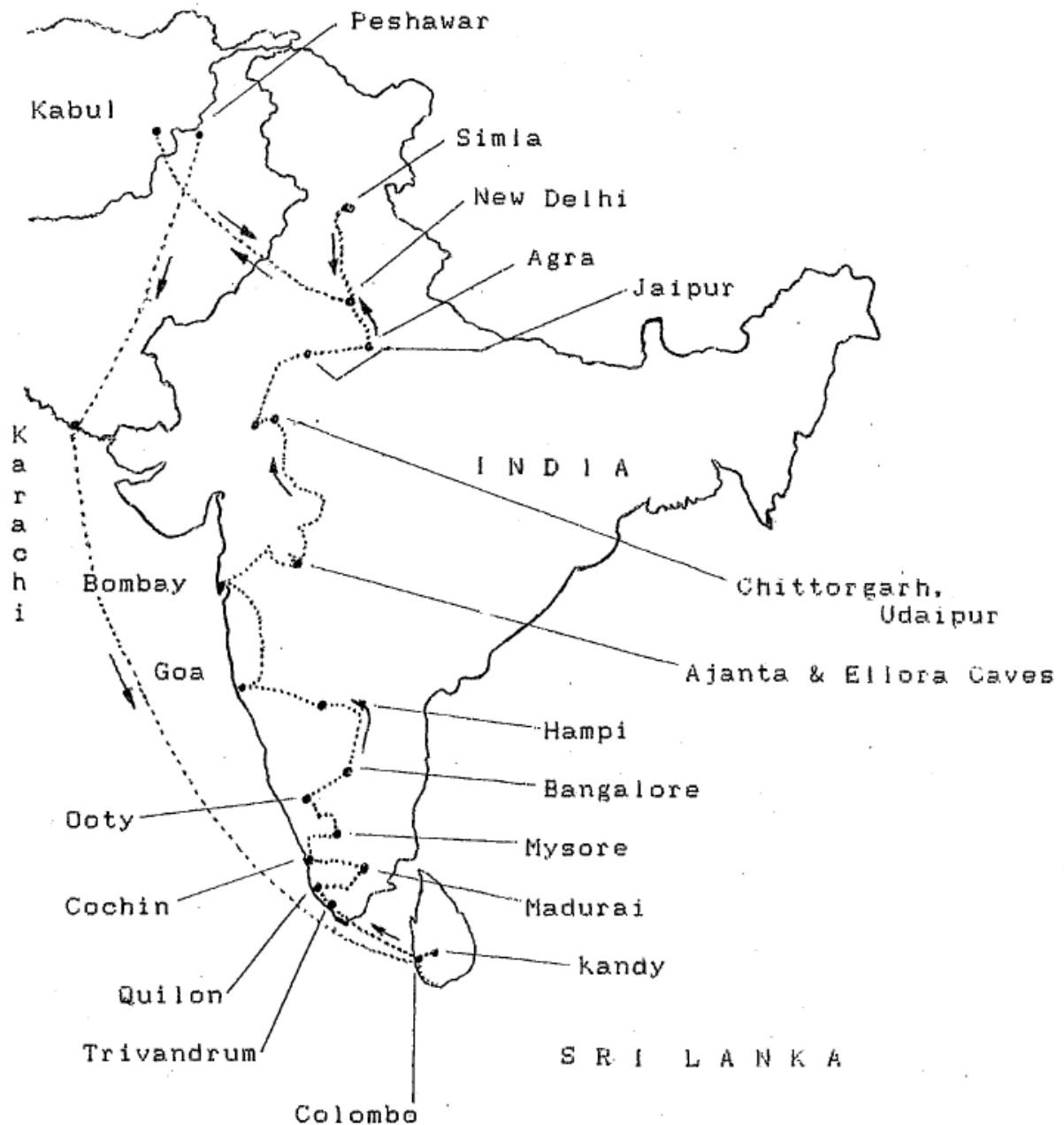
By happy coincidence, our first stop out of Pakistan afforded us the opportunity to meet the man who set all of this in motion nearly half a century ago, Arthur C. Clarke. He could not spare us much time, but the brief visit to his office-cum-residence in Colombo was still a highlight for me, at least. (Megan is not an sf fan. Yet.) He signed a book for a friend of mine, allowed one question, adding "If I've not heard it before, you can ask another" and mentioned that The Songs of Distant Earth has been optioned for filming. Then it was back to his terminal to work on a new Mars book.

Of course, Sri Lanka has other attractions too. After two years in Peshawar (one for Megan) our first thought was to hit the beach, and that's precisely what we did. The south and west coasts of the island have some magnificent beaches, almost entirely reef protected. (The other coasts may also have great beaches, but travel is still restricted to those areas because of the activities of the Tamil Tigers. For the same reason, we missed seeing the Oranges of Jaffna.) To an Australian, Sri Lankan beaches appear rather sedate; we missed the crashing surf and soon wound up at Hikkaduwa, one of the few surf beaches in Sri Lanka. It is also one of the key beach resorts and was thus heavily infested with tourists (the scum!) and their natural predator, the touts. Having had none of this for so long, we actually enjoyed browsing the handicraft and jewellery shops for a while.

The railways in Sri Lanka are quite good and our trip up to Kandy, the ancient capital in the highlands, was terrific fun. Kandy was crowded, though, so we stayed only long enough to see the museum and the Temple of the Tooth (as mentioned in Clarke's novel). Once a year Kandy is the site of a ceremony to the Temple involving hundreds of elephants, but it occurs later in the year. We thought we'd missed the

IN CASE YOU CAN'T FOLLOW THE TEXT

This sketch is intended to give you some idea of where we've been so far. Not every place we've seen is mentioned, but most of the highlights are here. I thought we'd seen a lot of India until I plotted our route out on this map! India is a big place with a bewildering array of different cultures.



spectacle until we arrived back in Colombo to find that an identical parade was scheduled there a few days hence. We stayed on to see it and were not disappointed. Not only were there 116 elephants (by my count -- they advertised 125!), the parade also engaged local musicians, dancers, stuntmen, stilt-walkers, fire-eaters, hoop-twirlers and others, all in traditional dress. Curiously, there were no women at all.

Still stunned from the parade, we took a deep breath and decided to plunge into India. Our flight landed in Trivandrum, from where we began a trip up the west coast. The atmosphere of southern India was a pleasant surprise -- very relaxed and easy-going. We had no troubles there and soon found ourselves used to the local food. Many travellers seem to have horror stories about Indian tucker, but we found it scrumptious. And safe -- we had few stomach problems until we reached another tourist beach at Goa.

Before Goa, however, we criss-crossed the Deccan Plateau a few times, to see a kaleidoscope of images. The Hindu temples of Madurai were elaborately carved rectangular pyramids within which Megan was blessed by an elephant. The gracefully slow dips and rises of the Chinese fishing nets at Cochin were mesmerizing and we spent a pleasant afternoon wandering through the narrow lanes of the Portuguese quarter.

Most of our travel to date had been by train, and our trip up to the hill station of Ooty was by a Swiss locomotive on a rack and pinion line. Again, the ride was great fun. Apart from the Botanical Gardens, we saw little of Ootacamund since we had to push on, but a line from the menu of one restaurant there lingers in my mind: "Your suits faction our aim".

A cramped bus ride to Mysore was rewarded with colorful scenes and scents in the bazaars, where fruits & vegetables and incense & paint powders were bartered for. We also toured the Maharajah's Palace, a kind of last hurrah for the British Raj since it was rebuilt after a fire in 1907 by an English architect. He enjoyed using Burmese teak (in-laid with ivory), Italian marble and Belgian stained-glass. Some dazzling chandeliers overhung a central chamber decorated in aqua and gold, with numerous huge paintings of military processions lining the walls. It really was over the top.

After some fun at the post office the next day (packages in India have to be sewn up in cloth and sealed with wax before the post office will accept them) we boarded a train for Bangalore. This was only a stopover on the way to Hampi, however. Hampi is a small village built upon, or within, the ruins of a city which flourished around the mid 15th century. Today numerous temples and buildings can still be seen, most linked by stone roads upon which monkeys and gurus lounge. A curious feature of all of the structures, as well as boulders lying around, are notches knocked into the stone along every

straight edge. It was as if someone critic at the time had observed that their architecture was solid but indistinctive, at which the builders all scurried off to chip notches in every pillar they could find. Weird! We wandered the ruins until we were exhausted.

From Hampi we went to Goa, about which the less said the better. The trip across the Ghats is nice, but that's about it. Bombay, an overnight train ride away, was far more exciting. Although we passed slums on the way in (an odd benefit of travel by railways is that they devalue the land they pass through, so you almost always get to see the poorer parts of towns on your way in or out) Bombay was not the crowded nightmare we'd expected. The architecture of the city was fabulous. Accomodation was expensive, but we had fun in the museums, markets, aquarium and nearby parks.

Another overnight train took us on to Aurangabad, from where we ventured out to Daulatabad Fort and then the magnificent Ellora and Ajanta Caves. Ajanta boasts some fine Buddhist paintings within caves hewn from cliffsides between 200 BC and 650 AD. From here the artisans apparently moved on to Ellora , where temples were carved out of rock by Buddhists, Hindus and Jains at different periods between 600 and 1000 AD. This was definitely one of the highlights of our trip.

Chittorgarh Fort, our next stop, is most famous for having been sacked three times in a 260 year period. Each time, the women and children threw themselves onto pyres and the men rode out to battle until death rather than surrender. On the last occasion the ruler evidently decided enough was enough, as he exempted himself from the ritual suicide and relocated to Udaipur. We followed his example.

A beautiful city with lots of palaces and temples, all set beside a broad artificial lake, Udaipur was a relaxing rest stop for us. We perused the bazaars, watched traditional Rajasthani dancing, tramped through the city palace and then caught a bus to Jaipur to do it all over again. Jaipur's buildings, however, are almost all of pink stone (natural or painted), as were the odd collection of astronomical objects dating from the 18th century. Amber Fort, outside of Jaipur, required a long hike uphill to see, but was well worth the effort. We recovered at a bird sanctuary not far away.

Fatehpur Sikri is a small city Akbar wanted as his capital, but it was deserted only sixteen years after construction began in 1570. From here we had some frustrations getting to Agra, but our foul moods dissipated as soon as we witnessed the Taj Mahal. It is a spectacular sight, very serene and inviting of quiet contemplation. We visited it several times and saw it from a distance often -- fascinated at how it could command one's attention even from a great distance.

[To be continued next issue ...]

SCIENCE FICTION IN INDIA

One of the most pleasant surprises I've had in India is to discover that it has an active science fiction fraternity which dates back many years. It was my great pleasure to meet and talk about Indian sf with one of its greatest devotees, in New Delhi. Here's how it happened.

A popular science magazine in India is 2001,_ founded in the mid-60s under the title Science Today. I noticed a copy on the newsstands shortly after arriving in India and saw to my delight that it included a short story. Moreover, the sf appeared to be a regular feature. I made a mental note to visit the editor when we reached Bombay.

And so I did, sort of. The copy I'd picked up turned out to be the farewell issue of editor Mukul Sharma and I arrived to find that no new editor had been appointed. I talked to several people in the office, however, and they were kind enough to show me back issues of the magazine. I hit paydirt with the June 1988 issue, which had feature articles on sf -- including Indian sf! I was amazed. The author of many of the articles was Dr Bal Phondke, who turned out to be in New Delhi. Again I had to bide my time, though I finally met Dr Phondke for lunch a few days after arriving in this city. The rest of this article is drawn from our conversation and the articles which appeared in Science Today.

Dr Phondke himself was editor of Science Today between 1983 and 1986 and it was he who introduced short sf stories to see if any of his readers shared his interest in the genre. Many did, so sf became a regular feature. Many of the authors have been students at universities and technical colleges, where, Dr Phondke advises, fan clubs also exist in the larger cities. The next editor of the magazine, Mukul Sharma, also used some stories by non-Indians as well as contributing a few from his own pan.

Science Today is not the only outlet for sf in India, nor is all Indian sf written in English. There are 18 official languages in the country (each with its own script) and many other lesser-used dialects. Dr Phondke is currently editing an anthology of Indian sf drawn from 7 of these languages. Strong sf traditions can be found in at least three of them -- Marathi, Bengali and Tamil.

Although some date the earliest Indian sf story before the turn of the century (and others like to consider the classic Mahabharata as part of the genre), science fiction did not begin appearing regularly until the 1950s. Translations and parodies of Wells and Verne were done into Marathi by Bha.Ra. Bhagwat and into Bengali by others. Unfortunately, Bhagwat was best known as a children's writer so sf became associated

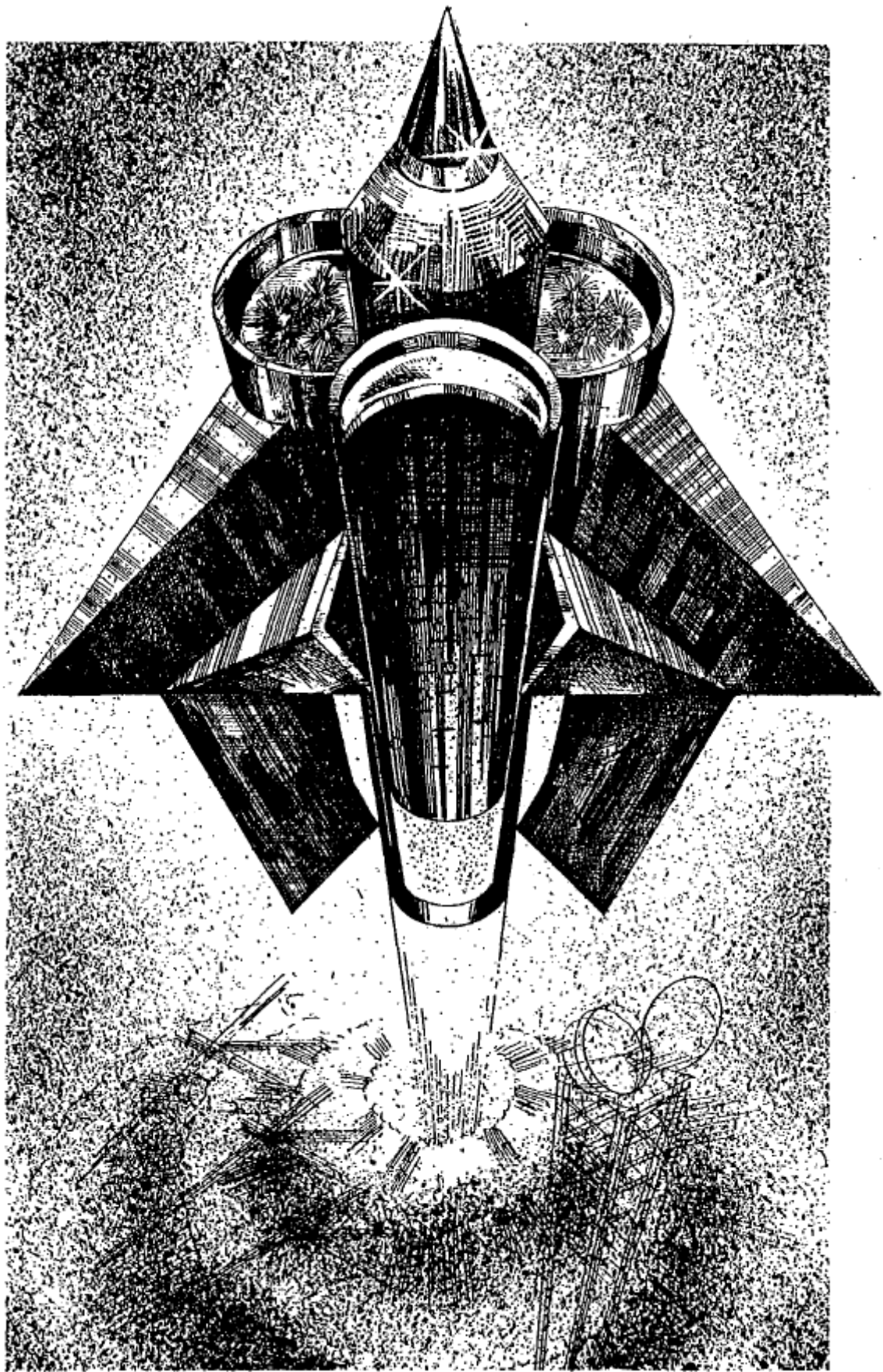
with children's literature. The situation was not helped by the pioneer of Bengali sf -- none other than Satyajit Ray -- as his stories about Professor Shonku were specifically written for kids. Other, adult writers, who followed in the 1960s were thus largely ignored. The genre was supported by several monthly magazines -- Naval, edited by Anant Antakar in Marathi, and Fantastic, edited by Adrish Bardhan in Bengali -- but suffered a low profile until the mid-1970s.

Among the factors producing the change were a revised school curricula which gave more emphasis to science subjects, an annual story competition which promoted the genre, and the appearance of works by one of India's best-known scientists, the astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar. He is still active today, along with Phondke, Laxman Londhe, Niranjana Sawadekar, G.F. Joshi and a number of younger writers. Commemorative annuals published for the Indian festival period in October and November have been featuring sf stories regularly for some years in Maharashtra, where the genre appears to have the strongest following. A seminar on science and science fiction writing will be held by the Marathi Science Society in Bombay early in May.

Several curious aspects about Indian sf occur to me. One is that Kerala, a southern state which boasts one of the highest literacy rates in Asia, appears to have produced few if any sf writers or works. Another is that India, despite having the largest film industry in the world, appears to have produced few films in the sf genres. Even Satyajit Ray, with his demonstrated interest in the genre, has never attempted a science fiction film. Dr Phondke advised me that Ray had collaborated with his son on a tv anthology series of sf works in the late 1980s, but the production standard was low and it attracted little interest. Other film-makers have imitated some of the more popular American sf films of recent years, but even here values differ. Star Wars was "a damp squib" according to Bal Phondke, though Back to the Future was extremely popular. Indians, he feels, prefer films which demonstrate "human values" over high technology and space opera. This is true, he believes, of literary sf also.

It's hard for me to say. Although I've found documented proof of the existence of much Indian sf, I've been able to find very little of it. I read several short stories in the offices of 2001, and one of Jayant Narlikar's recent novels, The Return of Vaman, but few bookstore attendants seem to know what I mean when I ask for it, even when I mention authors by name. I stumbled upon one children's book thanks to its cover art and Dr Phondke presented me with one of his own short works at our meeting.

The little I have read, however, has been very interesting and, abashed at having been ignorant of Indian sf before coming here, I look forward to reading further works.



ASIMOV AND I

I heard the news of Isaac Asimov's death while Megan and I were in Simla, a mountain resort north of New Delhi. Like most fans, I was shocked by the news and still find it hard to believe. Asimov's science fiction has been with me ever since I began reading in the genre and I have many happy memories associated with the Good Doctor's works.

Shortly after we arrived in Australia in 1972 we spent a while travelling around the eastern part of the country. I can still recall reading The Martian Way in the back of our station wagon during a rainstorm, somewhere in outback NSW. And the beauty of a park in Bendigo lives on in my memory because I largely ignored it, being absorbed in I, Robot at the time. When and where I first read the Foundation Trilogy escapes me, since I've reread it several times since. In high school I read most of the early novels (including The Naked Sun, whilst sitting at the back of the room during sex education classes) and I spent New Year's Day 1991 in Peshawar reading Prelude to Foundation.

It was during my university days, in March 1982, that I happened to be cleaning my bookshelves. This is a task from which I am easily distracted, and I had already reread part of Hitch-hikers' Guide to the Galaxy and something by Poul Anderson when I came to the two feet or so of titles by Asimov (I've only got a small collection). I, Robot fell out and I happened to begin reading when I came to the sentence in the prelude which states that Susan Calvin was born in 1982. Hey, I thought, that's this year! I scoured the rest of the stories to see if Dr A had ever dropped any other clues as to her early life. I could find none. The germ of an idea occurred to me.

Purely by coincidence, I happened to be reading the birth column of The West Australian newspaper several weeks later (April 1, to be precise). Therein appeared a birth notice for one Susan Calvin, daughter of Elizabeth and Jeremy, with thanks to Dr Asimov "from all who have long awaited this event". I clipped the notice and sent it off to IAsfM. A long time passed. Not aware of the lead time for the magazine, I assumed the notice had been ignored until a friend in the States wrote to say he had seen an editorial written around this notice in the December 1982 issue.

I was flabbergasted. Ironically, I didn't see a copy of the magazine myself until almost two months later. I never heard directly from Asimov about the notice, though his editorial clearly showed that he enjoyed the prank. I would have liked to have met him in person, but -- alas! -- it's now too late.

Rest in peace, Good Doctor.

APRIL IN KABUL

Having worked with Afghan refugees in Peshawar, many of whom were from Kabul before they fled Afghanistan, we heard a lot about the city and naturally looked forward to seeing it someday. As soon as we arrived in New Delhi, I called the Afghan Embassy to see if visas were being issued, but was told they were not.

A few days later we were on our way to the Rail Transport Museum, which happens to lay within the diplomatic area of New Delhi, when we decided to pass by the Afghan Embassy just for the hell of it. We didn't expect it to be open -- it was a Friday, the Muslim weekend -- but much to our surprise we saw activity behind the gates. Upon enquiring, we were shown into the visa office. "Yes, of course we're issuing visas," they said, now that we were face to face. We filled in application forms and wondered how many days we would have to wait for our visas. "Please give me \$44," said one of the staff. Five minutes later, we had 10-day visas stamped in our passports (right beside the note saying we'd each paid the \$12 fee). Clearly several aspects of this process were a bit dodgy, but we had our visas so we went to book our tickets. I shall spare you the trauma this entailed.

On April 12th, we arrived in Kabul.

It was quite exciting to finally see "the other side". Kabul is an absolutely gorgeous city, nestled in among snow-capped mountains with the mud-laden Kabul River passing through its center. Of course, the people in Kabul looked and acted exactly the same as our friends in Peshawar -- few Afghans have had any love for the Russians or real devotion to Soviet communism regardless of where they were during the war -- and everyone was very friendly. We did get a bit of a shock when our taxi driver asked for \$30 for the 5 km trip from the airport but that was just an indication of things to come.

Living expenses in Kabul are very high, especially for people who happen to come as tourists. There haven't been so many tourists over the last 12 years; most foreigners are working for the International Red Cross or United Nations and are provided housing. All of the hotels we checked were asking exorbitant rates and wanted US dollars. Afghans, the local currency, are not highly valued. The exchange rate was around 1000 Afghans to the dollar, but this fluctuated wildly according to war news and government whim. The city is also suffering food shortages. It looked like we were in for a very expensive holiday in Kabul.

Luckily, I had the telephone numbers of a few friends we knew from Peshawar that were now in Kabul. The phone system was absolutely terrible -- the exchange had been hit by a mujahideen

rocket the month before, it was explained -- but I finally succeeded in contacting both people. The first offered me a job but no accommodation; the second turned out to be our saviour. In more ways than one...

Our host was a major in the Australian Army, in Kabul to head up demining operations for the country. His house was sheer luxury after several months of non-stop travel; in fact, it would have been luxury at any time. There is little to do in Kabul, really, since you can't go beyond city limits and a curfew is enforced from 10:00 pm each night. To make up for all this, most UN and ICRC staff are provided comfortable homes with all mod cons -- including satellite tv! We might have spent more of our time in Kabul watching MTV than we did sight-seeing! (What a horrible thought!)

We enjoyed what we could see for two days and then, on the late news of the 14th, heard that Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces had taken Bagram Air Force Base 50 km north of the city. The next morning, it was clear that events were moving very rapidly and that we ought to be, too. The city was still quiet -- there had actually been fewer rockets during our few days than in the previous weeks -- but nobody was sure what was going to happen next, and we were advised to leave as soon as possible. We went to the airline offices and booked a flight out for the next day.

Overnight, we found out later, the leader of the regime in Kabul, Najibullah, had tried to leave the country but had been turned back by Uzbeki militia at the civilian airport. We saw them on the tarmac the next day, when we finally made it to the 737 after a delay of several hours in the waiting room. Upon boarding, we found many seats reserved and quite a few faces that had not been in our waiting lounge. Most were women and children, and some of them were crying. Our guess is that they were the families of government officials allowed to leave by the militia, without their husbands. 60 seats remained empty when we took off.

Anything more I write about Afghanistan will be outdated by the time you read this. Suffice to say we arrived safely in New Delhi, wondering what would happen next in Kabul. When things settle down, we hope to pay another visit.

=====

Now I can die and go to Heaven, for I've finished number 7. Illustration credits this time are: Gordon Ross, for the book pile on the inside cover (from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Jaico, 1948) and Jagdish Joshi for the spaceship (from The Alien Planet, Children's Book Trust, 1986). Any words of wisdom for me should be sent to Oz; specifically:

Chris Nelson, 36 St. Michael Tce., Mt. Pleasant, W.A. 6153