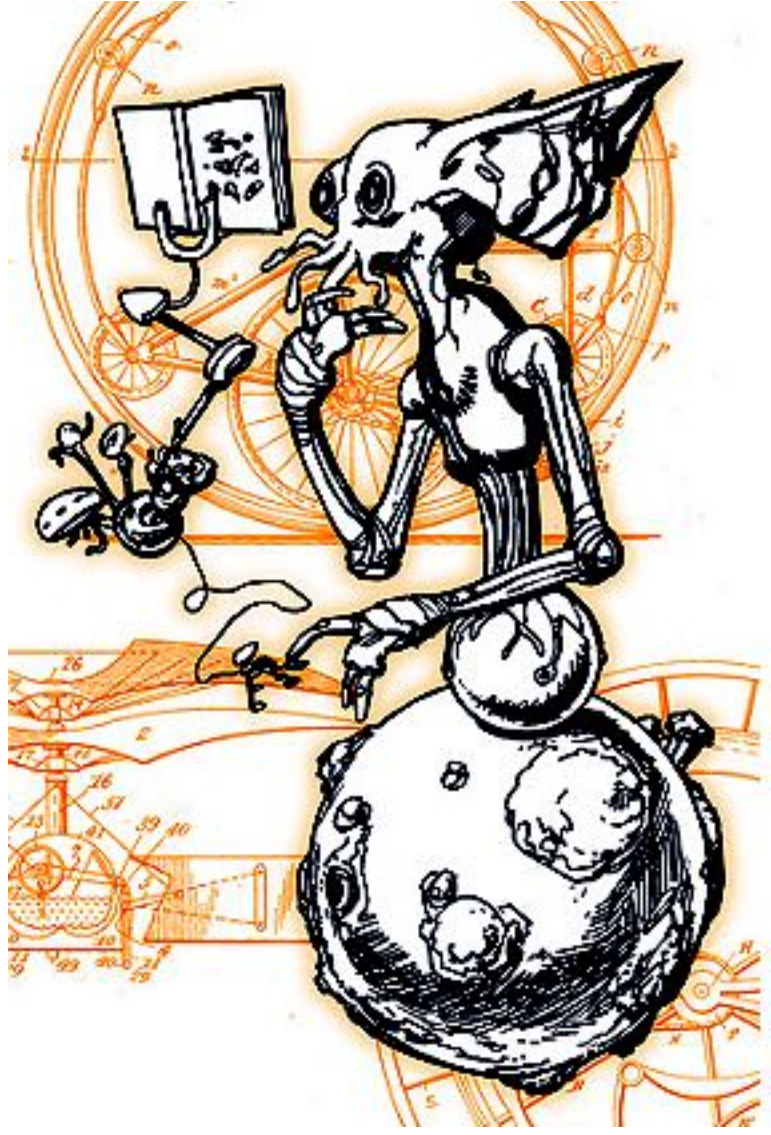


*Sparrowgrass & battle-twigs #72*



## Online Sf Cons

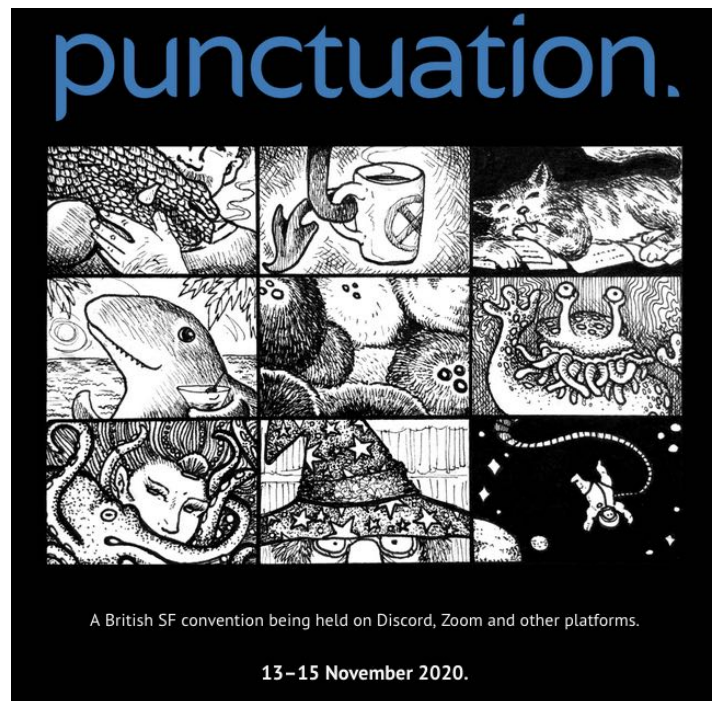
IT ALL STARTED, UNEXPECTEDLY, WITH CoNZealand, the Worldcon last year. I had a membership, as I had actually planned to attend the convention. Then COVID-19 made that impossible (or at best, *extremely* unlikely). On short notice, they moved online.

The con committee did a fantastic job, organising an online presence in very short time. They made use of *Zoom* and *Discord*, and provided training in the use of these tools for those of us unfamiliar with the tools. *Critical Mass*, Adelaide's SF discussion group had gone online via *Zoom* in April with a talk by Karen J Carlisle. Since *Nova Mob* had cancelled, we got several Melbourne fans joining us for the talk.

After a few months of zooming, I felt reasonably comfortable with *Zoom*. *Discord* was mainly used by gamers (apparently they exchange messaged while playing a game), so I wasn't used to it, and, to be honest, found it annoying and awkward to use during CoNZealand. While it allowed video chats, more than five people caused it to crash. As a texting app, it lacked features which might have made it more useful for carrying on multiple conversations.

Alison Scott, the current GUFF winner, was a zoom wizard because she had moved the London First Thursday meetings online using zoom, with breakout rooms mimicking tables in the pub. She let users move between "tables" so that you could have a conversation with the six or seven others in the room. As I discovered when I joined them one Thursday (Friday morning at 4am! local time), the system worked very well.

So when I heard of *Punctuation*, an online convention Alison and her fellow octothorpe podcasters were running, with the expressed desire to provide spaces for social interaction, I was happy to join the con to see how well that would work.



As well as using *Zoom* and *Discord*, they also used a tool to live broadcast talks and panels on youtube. *Punctuation* used *Airtable* to provide an on-screen programme, with each writeup containing a link to the actual event.

As well as the talks and panels, they included meals, tastings, games and spaces for fans to interact.

Despite the time difference (which wouldn't have affected most of the members to a British con), the convention was interesting and enjoyable. They made a modest profit on the membership fee (5 pound sterling), which was distributed to charity.

Well, I thought, given that *Critical Mass* currently shared a *Zoom* account with *Nova Mob*, *should we try to run an online con in Australia?*

*Critical Mass* had run day-long mini-cons in previous years — one of which featured a podcasting workshop which birthed a podcast, *KRAM-StuFf*, which has 250+ episodes online (most of which are < 5 minutes).

I chatted to Adam, and we decided to run a few tests in December to see what we could do just using *zoom* alone. Rather than aiming for the 250+ they had at *Punctuation*, we were looking at a

smaller audience<sup>1</sup>; our previous in person cons attracted around 30 people.

The advantage of an online con was the ability to invite guests from around the world; the disadvantage is that more than 2 or 3 hours of zoom is *tiring*: attention wanders, and people need a break.

So I wondered, could we create a mixture of talks, panels, games and discussions that would attract fans?

My initial thoughts were perhaps breaking a ten hour con into two evenings, but this would disadvantage fans in the US.

### *The Test Runs*

We decided to arrange six test runs over three weekend evenings, so that we could test various potential items.

The first tests were practicing Zoom use, with some online quizzes and screen sharing.

It turns out that you can share a screen if you're a host or co-host. For group quizzes, one person becomes the "scribe", and they download the quiz, so that when people move into their breakout room (separate room for each team), the scribe can share the quiz document, and people can write their answers directly on the sheet. When they are done (or the time is up), the scribe saves the shared answer sheet, so that they can either share the group's answer sheet back in the main room, or send it via chat to the host for marking.

Sharing pages was useful for questions about films, where we could display pre-selected screen shots of films to be identified.

The final test run was a fanzine panel, featuring well know fanzine producers such as Bruce Gillespie, Mark Plummer, Alison Scott and Christina Lake. Even Claire Brialey chipped in with some interesting comments about reprinting old articles (she'd edited several collections for Ansible Books). After an hour-long panel, five of us stayed online chatting until midnight! (We kept Spike up until 5am.)

Alison pointed out a hidden menu item (not placed where one would expect it) in *Zoom* which allows the host to not only mute all the non-panel participants, but to remove them from the display, so the screen just displays the panel members — in short, similar to the webinar feature for which zoom charge extra<sup>2</sup>.

#### time travel

Q: What time travel story features a very small cast?

Q: In which story is time travel the solution to a wave of suicides?

Q: In which story does a butterfly die with devastating effect?

Q: What might you use instead of a DeLorean to time travel?

#### colours

Q: In L Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz, what colour were Dorothy's shoes?

#### robots

Q: What are Asimov's 3 laws of Robotics?

Bonus: *What is the zeroth law?*

We name the robot, you name the creator:

(a) Maria –

(b) Robby the Robot –

(c) R Daneel Olivaw –

(d) Marius; Sulla; Radius; Primus and Helena

(e) Trurl and Klapaucius –

(f) Cassandra Kresnov –

\* A mini-quiz from *Conjecture*, 2009

<sup>1</sup> our zoom account allowed up to 100

<sup>2</sup> probably the reason the menu item is hidden

So, having run tests in December, Adam and I talked about which of the year's talks we wanted to reprise: we ended up inviting Eugen Bacon to repeat her *Afrofuturism* talk from Nova Mob, and Adam would repeat his piece about the first SF story, *A True Tale*, written by by Lucian of Samosata — a voyage to the edges of the universe and reason. *The title is the first clue that this will be a tall tale.*

We thought it'd be nice to have summaries of best new SF: written, on TV and radio. It turns out many people used lockdown to re-visit old books, so the "New SF" panel turned into new to the reader.

I roped Terry Frost into helping on the TV talk (given he's doing two podcasts on films).

We had a nice panel on podcasting in the evening, which was a convenient time for British fans, and John D Berry kindly agreed to talk about moving from fan to pro (I initially suggested the title *From Typo to Typography*, but that was a bit cheeky.)

Since this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of AUSFA, the Adelaide Uni SF Association, we thought it'd be nice to have a panel on this.

We had Jeff Harris, and could call on Alan Sandercock. I tracked down Joy Window, but had no luck finding Monica Adlington<sup>3</sup>.

Since Alan was in Atlanta, we had to schedule the panel fairly early (2pm Adelaide time), else it would be too late for him. In the end, the panel with Alan & Jeff went reasonably well. Unfortunately, Joy was in rural Queensland and the internet connection was very poor. She did send an email and some photos which we displayed during the panel.

Adam had the brilliant idea of doing a read through of the *Frankenstein Burlesque*, published by an Adelaide author back in 1864. This probably tempted Gillian Polack to volutes a panel on *Jewish SF in Australia*

Add a few games, including a treasure hunt and a round of exquisite corpse, and we had a pretty full programme.

We purposefully made it single stream, leaving enough space between items if discussion ensued; there were seven breakout rooms so that members could continue chats, catch up with friends, or play games.

### *Smooth sailing?*

Come the Sunday, there were a few hiccups.

I finished preparing slides for two of my panels by 11:45, at which point I decided it best to pen up the zoom meeting for early-comers.<sup>4</sup>

By 12:05, we had around 25 participants. I welcomed them all, wondering what had happened to Adam, my co-host. I went to open the breakout rooms, and invited people to move to the first panel.

*Oh oh, they couldn't move themselves.* I had skipped a step in empowering the attendees. Luckily, someone knew how to fix the problem, so I closed all the breakout room, fixed the settings and reopened them to find people (most of them) could now move themselves around.

There were a few people on platforms which didn't allow this, or who had old versions of the zoom software. We moved them to the appropriate room.

[The rooms were mostly named after famous bars in SF: most of the panels were in Munden's Bar or Callahan's saloon. We kept the SpaceBar from Punctuation, as it was such a good name.]

---

<sup>3</sup> Alan gave me a potential lead the day before the con; no response as yet

<sup>4</sup> as a consequence, I missed a few emails which only arrived at 11:45: my apologies!

*For some reason, I noted we had two versions of Adam in the participant listing. Eventually I discovered he had problems with his computer, and had logged in from his university machine. The university account wouldn't allow him to do some things. Eventually, we got him to exit and re-join under the usual account. While this was going on, his version in the Foyer wasn't responding and letting people in to the rooms. I eventually noticed this, and nipped out to reception to move the people there into the con breakout rooms.*

Another minor hitch at the Afro-futurism talk: Eugen couldn't share her screen for some reason. Luckily, I had a copy of her slides and had converted them into a form I could share.

It took a few minutes until I returned to the breakout room to share the slides [I was dumped from the zoom, and had to rejoin!]

The talk resumed with slides, and ran smoothly from there. The delay meant we had to move the movies quiz [Adam hadn't responded to my text request to start the movie quiz because of his computer problems].

As noted earlier, one of the requirements for recording a panel was that the person recording had to be present at the panel to the end. Sadly, because of interruptions, I couldn't record the talk. [I suspect Murray may have a recording of the Nova Mob talk.]

The *Early days at AUSFA* panel went quite well, with both Alan and Jeff having interesting tales to tell. As I had suspected, the Science Association talk on SF in 1970 helped inspire people to form AUSFA in 1971. We have a recording which I shall pass on to Leigh Edmonds, who was also there for the talk.

John D Berry's talk went quite well, as he had prepared some slides which he shared with the audience. There was some interesting discussion, so we delayed Adam's talk by 15 minutes.

Because I had to deal with new arrivals, I couldn't stay to listen to Adam's talk, so that recording is incomplete \*sigh\*

The *Steampunk Tea Party & Panel* started on time, and Karen Carlisle recorded the event.

I took a quick break to eat some lunch and prepare for the two afternoon panels I was in: recent TV and Audio/Radio dramas.

The audience seemed interested in the Audio dramas, so I posted a copy of my slides in chat for those who wanted to follow up the suggestions of works from *Audible*, *BBC*, *Wireless Theatre* and *serialbox.com*.

Lots of interest in the *Jewish SF panel*, so we extended Gillian's time to deal with questions. discussion with the audience.

The podcast panel went quite well, with input from Terry Frost, Christina Lake, John Coxon and me on *how* and *why* we podcast.

The *New Dr Who* panel rounded out the night, because we really didn't have enough people to do a read through of the *Frankenstein Burlesque* after the Dr Who panel.

We promised to organise a read through sometime towards the end of february.

I'll have a word with Adam about preparing scripts and chasing up likely takers for a read-through.

We gave up on the *zoom* around 10 or 10:30, and I was certainly exhausted.

I'll append one of our quiz rounds on the next page; while looking for questions, I ran across a quiz page from the last NatCon in Adelaide, Conjecture, in 2009.

*If we do another online con, I'd strongly suggest running it over two days, each day's panels split by games/quiz/chats over lunch or something similar. Each day to run 5 hours max.*

## Round 2:

1. What song does the rogue computer system *HAL 9000* sing to himself as he's shut down?
2. Dick Grayson was the first to act as Batman's sidekick Robin. Can you name one of the other fictional characters to take on the superhero identity?
3. In the *Alien* movie series, what is the name of Ellen Ripley's pet cat?
4. Before making the first Star Wars movie in 1977, George Lucas made a dystopian sci-fi film called...?
5. In which sci fi film did world-famous mime Marcel Marceau have his first speaking role?
6. Which John Wyndham science fiction novel has been filmed twice (in 1960 and 1995) as *Village of the Damned*?
7. Which 1865 novel by Jules Verne tells the story of the Baltimore Gun Club?
8. By what name is the planet *Arrakis* better known?
9. What is 6 miles long, 4 miles tall, and 3 miles wide and is operated by the *Jupiter Mining Corporation*?
10. Captain Nemo appears in which two Jules Verne novels?



## *Labor fails the climate test*

ALAS, THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, Labor's Anthony Albanese, has restructured his cabinet and moved Mark Butler, the Shadow Minister for Climate and Energy, out of his portfolio.

This at a time when we expect to go to an early election in September/October; Biden, the new US president is taking serious action on climate change; the four largest customers for Australian coal (Japan, China, South Korea and Taiwan) have committed to phasing out fossil fuels<sup>5</sup>; and industry is keen to invest in Australian renewables.

The Federal Government has made it quite clear that it's not going to increase its commitments to the Paris Accord, but it wants to spend \$50 billion on a "gas-led recovery"!

Mark Butler is knowledgeable about climate science, and had proposed reasonable targets for Australia as Labor's policy in the last federal election. He's on top of recent research suggesting the benefits of green investment in renewables, and is aware of the recent scientific research suggesting we need a much stronger and faster shift away from fossil fuels.

Butler's been moved because he's been too effective in communicating the need to act on climate change. "Albo" doesn't want to present a large target for the Murdoch papers and fossil fuel campaigns. All of which leaves us with a gutless opposition unwilling to make a strong case for action on climate: for some reason they think a "small target" will persuade people to vote for them. *Bah, humbug!*

<sup>5</sup> 2050 net zero: Australia left behind as Asia goes green, Mike Secombe, The Saturday Paper, Jan 30th

# Mailing Comments ANZAPA #318

OBO 318

As you note, the irony of you now taking on the OBE role as Bruce takes a well-deserved break isn't lost on us. While I much prefer the electronic form of distribution, I still

understand the preference for paper zines. Given the delay in physical mail, and the increasing cost of postage of a distribution, I doubt that returning to a paper form is likely in the immediate future. Members can, of course, print out all of the mailing if they wish.

## Odds & Evens

While approving the addition of blank pages to ensure printing of fanzines allows the creation of separate zines in the combined PDF, there really is no need to change the page contributions to be an even number. After all, we should be able to understand that 13 is equivalent to 14 (13) for "print" calculations. What if I submit an odd number of pages, but three of which aren't original contributions? Do we end up with notations such as 16 (15 (12)) for a nominal 8 double sided sheets, 15 pages of which only 12 count towards minac? Might I suggest that we can assume an odd number of pages means we need to add one to the count of printed pages in the combined edition? So my example would now be written 15 (12) to indicate credit for 12 pages out of fifteen. Since 15 is an odd number, we would assume 16 pages in the combined mailing edition.

*Would it make your job easier if we ensured each PDF file took up an even number of a4 pages by adding a blank at the end of an odd-numbered contribution?*

## Finances

Given membership fees will be due at some point, might I suggest a nominal \$20 annual fee until

such time we require to boost the bank account (eg if we decide to go back to physical mailouts)?

The \$20 could go towards paying for an appropriate dropbox account, and printing an archive copy if required — or possibly storing the PDF on an external hard drive.

## New Constitution

As I mentioned in an email to David, I am happy to second both of his amendments to the New Constitution.

Nice use of the Bould typeface.

## The Every-Day Book 5

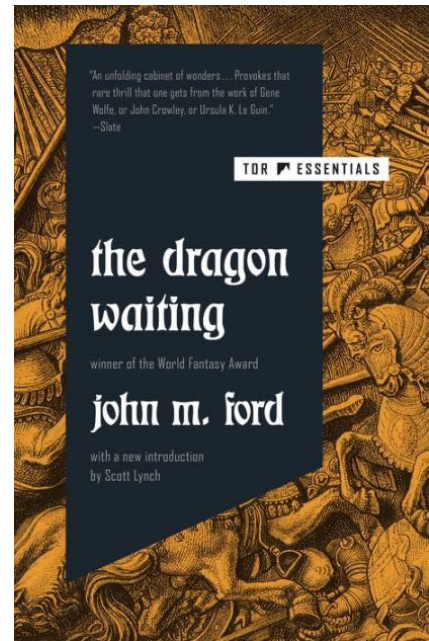
Lovely cover with Lotti & Bella.

I've been reading a lot about the new Macs with the M1 chip; please let us know whether it provides a noticeable improvement on your 2015 iMac. (I'm still going strong on a 2013 MacBook Air, which runs the latest OS & software reasonably well.)

Pleased that you enjoyed the Murderbot series; there's a new novel due out later this year (April 27th); events in *Fugitive Telemetry* take place before the events in *Network Effect*: Murderbot has to solve a murder!

Incidentally, if you're a fan of Richard III, you might want to pick up a copy of John M Ford's *the dragon waiting*, which is finally back in print again.

A wonderful alternative history, in which



Byzantium still rules its empire, France is split in two, and England is a set of squabbling fiefdoms.

Beautifully written, it's not surprising it won the World Fantasy Award. Four interesting characters from around the Empire decide they want to secure the English throne for the Duke of Gloucester...

## Quoz 74

**Claire:** Ah, excellent! A new collection of Langford. I immediately ordered the ebook upon reading about it in the Quoz!

As a fan of the *Quantum Gravity* novels by Justina Robson, I shall now have to order a copy of *When Demons Die*, as well.

**Mark:** The fact that snow leopards can be tamed should come as a relief to you, particularly as you note Claire *loves snow leopards*. Surely a tame one in the house would be far preferable to a wild one?

Lovely shot of the lightning over Edinburgh. It reminds me of the Tuesday night a few months ago when we had a massive storm over Adelaide. Since Tuesday night is when I cycle over to the radio station to do *The Environment Show*, the storm, which reached its height around 9pm, just when I was about to cycle home, was of considerable concern. For the next hour or so, whenever I opened the back door, I would either be blinded by a lightning flash, or deafened by thunder. It was certainly too wet, wild and stormy to cycle home. I hunkered down in the studio lounge, reading N K Jemisin for the next hour or so, until the storm had moved on, and managed to cycle home while staying dry and unstruck by lightning.

The storm returned at 4am to glorious effect. I was snug in my bedroom, but the bay window afforded me a nice view of the lightning.

## Tunc Movens CVI

Just for you, Leigh, I've included a staple in the top LH corner of this page. My political rant this issue is on p6, where I lament the movement of a Shadow Minister who was well informed, understood the need for action on climate change, and also a very nice fellow who paid attention to environment groups working on climate such as FoE, BZE and others.

I don't have JB's old Roneo 750 any more; it went when we cleared out old stuff from my parents' house as a prelude to selling it.

## New Improved Rhubarb 87

**Diane:** RYCToMe: Yes, that's a New Holland Honeyeater on the cover, snapped atop one of our compost bins. *Adler* and *Adventureman* were comic books, printed on paper (though I do have some electronic comics, too); I have the Chris Fowler mysteries in both electronic and print form. They're lots of fun, each focussing on some interesting aspects of the location's history.

**John:** I hope you got a good deal for the iPhone 11 Pro; the prices seem a bit high, even for the awesome camera features.

Reznor is right: having Johnny Cash do an awesome version of one of your songs is an honour indeed.



That's it for this issue of *Sparrowgrass & battle-twigs*, a modest fanzine produced primarily for members of ANZAPA by Roman Orszanski of Adelaide  
email: [websmith@internode.on.net](mailto:websmith@internode.on.net)

Last page typed 1:12pm Fri 5 Feb