

*Back downunder we go, for another installment of my DUFF report ...*

# The EASTER BILBY

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*I can still hear it.*

Whenever the air is clear and crisp and cool, or whenever I look out at a cityscape, bright and beautiful in the distance, I can still hear it – a thousand voice sharp in the crisp, clear, cool autumn Australian air ...

*“Row, row, row – on down the river – we will row, row, row – on down the river –“*

And in memory’s eye I am still gazing over the wide green oval field to Melbourne, beyond, through the gap in the stadium walls.

And there were other sounds, just as memorable. “WOT’S THE DIFF’RENCE YA DENSE ARAB?!?” I can still hear *that*, too.

The morning after Swancon’s crepes orgy, Rosy and I returned to the Perth airport. Edgily I eyed the grey grumpiness of the clouds. Fortunately we had another A330 to fly in – I have never seen a more comfortable plane – and I had another happy pill to soothe me during the four-hour lurch back to Melbourne. I *sort-of* remember the flight, a clumsy way of saying that it held its share of turbulent terrors, but what seems to stand out in memory is my reluctant awe at the beauty of the alien cloudscape, seen from above.

But there was one o’erwhelming virtue to the flight. At its conclusion, we were back in Melbourne, and Julia Hilton awaited us.

Long ago, before Nolacon II, Julia and her husband Craig visited New Orleans, and interviewed me for Australian radio. While they were there they gave me my first taste of Vegemite, the salty sandwich spread featured in the lyrics of “The Land Downunder”. (Rosy had tasted some on Hanging Rock, and agreed: it is *ghastly* stuff.)

Julia drove us into Toorak, their upscale Melbourne neighborhood – I remember pretty mansions on the road-side, and lots of shade from lots of trees. At their abode Julia took pride in displaying her garden, but I was mostly amazed by their bathroom – bigger than some apartments I’ve lived in and blessed with a nifty clear-glass shower stall.

After Craig returned from his practice, we scarfed a late supper of yummy omelettes and began my first comprehensive political talk of the trip. Craig lamented the mean-spiritedness of Australia’s current “bean-counter” government and expressed unease over the “huge footprint” America is leaving on the world. I took that comment in two ways. Culturally, I’d run into that worry during Swancon – the interest in Batman and *Smallville* – and was rather proud of it. Pop culture, after all, only reflects *what people like*. So *Baywatch* was for years the most popular television show on Earth? It’s only idiotic fun. America as a fantasy for the good life is something about which I could feel mildly proud and only mildly embarrassed. But of course Craig wasn’t talking about culture. Our bombs were falling on Baghdad even as we spoke. He was talking about Iraq.

Of that American footprint on the face of the world, I was neither mildly proud nor mildly embarrassed. Of that I was deathly ashamed. I could only protest to my intelligent and compassionate host what he knew already, that many, many Americans had no truck with W and his ego-stroking war, that his new and arrogant America was no America of mine, or theirs – as this friend of our country was very well aware.

Politics dealt with and done with, we retired to bed, a very comfortable futon in the Hiltons' computer room. The next morning, we loaded up their "Toorak tractor" – an SUV – and toodled off to one of the most magical places in Oz – Healesville.

In 2003 the Healesville Animal Sanctuary was completing its 70<sup>th</sup> year as one of the world's supreme zoos. It does its sanctuaring in one of the world's great locations, high in the Dandenong Mountains. We give our rivers and ranges Native American names; in Australia, the aborigines are so honored. Pretty vistas, in hills high but gentle, turf reminiscent to me of North Carolina but best described by Julia: "hobbit country."

On the way, the Hiltons told us of Australia's ongoing attempt to establish a new and nationalistic holiday symbol – the Easter Bilby.

Recall from your Australian history that the introduction of rabbits onto the continent brought along a devastating epidemic of myxomatosis, so bunnies are considered rather *declass*e downunder. Long has an effort been underway to establish an indigenous critter into Peter Cottontail's niche. The **bilby** has been chosen. Also known as the rabbit-eared bandicoot – as opposed, no doubt, to the *moose*-eared bandicoot – the bilby is a cute little marsupial; I could see why the Aussies wanted to anoint him. At the entrance to the sanctuary they handed out paper bilby masks.

And so in we went to the famous zoo. Healesville was a much fancier establishment than the zoo we'd gone to in Perth, but also more formal – no contact with the beasts allowed. But if I'd hungered for Australian fauna before, the Sanctuary answered my every wish. *Here*, anyway, I could feel like I was truly in an alien land.

Thousands of yards of walkways curl through Healesville, and at every step we found astounding creatures. *Brolgas* (grey storks with red heads – always loved redheads) – *red-tailed black cockatoos* – *larakeets* – *rosellas*, a.k.a. parrots – all flying free in the phenomenal Woodlands Bird Aviary. The *orange-bellied parrots* there were among the last 200 on Earth. They had *Apostle Birds*, and *Bronzewings*, and *Bush Thick-knees* (!) – and *anthornis melanuva*, the *karimako* ... a.k.a. *the bell bird*. Bad poetry has been written about the bell bird (see my Afterword). Their exquisite cry – *\*tink\** – is another Australian sound that resonates still within my brain.

The cute porcupine-like *echidna* we could almost discern amongst its camouflage of reeds and weeds, but the *quollas* and *gallahs* (their name synonymous downunder with "fool"). More familiar Aussie fauna was on hand – lazy koalas and a jittery *tasmanian devil*, ugly brute on the constant move in his spacious pen. All were amazing, but the prize for absolute wondrousness waited within its own special building. Darkened to mimic the night they move in, with walls of clear glass to reveal the pools they dive in, the abode of the *platypus* was a house of pure delight.

Surely the platypus is the cutest but most mind-boggling beast on Earth. An amazing amalgam of disparate parts. A bill like a duck. Claws like a panther, one poisonous. Birth by egg. Fur like a silver beaver – but, to my surprise, not the *size* of a beaver. The hyperactive tiny fur flying saucers swooping and diving through their shadowy aquatic lairs were no larger than squirrels. Just too cool. The Hiltons noted my rapture; when we left, they gave me a tiny pewter platypus as a souvenir.

We stopped for a boomerang demonstration, and as the aboriginal weapon corkscrewed through the ozone, learned that boomerangs come right- or left-handed and need grooves to fly. A way cool show of native birds of prey brought forth a *kestrel falcon*, hovering – a *black-breasted buzzard*, beating an egg with a rock (non-primates *do* use tools!) – and a huge *wedgetail eagle*, its wing frothing the air, catching a dead – I hope! – mouse tossed by its keeper. The eagle’s perch was right above our heads. Add a sensation to the Australian catalog – the wind from a wedgetail’s wings.

That was almost it for Healesville, but ... not ... quite. We did see kangaroos there, just as we had in Perth – only ... not ... quite as we had in Perth. For one thing, these were not the tame and pettable beasts we fed by hand at Caversham. These ‘roos were rather wilder, which is to say, less ... subdued. In fact, one randy dude had mothers covering their children’s eyes, and virgins fleeing. I gave him an immediate nickname: *Ron Jeremy*, after the flabby porn king and his trick of self- ... *engulfation*. Why did he do it? Because he *could*. I dare be no clearer than that.

“YEHHHHH!” smiled a cute female zoo worker. “That’s *very niice*, isn’t it?”



Up – up – *up* – along narrow mountain roads into the heart of the Dandenong Range. Julia was a splendid driver, but riding in the front passenger seat, on the *left*, on what I still felt was the *wrong* side of the road, made the twists and turns a bit more entertaining than usual. Our destination – gratefully reached – was on the crest of the hill, beautiful Orlinda, a tourist town *par excellence*.

Colorful cockatoos flew as freely o’erhead as do pigeons and robins, stateside. We found a gourmet restaurant called Pie in the Sky, and supped on delectabilities. Craig reports that I ate something called “a pie floater” and Rosy had “a mild Thai curried chicken pie that was more creamy than she expected” – I remember only leaving, with a happy tummy. Sated, we explored, photoing Craig in a candy store (see the pic in *Chall* no. 18) and touring Orlinda’s many antiques shoppes. Rosy was in hog heaven. A display of go-juss ornate Venetian carnivale masks caught my eye. They could have come straight out of Mardi Gras. A bittersweet thought. I was loving Australia so much that I almost hated being reminded of home.



So we’d seen kangaroos and cockatoos – a different sort of animal than we’d hung with on Friday evening: *fannus australianus*.

The Melbourne Science Fiction Club had been sending me entertaining fanzines for years. From it had issued *Ethel the Aardvark*, an excellent clubzines chockablock with articles by Danny Heap, photos and caricatures of the membership, and an inspiring sense of a fun group. Tall, bearded Alan Stewart, who had met our plane on first arrival in Australia, won a Hugo nomination at the last Aussiecon for *Thyme*, the world’s strangest newszine. It was an attractive, enjoyable, and informative publication – but its latest issues were dated *more than a year in the past*. Alan’s explained this practice to me more than once, but you’ll have to ask him why. Anyway, for as long as I’d been reading those fine publications, I’d daydreamed about attending a MSFC meeting, and the Friday after Swancon, by God, we did it.

Alas that we didn’t get to MSFC that Friday, because the week after Natcon is, we were told, one of exhaustion, and nothing much happens. Ne’ertheless it was fun to see the facility and meet folks I only knew from photos.

The facility is St. David’s Uniting Church Hall in Melbourne’s West Brunswick. Its kitchen was staffed this p.m. by a familiar, and utterly cute, face from *Ethel* – Emilly McLeay. In gratitude for the

issue of *Challenger* I pressed upon her, she sold me a Coke and a candy bar. I seem to recall a unique shape to the Coca-Cola can.

Alan gleefully took me up to the MSFC fanzine archives, located up a *steep* flight of stairs in an old movie projection booth. The archives filled box after box after boxes upon boxes. I despaired. How could my Melbourne friends and readers find *Challengers* to peruse in such a quantity? The answer was, in the MSFC library, which their website claims is “one of the largest fan-owned collections of Science Fiction material in the world.” I could believe it. The little room, walled with shelving 7-8 feet high, holds over 8,000 books – and stacks of fanzines (including hallelujah, *Challenger*). The titles on hand – and available for loan to members – included books familiar and obscure, from Gernsbackian antiquity to brand new. Rosy was delighted – she found four British editions of her daddy Joe Green’s novels. (Check out her photo with “Jocko” Allen, in *Chall* no. 18.)

Rose-Marie had worried that we’d be expected to make a presentation at MSFC, but it was more than enough to say hey to *Ethel*-familiar faces (like Paul Ewins, the club president) and hail friends from Natcon, like Heap and DUFF alum Justin Ackroyd. The meeting evolved into a party, we hobnobbed for far too short a while, we adjourned.



It occurs to me how much this account resembles Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, in that it begins in the middle, continues through the beginning, goes back to the middle, and ends ... where it ends.

Sunday morning marked – haha, I made a funny – a unique moment of our DUFF trip: Rosy and I went separate ways. She couldn’t, in good conscience, demand that I go shopping with her and Julia, just as I couldn’t, in good conscience, drag her to a *footy* game.

Like most Americans I first encountered Australian Rules Football, when I made the switch to cable TV and discovered ESPN. Does it mark – haha – me as a cultural Nazi to say that I could not believe my eyes? The carnage I observed seemed to bear some resemblance to rugby – a more popular sport in Sydney, I learned – and some resemblance to World Cup soccer, but there ended all resemblance to civilization. Imagine six foot five inch galloots in tee shirts and shorts slamming into each other like freight trains at open throttle – in pursuit of a ball that looks something like our football (only with rounder tips), kicked, dribbled, punched across an enormous field to the accompaniment of head butts, body slams, karate kicks and every other sort of legal violence – in hopes that two guys in white shorts, suit jackets and fedoras will wave a flag or point both hands into space and the crowd will go bananas. It makes American football – “gridiron” to those downunder – seem rank sissified, with its pads and helmets and *rules* ...