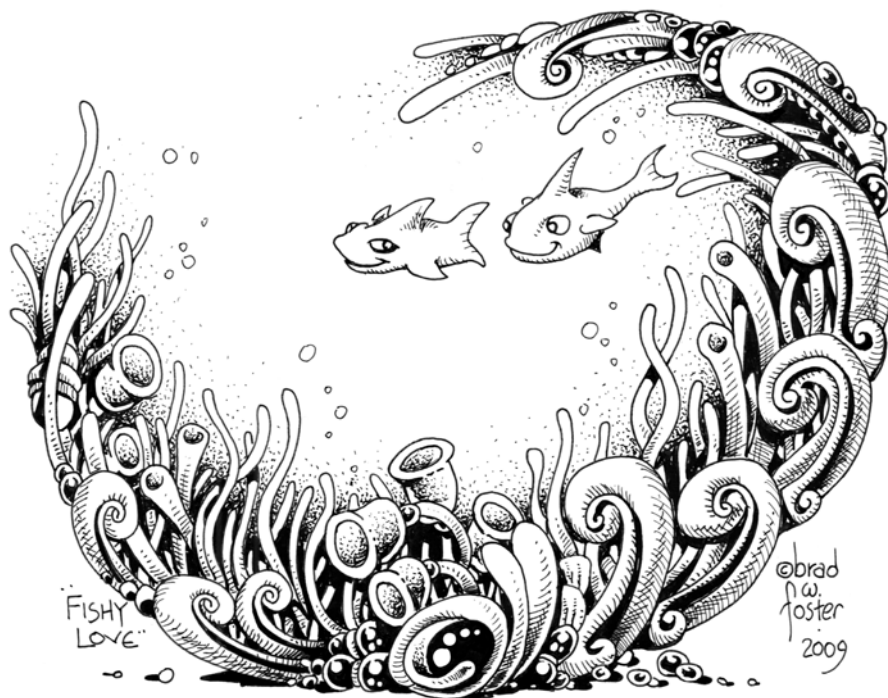


Visions of Paradise

#149



Visions of Paradise #149

Contents

Out of the Depths.....	page 3
<i>Least Favorite Authors of SF</i>	
The Passing Scene.....	page 5
<i>January 2010</i>	
Wondrous Stories	page 7
<i>Year's Best SF 14 ... June/July 2009 F&SF</i>	
Halcyon Days	page 9
<i>Dengrove ... Mayer ... Penney</i>	
On the Lighter Side.....	page 12

—\\//—
(0_0)
o00 (_) 00o

Robert Michael Sabella

E-mail bsabella@optonline.net

Personal blog: <http://adamosf.blogspot.com/>

Sfnal blog: <http://visionsofparadise.blogspot.com/>

Available online at <http://efanzines.com/>

Copyright ©January, 2010, by Gradient Press

Available for trade, letter of comment or request

Artwork

Brad Foster ... Cover

Out of the Depths

Other than as a market category, science fiction is not a “genre” per se, but a huge umbrella which envelops numerous types of speculative fiction: space opera, worldbuilding (both physical worlds and cultures), future history, cyberpunk, steampunk, alternate history (which it shares with historical fiction and might be a separate category itself, but there is enough connection between AH and SF to mention it here), secret history (ditto), hard science, and probably several others I’ve forgotten momentarily.

So what this all means is two things: (a) SF contains something for just about every reader who is not instinctively repulsed by any fiction which reeks of genre; and (b) it is unlikely that every fan of SF, not matter how devoted he or she might be, is going to enjoy every single sub-genre.

Thus, as I suspect is true of most SF fans, there are several popular writers whose fiction rarely resonates with me. Those writers tend to fall into three categories: writers pre-occupied with technology, writers who specialize in dismal views of the near future (the dreaded “near-future dismal”), and writers more concerned with flash than with substance.

In the past I have often listed my favorite writers, so here is a listing of my least favorite writers of SF:

- *Charles Stross*. I have tried to read his fiction, including several of his “Accelerando” stories and his novella “Missile Gap,” and I have found them too much *sturm und drang* and not enough storytelling or character development;
- *Vernor Vinge*. His interest in high-technological developments mostly bores me, although I did enjoy one of his novellas many years ago in **Analog** called “The Barbarian Princess,” which was a total departure from most of what I have read by him;
- *Bruce Sterling*: I cannot pinpoint why I generally finish a Sterling story with a feeling of dissatisfaction, but I usually do. It might have something to do with the fact that I generally feel no empathy for his characters who generally have attitudes totally different from my own. If I cannot relate to the characters in a story, I generally remain cool emotionally to the story itself;
- *Greg Bear*. I used to like Greg Bear stories until he decided to reinvent himself as a writer of thrillers. I dislike most thrillers which seem too artificial to me, little more than a series of unlikely complications strung together more for the purpose of keeping the thrill quotient high than actually being an absorbing story;
- *Terry Bisson*. A simple reason here: I am not a big fan of humorous fiction. It usually falls flat with me, which is why I have hesitated to read any of Terry Pratchett’s acclaimed *Discworld* novels;
- *Greg Egan*. Too much hard-science dominating his stories. I don’t mind a strongly-plotted story which has a hard science foundation, but Egan’s stories are mostly about

analyzing the scientific basis of the story, and that's too much for me;

- *R.A. Lafferty*. There's a point where strangeness becomes so dominant in a story that I totally lose interest in it. If I cannot relate to any of the characters, or become absorbed in the storyline, then the story has no purpose to me;
- *Paul McAuley*. Read my comments about Greg Bear;
- *Spider Robinson*. Reading a story of his usually reminds me of the Monty Python sketch where Eric Idle is smirking, "Nudge nudge, know what I mean?" while elbowing the person next to him. With the exception of "Stardance," I've never enjoyed the other Robinson stories that I've read;
- *Rudy Rucker*. See R.A. Lafferty above.

I assume that all of the above writers have written atypical stories which would not fall into my blind spot but which I have not yet seen, so any such recommendations are welcome.



The Passing Scene

January 3-10: I spent my evenings during the first week of January editing my nephew Gabe's master thesis, one chapter per night. Since he has lived in Japan for the past half-dozen years, his topic was on sustainability in Japanese agriculture. I also edited an essay for one former student and wrote a recommendation online for a graduate teaching program for another. Somehow, I also found the time to grade an AP Calculus test that week as well.

I spent one afternoon at school with Liu who has been very stressed and anxious recently. She was part of my 8th period Honors Algebra 2 class last year, a group of students who are very close to me. We chatted for several hours, and I think she felt better afterwards.

I was asked by the advisor of the National Honor Society to be the speaker at this year's induction ceremony. I was flattered, of course, but anxious that I will not be able to give a particularly good speech. It is amazing how popular you become when you announce your retirement. (

Mark and Kate got two kittens who are 4 and 6 months old, a male named Rocky and a female named Kali. Although they are not siblings, they lived together previously and get along fine. The woman who owned them originally was allergic to cats, so she returned them to the pet store for re-adoption.

The weekend was busy but enjoyable. Friday night we went to the Chinese Buffet with Alan & Denise, after which we chatted for several hours, then Sunday we went to my nephew Chris and his wife Keri's second baby Christopher's baptism. It was held at a church where both priests taught with Jean and me 30 years at Paul VI High School. Sadly, the pastor has been recovering the past two months from a very serious stroke, while his assistant also had a stroke six years ago. We reminisced with him awhile about the old days.

Jan 11-17: A three-day weekend due to Martin Luther King's Birthday, so we were busier than usual. Saturday we went to the YMCA and farm store, after which we went to Frank & Marilyn's house for our monthly get-together with them. Marilyn made a chili recipe which was considerably different than ours, and quite good, as well as very thin pizza (even thinner than the Neopolitan pizza my mother always made) with vegetable topping. I made chocolate cream pie for dessert. Frank was in a movie-watching mood, so he and I watched a John Wayne western, which was decent, while we talked about movies in general (one of Frank's favorite topics). Jean and Marilyn chatted in another room.

Gabe sent me a thank you email for editing his masters' thesis and a 3,000 yen gift card at Amazon.jp. The problem is that I sent an email to Amazon.com who told me that I cannot transfer the card to them, but shipping books from Amazon.jp is 3,000 yen! I don't know why they need to ship the book from Japan since the books I selected were American books. Jean mentioned that Gabe is returning to the U.S. in April on his way to a job in Barcelona, so I ordered the books and had them shipped to Gabe, then he will bring them back to the U.S. and mail them to me here.

My ESL class this year is fairly typical, 13 students who are all over the place in mathematical abilities. The year began with 5 students: Akash and Shampa, brother-and-sister from Bangla Desh who have decent English. Since Shampa is a girl, she was not permitted to learn any mathematics there, so she arrived in my ESL class on about a 3rd grade math level. I started by teaching her the times table, then gradually moved her through basic math operations, until now she is actually doing elementary algebra. She is a bright girl with a good work ethic, and I am very impressed with how much she has progressed already.

Her brother Akash is doing Algebra 1, and his ability and work ethic are comparable to his sister's, but his background is far stronger.

Also in the class at the beginning was Dhvani, who is from India and thus has good English, as do all my students from India since English is still spoken widely there. She is doing Algebra 1 but at a somewhat faster pace than Akash since her background is better.

Anton is from Russia with very good English, and doing Algebra 1 at about the same pace as Dhvani.

The fifth original student was Robert, who is from China and doing Precalculus, but he is nearly finished with the book and ready to begin doing Calculus already. I have no idea what he will do next year, since with me leaving it is highly unlikely anybody else will feel qualified to take on an independent study student in math.

Shortly after the start of the year, 3 new students arrived: Jesper who is from the Phillipines and currently doing pre-Algebra, and two brothers from Mexico, René (doing Algebra 1 slower than either Akash or Dhvani, because his background is weaker than theirs but he is bright) and Benjamin (doing Essential Math using a middle school book, although I anticipate moving him to a Pre-Algebra book soon).

In January, 3 students arrived from China with minimal English. Wenjing is doing Algebra 2 very quickly, since she already knows about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the material. Emily is also doing Algebra 2, but she knows most of it already, so I anticipate moving her to Precalculus as soon as I fill in her few gaps.

Zhengxiong has almost no English and a weaker math background, so he is doing Algebra 1. All three of these students plus Dhvani are juniors because of their age upon arrival, so they are also in Jean's review course which prepares students in danger of failing the state requirement math test which all juniors take in March. Unfortunately, the math portion of that test requires a lot of reading and understanding problems, rather than being pure math, so ESL students always have a much tougher time passing it than comparable math students who are native English speakers.

In the past week, two students have arrived from South America: Claudia who has good English and is doing Algebra 1. Rachel has hardly any English, so René translates for me occasionally. She also has a very weak math background, so she is doing Essential Math.

My courses will be difficult to take over next year. Advanced Placement Calculus BC is a

college-level course which most of the math teachers have not done in several years, plus it is a lot more difficult being the teacher than being the student. Advanced Placement Statistics is also college-level, and ESL Math requires a teacher to place students, then work with a dozen of them individually on various different courses during a 44-minute period. Jean is qualified for both the AP courses but, of course, she is retiring as well.

Wondrous Stories

In the mid-1990s I read several annual best-of-the-year anthologies until I went through a year-and-a-half sf burnout during which I stopped buying all f&sf, including those annual volumes. When I gradually returned to reading sf, I resumed buying Gardner Dozois' **The Year's Best Science Fiction**, even filling in the missing volume #13. But I never resumed buying David Hartwell's **Year's Best SF** (which, by this time, was co-edited by his wife Kathryn Cramer), although I did eye it occasionally. I guess the main reason I did not do so was that I was now also reading historical fiction, thus not buying as many f&sf books as I did previously, and there were too many worthwhile volumes being published each year for me to commit to a regular annual purchase.

This past Christmas one of my gifts was **Year's Best SF 14** which I immediately began reading, and I am glad that I did. Lately I have grown weary of much of what goes under the guise of "science fiction" but is really anything *but*: contemporary fantasy, slipstream, magic realism, mainstream fiction which pokes around the edges of science fiction. Thus it is good to read a book which is unpretentious science fiction, running the gamut from traditional problem-solving, to space opera, future history, and everything else which filled the pages of magazines such as **Galaxy**, **Worlds of IF** and **Worlds of Tomorrow** when they were my favorite zines in the 1960s.

The book opens with Carolyn Ives Gilman's "Arkfall" which tells of a strange world where everybody lives in underwater habitats, and the protagonist is trapped on a runaway habitat with an offworlder whose attitudes are considerably different than natives who have centuries of training in being non-selfish and nonviolent. This story combines storytelling, a wondrous world tour, and a character study, three ingredients in the very best sf. It also passed the test of a great sf story: it convinced me to read one of Gilman's sf novels as well.

Paolo Bacigalupi is one of the finest new sf writers, but at times his version of near-future dismal sf turns me off as much as his writing interests me. My favorite story of his was "The Fluted Girl," which was one of my favorite sf stories of the past decade (or current decade, depending on whether you accept that 2010 is a new decade or not). "Pump Six" started out as if it was going to bore me with its recitation of calamities in a near-future New York City, but Bacigalupi's writing kept me intrigued as the story itself grew more and more interesting. It reached its peak when it skewered post-collapse education with a visit to Columbia University.

Cory Doctorow is an anomaly, an author totally consumed with high tech whose stories always appeal to me. He obviously knows the difference between gushing about his love of technology

and story-telling, and “The Things That Make Me Weak and Strange Get Engineered Away” (an unfortunate title which has no effect on the story itself) is a strong story about a bastion of anti-social nerds locked away from society whose main function is keeping tabs on society for the over-protective post-9/11 government, and what happens when one of its members temporarily leaves the hideaway and visits the bigger world. Good stuff.

Ted Kosmatka’s “N-Words” is a story about racism, but not the type its title might lead you to believe. The “N” referred to are neanderthals who have returned in the same manner that dinosaurs returned in **Jurassic Park**, but the neanderthals turn out to be considerably different than anthropologists have surmised. The story’s last line is a classic and worth the entire story.

Alastair Reynolds is one of my two favorite hard science / space opera writers (along with the multi-talented Stephen Baxter) and “The Fury” is a very good story which is part police-procedural and part human interest story which ends up being more thought-provoking than a typical Reynolds story. It tells of a security expert for a near-immortal emperor who investigates an assassination attempt which would have succeeded except the emperor’s mind was quickly downloaded into one of dozens of available replacement brains. The story’s main concern though is questioning how much punishment for an evil deed is just, especially when that punishment might cause repercussions far worse than the original evil act.

There are numerous other good stories as well, such as Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette’s “Boojum”, Robert Reed’s “The House Left Empty” and Ann Halam’s “Cheats” (a rare VR story which I actually enjoyed). Now I regret having never returned to buying this series, and I’m wondering if it is possible for me to fill in my collection with the missing 10 issues.

*

Robert Reed is such a good writer; how many writers could possibly churn out as many stories as he does, with all of them being near or at the top of his talent? An example of why he is so good is the story “The Firehorn,” in the June/July 2009 issue of **F&SF**. The plot is simple: a group of children aged 8 through 13 have a secret clubhouse where they play the typical games children of that age play. Then the 13-year old boy teases the youngsters by claiming he saw a monster prowling nearby. The 13-year old girl plays along with him and names the monster the “firehorn.”

Somehow the firehorn takes on a life of its own. Soon all the youngsters in town believe in it, and are seeking it out, and even the adults play along. Then somebody actually sees a creature which resembles the mythical firehorn, and the practical joke grows into a legendary creature along the lines of the yeti or bigfoot.

Fifty years after the “creation” of the firehorn, the originator is hired by a group of AI’s and cyborgs to help them hunt the firehorn, whose existence they truly believe. He wonders why artificial beings believe in such a chimera? This leads to an inevitable discussion about the genesis of both religions and legends, and a story which began as a lark turns into a philosophical treatise with a superb ending. While “The Firehorn” is not a classic story, it is definitely well worth reading.

Another very good story in the issue was Albert Cowdrey's novella "Paradiso Lost," a space adventure involving two raw officers who are part of a mission to find a missing space colony which was established by a religious cult several years ago, and now seems to have disappeared. The entire story takes place on the ship and its cast of characters include the arrogant general, his dwarf companion, the female second-in-command, and the grizzled sergeants who serve under the two lieutenants but are their advisors much of the time. While this might sound like military SF, a sub-genre which I generally dislike, it is much more of a human interest story wrapped around two intriguing mysteries. Good stuff.

Halcyon Days

Lloyd Penney

1706-24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke, ON, CANADA M9C 2B2

January 12, 2010

It's finally this much-touted new year, and as far as I can see, it's just more of the same. Just like this letter I'm writing. Here are some observations on **VoP** 148.

I would think that either you're well-educated, or know how to do your research, when it comes to writing SF. You need to tell a good story, too. Those first qualifications may not have to apply to fantasy writers, just a sense of story logic. What does fantasy offer its readers that SF doesn't? Right now, it's just variety, and I think there's also a decline in interest in science. Fantasy seems more mainstream, (sounds odd), while SF is the geek's domain. When did the word geek have some positive connotations?

Those writers you mention who may write fantasy, but won't admit it...it's all in the marketing. Vonnegut didn't want to be forced into an SF ghetto he might not escape from. Margaret Atwood wants to keep her place in the Canadian literary establishment. I suppose it's the difference in being a writer, and being an author. They seem to be more disclaimers than anything else, sometimes...

I wish I'd been able to read Fred Pohl's work in some semblance of sequence. It's all great stuff, but with so many series, I'd have to start one without finishing another. A minor kvetch; his work's been wonderful. Stay well in your 90s, Mr. Pohl. His granddaughter, Emily Pohl-Weary, lives up here, and writes SF as well.

Rich Dengrove is right; old fans no longer control the Worldcon or the Hugos. That's most because old fans don't attend Worldcons, and therefore aren't able to vote on the Hugos. I've heard so many complaints about who or what wins the rockets...I bought a supporting membership in the Australian Worldcon so I could vote, plain and simple.

The new job has just passed the two-month mark, and I hope they will find more work for me...I am finding that I am cruising through the work provided. My bosses seem pleased with what I'm doing, but I may not have enough work to last me past the end of February. The job hunt

continues on, as ever.

I am done for the moment, Robert...take care, and may your preps for your impending retirement be easy and fulfilling.

[Good luck with keeping your job. My main concern about retirement right now is that our state's new governor hopes to balance the state budget partly by restricting public employees' (including teachers') pension benefits, while giving tax cuts to the rich (of which he is one). I'm not sure how imposing a caste system will help the state in the long run.]

Eric Mayer

groggy.tales@gmail.com

Jan 13, 2010

Yes, I am still around. I suddenly realized last spring that I really didn't have much to offer to today's sf fandom and decided I ought to just cease and desist entirely for a while. However, I have kept up with a few zines I enjoy and I see in this issue you discuss your reading for last year, which is always an interesting topic.

One of the things I wanted to accomplish last year, and the only success I had, was to get back to reading more. My reading had declined to the point where some years I didn't read as many as six books! In 2009 I ended up reading, if I counted rightly, 85 books, mostly fiction. Now please understand most of these books were very short. I purposely looked for short "classics" like **The Great Gatsby** and **Tortilla Flat** and **The Turn of the Screw**. I read quite a few fifties noir paperbacks, always short. I did read a few longer works: **Moby Dick**, **Journey to the End of the Night** by Louis Ferdinand Celine and **Dumas Key** by Stephen King, not to mention William Hope Hodgson's **The Nightland**.

I only read six books I'd call science fiction:

A Canticle for Leibowitz -- Walter Miller

The City and the City -- China Mieville

The Puppet Masters -- Robert Heinlein

A Journey to the Interior of the Earth -- Jules Verne

The Deep Range -- Arthur C. Clarke

The Einstein Intersection -- Samuel R. Delany

Half were rereads. Although, when I was reading **The Puppet Masters** I was kind of shocked at some of the stuff in it. Nothing lurid by today's standards, but stuff I surely would have recalled (I figured) after reading it as a kid. Turns out I was reading the unexpurgated version from the late eighties. Heinlein's emphasis on people exposing themselves in public still struck me as kind of creepy, but he made it sound sensible, moreso than Homeland Security with its body scanners stripping people electronically at airports. I am reminded of those X-Ray glasses they used to advertise.

I guess I read twice as many fantasies of various sorts. One thing I realized is that I simply prefer older books. I suppose that is partly because with older books, as opposed to ones just coming out, I have a better idea of what I'm getting, whether I'll like it, and also if I'm selecting from books that have maintained some sort of reputation over the years I have a better chance of ending up with a "good" book. Plus, I am more comfortable with older writing styles. I haven't been able to find a modern fantasy novel that I can bear to read.

I also read around two dozen crime/mystery books and a similar number of general "literature" along with a few nonfiction books, notably Will Durant's **Story of Philosophy**.

After sampling modern books, with little success, I finally decided that I wanted to read for my own enjoyment and that I had no obligation to keep up with modern literature or much interest in doing so. (And who could read, say 145 sf books a year anyhow?) Once I took the reactionary approach and started reading old books I found myself enjoying reading again. Mind you, Mary read at least three times as many books as I did last year.

Anyway, I have never read **Gateway** and I have put that on my list to read in the next few weeks.

I gather you are aiming to retire after this year, in which case, of course, you will have more reading time. I know you love teaching. My dad quit teaching to devote himself to painting watercolors and regretted it, to the extent he missed teaching, but he did continue to give art classes from his home, and to teach adult education courses and so on, and I wonder if you plan to keep your hand in somehow.

[Much of what transpires in fandom escapes me as well, but so long as I care about reading and writing about f&sf, I will continue publishing, so you will always have a home in these pages.

[Your decision to only read what you enjoy mirrors my own decision in the mid-90s, after which I have enjoyed my reading much more than I did for the prior decade when I deliberately tried to keep up with all the "important" f&sf being published. Fei Fei spurred me into that decision, for which I am very appreciative.

[I am considering doing some adjunct teaching at one of the local colleges, at least temporarily until I decide if I enjoy it. I did it in the 1970s and it was enjoyable then.]

Richard Dengrove

<rdengrove@cox.net>

15 Jan 2010

Like **VoP** #148. One of the reasons is that there were so many comment hooks.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS. Why is science fiction lagging behind Fantasy with the buying public? You say it is because a lot of current science fiction is thrillers with no depth. I disagree. The thrillers tend to be thriving; it's the more thoughtful science fiction that has shrunk. My own theory is that people yearn more for fantasy these days, and magic and the past. That is what

fantasy is about. Science, which science fiction has always been associated with, has more and more become the bad guy. Look at *Avatar*, among the more astronomically popular films, if you doubt me.

Why do literary writers eschew the label science fiction? My answer is they consider it for the masses, and they are writing for the elite. Readers who consider themselves the elite will eschew novels labeled science fiction too. Neither do this as much as they used to, though. More and more the high brow, middle brow and low brow are fusing. Whether this is good or not is another thing entirely.

THE PASSING SCENE. For a loner, you have a lot of people in your life: family, students, friends. I'm probably the real loner.

WONDROUS STORIES. Originality and creativity remain the big reason to read science fiction. Of course, if you can come up with great details: realistic, wondrous or humorous: you are being original and creative. And it adds to the sense of wonder.

Yes, Sam Delany updated old pulp stories into a rich and dynamic form by adding details and making the characters human. I suspect you can do that with even Conan the Barbarian. The problem is: will it sell? The film *Avatar* started out detailing its world and humanizing its characters. Then it decided to make everything black and white, and depend on mindless action. I wasn't impressed. However, it's the best selling movie since Adam and Eve.

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE. Great jokes about bell ringers. However, for whom does the bell toll?

On the Lighter Side

A drunk man who smelled like beer sat down on a subway next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked, 'Say Father, what causes arthritis?'

The priest replies, 'My Son, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap, wicked women, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow man, sleeping around with prostitutes and lack of a bath.'

The drunk muttered in response, 'Well, I'll be damned,' then returned to his paper.

The priest, thinking about what he had said, nudged the man and apologized. 'I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?'

The drunk answered, 'I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does.'

*

I feel like my body has gotten totally out of shape, so I got my doctor's permission to join a fitness club and start exercising. I decided to take an aerobics class for seniors. I bent, twisted, gyrated, jumped up and down, and perspired for an hour. But, by the time I got my leotards on, the class was over.

*

Reporters interviewing a 104 year-old woman: "And what do you think is the best thing about being 104?" the reporter asked.

She simply replied, "No peer pressure."

*

A 97 year-old man goes into his doctor's office and says, "Doc, I want my sex drive lowered."

"Sir," replied the doctor, "You're 97. Don't you think your sex drive is all in your head?"

"You're damned right it is!" replied the old man. "That's why I want it lowered!"