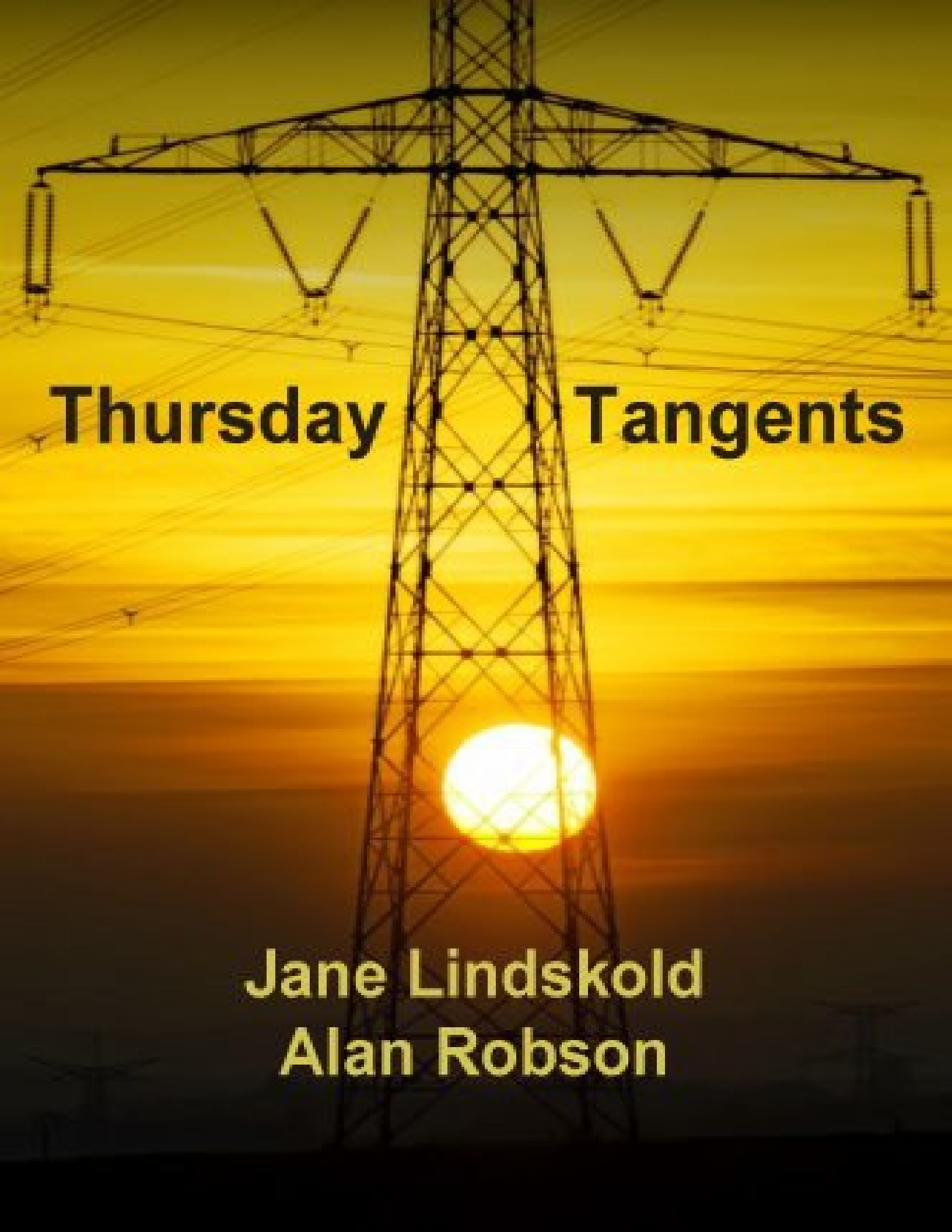
Thursday Tangents
Jane Lindskold
Alan Robson

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by

Jane Lindskold and Alan Robson

For Jim and Robin
and for the
Norman ConQuest
where it all began

Acknowledgements

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Introduction by Alan

"Brown!"

Jane's eyes were sparkling with mischief. It was 1995 and she and Roger Zelazny were guests at ConQuest, a science fiction convention being held in Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand.

"Why is it called ConQuest?" Jane asked me.

"Because the chairman is a man called Norman," I told her.

Jane began to edge away from me. "I see," she said, checking out the location of the nearest door...

Roger was answering questions from his audience. Someone had just asked him what New Mexico was like.

"I've lived there so long that I don't see it any more," he said. "You should really ask Jane."

"Brown," said Jane. "The houses are brown. The landscape is brown. People think it's fashionable to live on dirt roads. At Christmas they decorate with brown paper bags filled with dirt and candles. Everything is brown."

Jane had a lot of fun in New Zealand. We dragged her out of bed at some ungodly hour to show her the Southern Cross. We took her on a boat trip across Auckland harbour and showed her volcanic islands that didn't appear on the early maps because they didn't actually exist when the first Europeans to arrive in this part of the world mapped the area.

"Green!" she said, appreciatively.

We all missed her terribly when she went home to New Mexico, back to the brown.

The years passed and those there interwebby tubes came into both our lives. I discovered that Jane had a web site, and that she had married a man called Jim. I sent her an email congratulating her on her marriage and asking if she remembered me and her visit to New Zealand.

I got a very warm reply, bubbling over with enthusiasm about the wonderful time she'd had at the bottom of the world. We began exchanging regular emails. We told each other about the cats that ruled our lives and about the general minutiae of living. We investigated the strange differences between growing up American and growing up British. We both had lots of fun.

Jane began to write a blog. One day, to my surprise, she asked me if I'd like to collaborate with her on a series of dialogues that would formalise some of the things we'd spent so much time chatting about in our emails. I was thrilled and flattered to be asked. And so the Thursday Tangents were born, so called because we published one every Thursday and we raced off on all sorts of tangents whenever they beckoned. Jane and I are nothing if not imaginative with our titles, you know. And like Topsy, the Tangents just grew...

Writing the tangents with Jane imposed interesting pressures on me. For many years I'd been writing a monthly column about this, that and the other which I published on my web site and in various New Zealand small press magazines. But a month is a rather leisurely span of time. Now, suddenly, I had to produce something every week. My wife Robin was quite amazed at the way I coped with the deadline.

"Once a month is a hobby," she said. "Once a week means you are a real writer."

That was a big ego boost. So I am very grateful to Jane for impressing me (in the Naval sense -- not in the sense of ducklings, baby dragons, or with her own importance) into writing these columns. I really have learned a lot from the experience.

Not long after Jane went back home to New Mexico, I visited Perth in Western Australia, where Robin's family lives. Thanks to Jane, I knew immediately how to describe what I was seeing.

"Brown!"

Introduction by Jane

April 1995. It was probably not the best time for my first trip outside of the United States. Roger Zelazny - with whom I was living at the time - had cancer. Late that winter, he'd begun losing ground, although neither of us were aware that this time there would be no rally. He'd been invited to be Guest of Honor at a convention in New Zealand and very much wanted to go. He'd been to New Zealand once before and liked it a great deal. He thought I would, too.

I mention this to put the trip in context... I mean, who wouldn't like visiting one of the most beautiful countries on earth in early autumn when the roses were in full blush? But I'd never been out of the country. I'd never been away from home for that long. And my traveling companion was in less than robust health.

Nonetheless, New Zealand won me completely over. Most especially, the New Zealand fans enchanted me. Although my first novel, *Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls*, had come out a few months before and my second novel, *Marks of Our Brothers*, was due out, I wasn't really there as an author. I was Roger's companion. Nonetheless, from the warmth of my welcome, you'd have thought I was the main event.

Without the New Zealand fans, I wouldn't have seen the Southern Cross. I wouldn't even have known to look for it. I wouldn't have heard all those little bits of local lore that make a place "real," not just a holiday destination. And I certainly wouldn't have gone home laden with gifts that included a handmade pendant featuring a New Zealand fern, a video tape of Maori myths and legends, and stacks of local publications.

Even when the convention was over, the fans kept the kindness coming. Various people took time off from their jobs to escort me, Roger, and Vonda McIntyre (the other guest of honor and a completely wonderful human being - and writer) to various places.

But Roger wasn't doing well. Eventually, he asked me if I'd mind going home early. We did, arriving home to the news that the courthouse in Oklahoma had been bombed - a sobering contrast to the warmth and friendship we'd met on the bottom of the world.

Somewhere after that convention, I went through the piles of publications we'd been given. I liked a lot of them, but I immediately gravitated to the pieces by someone named Alan Robson entitled *Trimmings from the Triffid's Beard.* I remembered Alan as one does a vibrant personality met in a crowd. However, I feel my real introduction was those columns.

When Roger died, I heard from some of the New Zealand fans. I believe Vonda actually printed and mailed some comments that had been sent to her via the web, since Roger and I didn't have internet access. Some time later, it was the web that brought me back in touch with Alan Robson. He was the one who got in touch, but I remembered him right off. The style in the e-mail was the same breezy, twistedly humorous one I'd come to know through his columns.

We started corresponding somewhat sporadically. Jim and I sweated with Alan and Robin through their cat Porgy's frightening illness. Somehow, Alan managed to convey the intensity of his concern for his pet without losing that sense of humor. ("Out comes the credit card...") When Alan and Robin got married, Alan sent pictures. His back was to the camera in several of them, but I've learned since that, like me, he's camera shy.

Somehow a sporadic correspondence became more regular. I found myself reading sections of Alan’s e-mails out loud to Jim. By then, I'd started writing my Wednesday Wandering blog. Often Alan and I would end up practically writing a second blog either in the comments or in separate e-mails. Many of these then expanded into elaborate cross-cultural explorations. And, one day, I decided to ask Alan if he wanted to collaborate with me on a new feature for my blog.

Thus the Thursday Tangents were born... I don't think either Alan or I thought we'd end up with so much to talk about, but somehow or other, we keep finding new things to explore. In case you wonder, the Tangents are really conversations. Often they start with me tossing a few questions to

Alan. He responds. This triggers more discussions. Sometimes we realize we've gone overboard and break entries into smaller installments. The only rule is that both of us need to have fun.

My husband, Jim, provides the photos - often searching for a way to illustrate a non-visual idea. An unsung member of the team is Paul Dellinger who proofs us, patiently preserving British spelling for Alan and American spelling for me.

As I write this, Alan and I have more or less finished discussing place names, but I have no doubt something else is going to occur to us and, on opposite sides of the planet, fingers will start flying.

Jumping Jumpers!

JANE: Hey, Alan. I'd always figured that the British and American editions of the Harry Potter novels were about the same. After all, we speak the same language.

A Jumper and A Book

Then I learned that – at least early on, before the novels were rushed out as fast as possible – an effort was make to "Americanize" some of the language so that young American readers wouldn't get confused.

That got me thinking about the often repeated statement: "England and America are two countries separated by the same language." (By the way, a version of this statement is usually attributed to Winston Churchill, but apparently he didn't originate it. The closest agreed upon source I could come up with was this phrasing, credited to George Bernard Shaw.)

One example of a change that was made is that in the American editions of the Harry Potter novels Mrs. Weasley makes "Weasley sweaters" for her family (and Harry, too). I understand that in the British edition these are "Weasley jumpers."

Here in the United States – at least as a form of attire, not a reference to a suicide or an athlete – a "jumper" is nothing like a sweater. I wore a jumper for years as a part of my school uniform. It's a sort of sleeveless dress that's worn over a long or short-sleeved blouse. According to the dictionary, the American "jumper" can also be worn over a sweater, which would be really confusing, if you were British.

I believe there's a form of baby clothing called a "jumper," too. It also is unrelated to a sweater.

So, are jumpers and sweaters really the same thing?

ALAN: Yes. A jumper is a knitted garment (sometimes called a woolly jumper). It's synonymous with "pullover." It is generally knitted by fond grandparents or aunties and is often too large so the child will "grow into it."

You can buy them in shops as well, of course. The sleeves are handy things for wiping snotty noses, much to the parents' displeasure since the garment generally has to be washed by hand.

There's a joke beloved of small children.

Q: I say, I say, I say. What do you get when you cross a kangaroo with a sheep?
A: A woolly jumper!

JANE (aside): I told Jim that joke and his answer was "A sweater with pockets." I think that's pretty good!

ALAN: Of course, jumpers are not restricted to young children. My wife, Robin, knitted me a jumper a few months ago. It's much too large (as traditionally it should be, though I doubt I will grow into it unless I eat far too much dinner) and I love it to bits because she knitted a cat into it. On the front is a cat's face, the body sprawls over my shoulder, and the tail hangs down the back.

Robin and I got to thinking about related words, like "cardigan" and "pullover." Do you have those there?

JANE: Yes, we do. A cardigan is a sweater that buttons up the front. A pullover is what the word implies, a garment you pull over your head.

How about "jersey"? Here a jersey is something sports players wear, but I think that in British English that's another word for "sweater."

ALAN: A jersey is a special kind of jumper. It's knitted with a special pattern that was commonly used

on the island of Jersey (one of the Channel Islands). Hence the name.

One of the other Channel Islands is called Guernsey and it, too, has a distinctive pattern for jumpers. I remember when I was a small child my grandmother would talk about both Jerseys and Guernseys, but I haven't heard the word Guernsey for years, so probably it's fallen out of use.

These days, I think, jersey and jumper are synonymous for all practical purposes.

JANE: Both of which are synonymous with "pullover." Got it!

I should warn you. I'm planning to re-read the Harry Potter novels one of these days. You may find more questions coming your way. In fact, I can already think of a couple. Or maybe you have a question for me?

ALAN: I do, actually. Something that's always stood out for me when I watch American movies is how what we call a "waistcoat" you call (I think, correct me if I'm wrong) a "vest." We use the word "vest" to refer to a sleeveless item worn next to the skin, underneath a shirt or blouse. I have absolutely no idea what you call that.

I always get very strange pictures in my head when an actor dressed up to the nines by putting on a vest….

JANE: I can answer that one and actually have a few funny (to me, anyhow) stories to tell. However, that will have to wait until another time.

The Lore of Underwear

JANE: Alan, last time you ended by asking about different American and British uses of the word "vest."

A Confusion of Words

To quote you: "We use the word ‘vest’ to refer to a sleeveless item worn next to the skin, underneath a shirt or blouse. I have absolutely no idea what you call that. I always get very strange pictures in my head when an actor dresses up to the nines by putting on a vest..."

Okay. Here’s a simple answer. What you folks call a "vest" we call an "undershirt." Logical and easy, right?

Except that until comparatively recently (as sartorial matters are judged), an "undershirt" was also called a "T-shirt." If you know anyone who is into medieval costuming, you’ll recognize the similarity to the standard "T-tunic" – a term that comes from the general shape of the garment.

Now, until the 1950's, only working men and bad boys (think James Dean in the movies) wore their undershirts as upper-shirts. Even workmen only did so when the job was a particularly grungy one.

Then, somewhere in there, the undershirt – T-shirt style – became an acceptable upper-shirt. These days, even a respectable grandmother like my mom will wear an attractive T-shirt as an outer garment. So a T-shirt is no longer an undershirt.

Got that? It gets worse. Not all "undershirts" are "T" styled. There are several sleeveless styles. One of these is what we call a "tank top" for reasons that escape me, since these shirts look nothing like armored personnel carriers or water towers.

Like T-shirts, "tank tops" can be worn as outerwear as well as underwear. However, there is a particular unadorned utilitarian version which, when worn by men, is called a "wife beater." This term makes my skin crawl, but it seems to be moving into common usage.

The other day I overheard two girls commenting on a group of men. "That one’s pretty cute," said Girl One. "The one in the blue tee?" asked Girl Two. "No, the one in the wife beater..."

Brr...

ALAN: Wife beater makes me shiver as well. We do have the term, but it isn’t in common use and I hope it never is. In the Antipodes, sleeveless garments like that are generally known as singlets and they are often the only upper body garment worn by farm labourers and the like as they work all day in the sun. Singlets are traditionally black, goodness knows why, and they leave interesting suntan shapes on the body when removed.

But if we are talking about underwear, there’s the whole pants/trousers thing. To me pants are underwear (underpants is also a commonly used word). But you seem to use the word to refer to the outer garments I call trousers.

So to me Superman wears his pants outside of his trousers. You probably think he wears his underwear outside his pants...

I think we both have the word "panties" (diminutive and possibly feminine, though the idea of language gender has largely vanished from English on both sides of the pond) to refer to underwear worn by women. Am I right in thinking that? Of course, women wear pants as well, and often do. I have no idea where one ends and the other begins.

Talking of underpants, in American novels I’ve often seen the phrase "Fruit of the Loom" and from

context it appears to refer to underwear, though I have no idea what it actually means. Is it a brand name? It always makes me think of Adam getting dressed for a hot date with Eve and wearing a bunch of grapes instead of a fig leaf. Sometimes I worry about what is going on inside my head…

JANE: I absolutely love the bit about Superman's attire. That's so bizarre as to edge into the philosophical.

Yep. Americans are more likely to say "pants" than "trousers." In my household, "jeans" are the usual bottomside attire, so neither Jim nor I are likely to use either word in routine conversation. It's much more likely to be something like "Please don't put my jeans in the dryer! They'll shrink."

Americans have come to use the word "panties" for female undergarments. I love your insight that this is one of the rare cases of gendered language in modern English. Certainly no man I know – even those who prefer slim cut briefs to boxers or loose "jockey shorts" – would refer to their undergarments as "panties."

I don't remember "panties" being commonly used when I was a kid, although that might just have been my family.

Fruit of the Loom is indeed a brand name, with "fruit" meaning "product," not anything else. Really. You're not too far off with the image of Adam wearing grapes instead of a fig leaf. A few years back, there was an ad campaign that featured a group of men each dressed up as one of the fruit in the Fruit of the Loom logo. For some reason, these became incredibly popular. There were stickers and little figurines. I must admit, the appeal escaped me.

But then American culture is remarkably inside out where such matters are concerned. Women's underwear advertisements are one step short of porn; men's underwear is advertised by laughing and dancing fruit.

If you asked the average American who was more prudish, British or Americans, I think the answer would be British. However, from what I've seen on some of the BBC programming that has reached here, there's one area where you make us seem positively Victorian: Bathroom Humor.

Can you address this without offending the sensibilities of our American readers? Or is that simply impossible?

ALAN: Well, there you go, falling straight into another linguistic trap. To me it would be toilet humour rather than bathroom humour. The British visit the bathroom in order to have a bath. Should they have other purposes in mind, they will use other words. We have quite an extensive vocabulary in this area. We also find bodies and bodily functions endlessly amusing in themselves. It's required by law, you know. The stories I could tell…

Next time, perhaps?

Bathroom? Rest Room? Toilet?

JANE: Well, Alan, last time you promised the secrets of British "toilet humour." With some (very American) trepidation, I shall invite you to begin.

Humorous Toilet

ALAN: As I said last time, the British find toilets irresistibly hilarious because, when you think about it, what goes on in there is so bizarre that you can't help but laugh at it. A cartoon I saw once (probably in *Punch*) expresses it very well:

A middle aged man is standing quite still, waist deep in the sea. All around him people are splashing and cavorting and generally having a fine time in the water. The man has a secret smile on his face, and the caption reads "Psychiatrist has a silent pee."

JANE: My dad would have loved that. One of his often repeated jokes was that he was from the state of "Illinois" in which the "s" was silent, like the "p" in swimming. I remember when I figured that one out. I was torn between fascination and horror. But I stray from our fascinating linguistic discussion. Pray, continue.

ALAN: So a toilet is simply a toilet, or possibly a loo. And that isn't a euphemism. Loo is a contraction of the phrase *Gardy Loo*, which, in bygone centuries, was shouted loudly to warn passers by that the contents of the family chamber pot were about to be thrown out of the window, so watch out below. The phrase derives from the French *Gardez L'eau!* which means "Beware of the water."

Passers by with slow reflexes would have a moist and fragrant day. Colleagues would keep their distance. And this, too, is hilarious. Slapstick humour at its best.

JANE: This also reminds me of my dad... One of the most common American euphemisms for toilet is "john." Guess what my dad's first name was? Guess what euphemism for "toilet" we emphatically did not use in our household?

And that makes me wonder... Do girls named "Louise" or boys named "Louie" every get called "Lou"? Do they come in for teasing?

ALAN: Probably not. I've never met a boy called Louie so I can't comment about that. However I do know several girls called Louise. And they are invariably called Louise. We tend not to abbreviate names in the same way that you do – there are some exceptions of course; "Bill" instead of "William", for example. But by and large, names are rarely abbreviated.

I've met several Americans who insist on calling me "Al" which absolutely infuriates me because I think of myself as Alan. I simply can't identify with this stranger called Al.

Perhaps this view that things (and people) are what they are rather than being something else (as would be implied by using an abbreviation or a euphemism) might be a contributing factor in our basic openness about things like bodies and bodily functions both in real life and in fiction. Call a spade a spade, as the proverb has it.

Television is perhaps a good example. In the 1960s the BBC was broadcasting a dramatization of the life of Casanova. Colour television was just starting to become available, and my father immediately went out and bought a set because he wanted to see the naked ladies in colour rather than in black and white. Everybody thought this was a perfectly reasonable thing for him to do; it raised no eyebrows at all. But even today, totally naked ladies seldom if ever seem to show up on American prime time television. In the 1960s it would have been utterly unthinkable. However, that is starting to get into cultural rather than linguistic differences and we are wandering off topic.

JANE: I rarely watch television, so I can't answer to how many naked ladies are telecast in this enlightened Twenty-First century.

Do the British still call the toilet the W.C. or has that fallen out of date? Any other euphemisms we Americans should learn to ease our visits to that green and pleasant land?

ALAN: W.C. (or Water Closet) is perhaps a bit old fashioned these days. If you used it you would certainly be understood, but you'd be regarded as rather quaint.

In the nineteenth century navy, the phrase "the head" was used. Also "the seat of ease" (lovely phrase!). The latter has vanished from the language, but the former is still in use in the navy and is sometimes used by civilians for pretentious effect in casual conversation. But really "Loo" is probably as close as we come to a euphemism.

Although having said that, when I was a child, my mother would often talk about "spending a penny". This is an English euphemism used almost exclusively by women. It dates from the days (now long gone) when women's public toilets had coin operated locks on them. The entry fee, of course, was a penny. Men's public toilets have always been free (can you say gender discrimination?).

The potential for comedy with toilet euphemisms is large. I once saw a stage play in which an Australian excused himself by declaring that he was going off to "...point Percy at the porcelain." This got an enormous laugh from the audience, of course.

Robin, who is Australian, assures me that this is not a genuine expression (even though Australians are noted for their colourful use of language) so I presume the scriptwriters made it up just for the sake of the joke.

JANE: There's been an odd development here in the naming of "restrooms" (that is "toilets") in restaurants. The usual way for rest rooms to be labeled is "Men's" and "Women's" or, sometimes, in places with pretensions to classy service, "Gentlemen's" and "Ladies."

However, if you go to a Spanish restaurant, you may find the restroom labeled "Hombre" and "Mujer". In a German restaurant, you might be directed to rooms for "Mensch" or "Frau". In many of these places, there is a little drawing, often with appropriate ethic costuming, just in case you can't figure out the words.

Not to be left out, theme restaurants put in their own variations. A place with a Western theme might have signs for "Cowboys" and "Cowgirls." I heard a story about restroom signs at a dog show that were labeled "Pointers" and "Setters." So maybe we Americans aren't as deficient in toilet humor as you imagine.

Or, maybe, thinking about it, maybe we are...

Anyhow, I've often thought future anthropologists might draw the conclusion that these places only served one sub-section of the population, rather than being open to the general public.

ALAN: Let's change the subject. You mentioned restaurants. What did you have for dinner today? Or was it high tea, or possibly supper? Food in all its aspects is bizarrely different in both our languages. I remember you once asked me about mince. It occurs to me now that I only gave you half an answer...

Ground and Grilled

Inna Bun

JANE: Alan, in one of your *wot I red on my hols* columns, you mentioned shopping for "mince." I admit, that one got me. I thought you might mean what I grew up calling "ground beef." When I went to college in New York, my New Yorker classmates called the same item "chop-meat," so there seemed to be a similarity.

However, I'm not sure. I mean, if "mince" is "ground beef," then what do you call "ground pork" or "ground turkey"?

ALAN: Well actually we follow much the same logic that you do. We have "chicken mince" and "pork mince" etc. etc. Mince is really just all the butcher's offcuts and general junk all ground (minced) together. It's very cheap and is sometimes regarded as the kind of thing you eat when you can't afford anything better.

I think that is actually a rather snobbish attitude. As with anything else, when you cook it properly and take care with it, it can be the basis of tasty and nutritious meals. I have some mince in the fridge even as we speak and tomorrow I will be making a cottage pie with it. In case you don't know what a cottage pie is (no, only really desperate people make it with actual cottages!), it's essentially a stew of mince and vegetables and whatever herbs and spices you care to throw in, with a topping of mashed potato, sprinkled with cheese and baked in the oven.

Of course the name varies depending on the main ingredient. It's only a cottage pie when you make it with beef. If you make it with lamb mince it's a Shepherd's Pie. I once cooked the dish with venison mince and I called it Sherwood Forest Pie on the grounds that Robin Hood went poaching for deer in Sherwood Forest.

JANE: "Actual cottages..." Ouch!

Oddly enough, the only times I've been served "Shepherd's Pie" here in the United States, the dish has been made with beef. That doesn't make any sense, since shepherds are "sheep-herders" by definition. However, except for lamb chops and leg of lamb in the spring (often imported from New Zealand), lamb isn't that popular in mainstream American cooking. I think it's becoming more common because of the increased popularity of "ethnic" cuisines that use it.

When I was in New Zealand, I was fascinated by how many sheep there were - even in what looked like city parks to my untutored eye.

Another word we use for "ground beef" is "hamburger" - clearly because "burgers" are commonly made with ground beef. Do you folks have a different name for that particular food item?

ALAN: Well we certainly don't call mince "hamburger", though we certainly make and eat hamburgers ("burger" is an acceptable abbreviation). However since our mince is generally made of rubbish, I think you'd need much better quality mince (sometimes called prime beef mince) if you wanted to make hamburgers with it.

Why aren't hamburgers made out of ham? That's always puzzled me.

JANE: I believe the origin comes from "Hamburger steak," which, like the similar "Salisbury steak" is a patty made with ground beef. However, hamburgers are usually grilled and served on a bun, whereas "Salisbury steak" is usually baked and served with gravy over potatoes.

Since on this side of the world we're moving into summer, hamburgers are sizzling on many a grill, side by side with what we call "hotdogs" or "Frankfurters."

What do you all cook and serve (as Terry Pratchett's character Dibbler would put it) "inna bun"?

ALAN: Yes, sausages sizzle on our grills as well.

However if you are ever given the opportunity to eat a New Zealand sausage, I suggest you refuse. NZ sausages are uniformly disgusting. The only ones worth eating are imported from overseas. In England, sausages are sometimes called "bangers" (probably because that's what happens to your tummy after you eat one, and now we're back to toilet humour again. Sorry!). Australians sometimes refer to sausages as "snarlers," I have no idea why.

The English seem to like picturesque names for food. Ask anyone who has ever eaten school food about "spotted dick" and they will wax nostalgic for hours. Spotted dick is a steamed suet pudding spotted with currents or raisins. It is also known as dead fly pudding. Rumour has it that unscrupulous cooks use real flies...

The English have a thing about steamed suet. If you read Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels you will often find Jack Aubrey rhapsodizing over boiled babies.

JANE: Actually, I think that's "drowned babies," but I'm too lazy to go check. I've had both "spotted dick" (the spots are currents, I think) and "drowned baby." Neither excited me. Maybe the English give weird names to spice up an otherwise bland cuisine.

ALAN: Probably true – though these days the British national dish is curry and you can't get less bland than that! But we don't have a monopoly on weird names. You do it too. What on earth are "grits"? To me, grit is simply pulverized rock which I would imagine is somewhat abrasive on the teeth. And what about "biscuits"? Confusingly, we use the word biscuit to refer to what you would call a cookie...

I found a recipe for biscuits in Larry McMurtry's novel *Lonesome Dove* which seemed to suggest that I would call it a "scone" (pronounced "skonn"). However, I would eat a scone with butter and jam. You seem to have it with gravy (yuck!). Sometimes with "white gravy." What's that?

And then there's a rutabaga. I can't even begin to imagine what that might be.

JANE: Grits are ground grain, usually wheat or corn, boiled into a sort of porridge. Sometimes the porridge is allowed to cool and firm up, then is sliced and fried. Think polenta, sort of...

Grits are more common in southern cooking and, like barbecue, there isn't one way to prepare them.

I've had scones. My friend and fellow author, Pati Nagle, makes phenomenal cream scones. (Come to Bubonicon sometime. She usually makes mini-scones for the Author's Tea).

Biscuits are more like scones than they are like cookies, but they're usually not sweet. A buttermilk biscuit served with butter is a wonderful accompaniment to a meal. A good biscuit is lighter than a scone, but like a good scone is flaky, rather than "bready" like a roll or slice of bread. Yum!

White gravy... Well, I'm not a huge fan of that. I find it bland and salty, at best a little peppery.

Someone else will have to tell you how it's made. I don't make gravy if I can help it. When Jim and I got together, I informed him that if he wanted gravy, he was going to have to make it, because I didn't like gravy enough to add the hassle. He did, of course, and now makes a very fine turkey gravy, good enough that I've been converted.

ALAN: You still haven’t told me what a rutabaga is. I truly don’t know!

JANE: A rutabaga is a root vegetable something like a turnip. Despite the fact that another word for this vegetable is "Swedish turnip" or "Swede," I actually know very little about them. I may be one-eighth Swedish, but very little in the way of Swedish cooking has entered into my diet.

Again, as with gravy, maybe someone else can tell you more.

All of this has made me hungry! I'm going to go get something to eat.

ALAN: It just occurred to me, I haven’t told the other half of the mince story. I also wanted to ask you some questions about American pies.

JANE: Definitely, next time... Now I really need to eat!

Pie Chart

JANE: Okay, Alan. This time I have a snack and a mug of coffee close at hand. Tell me the other half of the mince story.

Apple Pie. No Cheddar

ALAN: At Christmas (and at no other time of the year) the British eat mince pies. Mince pies, of course, are filled with mincemeat (all one word). However mincemeat is actually minced up fruit and consequently mince pies are really fruit pies which contain no meat whatsoever. Is that odd, or is that odd?

I ate my first mince pie at around the age of five – my mother offered me one on Christmas Day. I took a huge bite and was horrified to find fruit instead of the meat I was expecting. I spat it out and I have never eaten a mince pie again from that day to this. Childhood traumas scar you for life.

It seems to me, again from reading American novels, that in America pies are invariably fruit pies which are often eaten cold (I have read of pies being placed on the windowsill to cool.) However in England (and New Zealand and Australia), pies are almost invariably filled with meat of some description and they are eaten hot as a main course. Do you have meat pies in America?

A proper steak and kidney pie is just gorgeous...

JANE: Actually, Alan, maybe you just didn't like fruit mince. Mincemeat pie is an American holiday tradition as well, and I've never found one I liked.

"Cold" for American fruit pies is not quite accurate. In fact, some fruit pies are usually served hot or at least warm. The problem is that when hot a good fruit pie can't really be sliced. The crust breaks and the filling slides. So you let the pie cool enough for the filling to firm up.

Possibly the most American of all desserts is apple pie. This is usually served at least warm, often with vanilla ice cream or a slice of sharp cheddar cheese. My dad's birthday was in July and he often requested apple pie rather than cake. To a child, this was a great disappointment. To me as an adult... I'd probably make the same choice.

So, how do you serve a fruit pie, anyhow?

ALAN: Fruit pies are generally served hot and are often slathered with custard although your very civilized habit of serving them with ice cream (or cream) is now common. The contrast between the hot fruit and the cold ice cream is quite a taste sensation. The thought of serving a fruit pie with cheese makes me shudder!

JANE: Going back to your question as to whether we have meat pies in America, the answer is "yes," but for some reason they're often called "pot pies." Chicken pot pie is fairly common, as, I believe, is beef. As I mentioned last time, I have a friend who makes Shepherd's Pie.

ALAN: Ah! But Shepherd's Pie isn't a pie because it has potato on top rather than pastry. We just CALL it a pie. Fish Pie isn't a pie either, for similar reasons.

JANE: I have never had steak and kidney pie, however. I must admit, even the most loving descriptions of it sound sort of... well, odd. I mean, in one novel a character rhapsodizes about the proper "urine" tang of the kidney. That just sounds nasty.

What is the appeal of steak and... uh, pee?

ALAN: I've never really found kidneys to taste of pee, any more than tripe tastes of other unsavoury intestinal excretions. I absolutely love offal in all its forms. When I was at primary school (age about seven) we had a "thank you" book in which we were supposed to write thanks to God for all the good things in life. Most of the children in the class wrote predictable wimpy stuff. I wrote: Thank you God for liver and bacon and mashed potato and all the lovely gravy that goes with it.

I was never allowed to live that down.

But I have to confess I'm not fond of tripe. It's a texture thing – tripe squirms in the mouth like dead snakes smeared with soap.

One of the problems this discussion has highlighted is that very confusing area where we each use the same word, but we mean utterly different things by it. Remember biscuits, for example?

We even seem to have different meanings for the various courses that make up a meal. What you call an entree, we call a main course. We use the word entree to refer to the appetizer or starter, the first course that precedes the main course. Again it derives from the French; entree (sorry, I can't do the accent over the 'e') meaning entrance -- the entree is the entrance to the meal, i.e. the first course, the beginning. Since you call the main course the entree, what (in my terms) do you call the entree?

JANE: Appetizer. I'm guessing the logic behind this is that the "entree" is the actual start of the meal. The appetizer just gets your appetite going. In America, appetizers are often eaten before the meal, not as part of it: chips and dip, a veggie platter, or fancy little canapes.

If the dinner is very formal, this first course served at the table would be the soup. This would be followed by the salad, then the entree. The entree will usually be served with some form of starch (potatoes, rice, or pasta) and, in some households, bread or rolls as well. There might even be a hot vegetable as well. Dessert may follow immediately, or after a break.

ALAN: Weird! We serve salad with the main course -- it's considered to be a semi-vegetable (or sometimes a substitute for vegetables) and is often presented on the same plate as the meat.

JANE: I have an old cookbook, given to my mother when she and my dad got married. (Although published a few years earlier, in 1956). This cookbook was meant for a bride who was inexperienced in planning meals and so includes menus.

Reading over them, I'm fascinated both by how few vegetables are included and how heavily starches are emphasized. That certainly was not the case in my childhood! My parents could go into rhapsodies over fresh summer produce - probably one of the reasons I'm such a devoted gardener.

Heavy on starch and meat, with what vegetables that are included cooked to an unrecognizable mush is the reputation of English cooking here in America. Would you say that's a fair assessment?

ALAN: Certainly once upon a time it was. My mother would set the vegetables boiling round about the time she put the roast in the oven. When they were served there was almost no taste or texture to them, but that didn't matter because there was lots of meat, gravy and potato to add flavour.

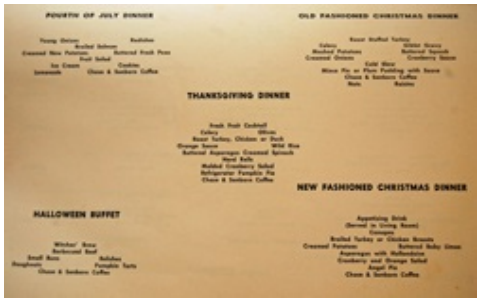
It wasn't until I left home and started cooking for myself that I discovered that vegetables actually tasted of something and that cabbage was green and best served crispy rather than white, limp and soggy.

These days English cooking is much more cosmopolitan than once it was and food is much more varied and much better prepared. People of my parents' generation still have a tendancy to consider it to be nasty foreign muck and they stick firmly to their meat and two (boiled to death) veg. But that attitude is dying out.

JANE: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner... Also known as the "Three Square Meals." My impression is that the British are like Hobbits and have a lot more formal mealtimes. Maybe that’s something to look into for next time.

Three Squares

JANE: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were what I learned to call the three standard meals of the day. Later, I learned some people called "dinner" "supper" instead, but it still seemed to be the same meal.



Late 1950's Menus

Are the meals the same in English terminology? Are Hobbit Terms like "elevenses" really used?

ALAN: Most definitely! The English are very hobbit-like in this respect. Elevenses (also known as morning tea) is a very, very important part of everybody's day. The tea break is sacrosanct and woe betide any employer who tries to prevent his employees from having one! Riots ensue...

JANE: And that brings us to "Tea." I must admit, it took me longer than it should have for me to figure out that "Tea" was a meal, not just a drink. I was always confused about how addicted characters in English novels seemed to be to drinking tea.

ALAN: But they are completely addicted to drinking tea so it is easy to confuse the two things. The very first thing that happens when you visit someone is that they offer you a cup of tea. And the longer you stay, the more tea is offered and drunk.

A cup of tea is the first response to a crisis and is also the first thing you drink when the crisis is over

JANE: My breakthrough came when I read Agatha Christie's marvelous novel *At Bertram's Hotel* in which the elaborate nature of the "Tea" being served at this old-fashioned hotel awakens Miss Jane Marple's suspicions.

Pray, enlighten us Americans all about Tea, High Tea, and its associates

ALAN: Ah! Now here is a very pretty can of worms...

The whole thing about what refreshments are taken, the time of day at which they are taken, the exact nature of the food and drink that is served and the name that is given to the meal is very much intertwined with the complexities of the English class system. This is a system of Byzantine subtlety which is not well understood even by its own practitioners. Nevertheless it is hugely influential upon social behaviour even today.

Breakfast and morning tea are common to everybody. But the later the day becomes, the more complicated things get.

Around about the middle of the day, the lower classes eat dinner and the upper classes take lunch. Middle class people may have either lunch or dinner at this time, depending upon their aspirations and pretensions.

In the mid-afternoon there is afternoon tea. This is the afternoon equivalent of morning tea and in more leisurely households it may well be served with cakes and scones and maybe even sandwiches as a light snack.

In working class households, high tea would be the main meal marking the end of the working day and would generally take place in the early evening when the man of the household got home from work. However, when I was a child, my parents would serve me high tea as my main meal of the evening and have their own main meal later, after I had gone to bed. So they didn't have high tea, they just had tea because it was eaten later in the evening (high tea specifically takes place in the early evening). That same meal (tea) would be called dinner by the upper class (because it was a main meal eaten later in the day), but my working class parents couldn't call it dinner because that's what they called lunch, and so the word was no longer available to describe their evening meal.

And then, even later in the day, just before they went to bed, my parents would have supper. This was usually a light snack, perhaps cheese and biscuits and, of course, a cup of tea. I didn't have supper,

because I went to bed after my high tea. Though if my high tea had consisted of just a light snack rather than being a main meal, it would of course have been called supper instead of being called high tea because it was a snack eaten just before bed time. This was likely to occur if my dinner (lunch) had been a main meal. I would then be given supper instead of high tea on the grounds that two main meals a day might be a bit much.

Upper class people would also probably indulge in supper as well, but being upper class theirs would almost certainly be a more elaborate preparation though I'm not sure exactly what because I've never moved in those circles.

JANE: Wow! That boggles the mind.

Now that I think about it, we do have one other meal term: brunch. Brunch is "breakfast/ lunch." Unlike your morning tea and tea and high tea, it isn't a meal, but rather a substitute for two meals. American breakfasts can be rather light. Some typical breakfasts are cereal with milk, or a hard boiled egg and toast, or a bagel and cream cheese, or bacon and eggs. Ideally, for good nutrition, these would be served with fruit or juice, but that doesn't happen all the time. By the time noon rolls around, you're going to want lunch.

Brunch, by contrast, is always a more substantial meal. There will be some sort of egg dish, a ham or sausage or bacon - sometimes more than one of these, fruit, toast, a sweet roll or Danish.

I've been to restaurant brunches that are so lavish that not only would they substitute for breakfast and lunch, but for dinner, too.

Do you folks have brunch?

ALAN: Yes, brunch is now quite common, especially at the weekend because of course we tend to sleep late on Saturday and Sunday as a special treat. I suspect that we actually stole the idea of brunch from you and then filed the serial numbers off so that nobody could tell.

There was a time when English breakfasts were themselves very substantial – bacon, fried egg, fried bread, fried sausages, fried mushrooms, fried black pudding, fried tomato with baked beans for added fibre – it's known as the "Full English" and you can feel your arteries hardening as you look at it. But these days our breakfasts also tend towards the lighter side, just like yours.

By the way, I absolutely love the way Americans cook bacon – crisp and crunchy, it's just magnificent. That's the way bacon ought to be cooked. My mother used to cook it that way – she would grill it rather than fry it which I think was the secret of her success. New Zealand bacon, by contrast, is revolting. No matter what you do to it, it will not go crispy; it will burn itself black without ever going crispy. What a breakthrough in food technology! Consequently the Antipodean equivalent of the Full English is really rather sad. It sits on the plate grey and limp and oozing goo. Ick!

JANE: Now that I think about it, my siblings and I came up with "linner" as the term for a meal that substituted for lunch and dinner, but that never caught on. I guess Americans are willing to skip breakfast, but not both lunch and dinner.

I think we'd better leave food for a while or I'm going to start eating my way through these conversations. I have an idea. Why don't we switch over to something low calorie, like dialects?

ALAN: Aye, lass. Gradely!

Dialectful

JANE: The novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett had a great influence on my life. One of the main elements in the novel is Mary's desire to learn the Yorkshire dialect which is spoken by the people in the area where she is now living.

So, Alan, as our resident Yorkshireman, what did you think about the use of your native tongue?

ALAN: The Yorkshire aspects in the novel were very authentic and added a lot to the atmosphere of the story.

One curious thing that struck me - not very far into the book, Mrs. Medlock uses the word "marred" and then there is an authorial intrusion which says "Marred is a Yorkshire word which means spoiled and pettish". I would have used the word "mardy" (or possibly "marredy" -- I honestly don't know how to spell it) instead of "marred." However I'm quite happy to accept "marred." Words do vary across Yorkshire; even villages right next door to each other will often have slightly different vocabularies. When I walk down an alleyway I'm never sure if I'm walking down a ginnel, a snicket, or a twitchell...

Land Of Many Dialects

One thing I *did* object to. Throughout the book, the word "the" is rendered as "th'". That's just plain wrong. A much more accurate rendering would be the simple "t'" I've just jumped to a random page where I see the dialogue:

"One o' th' kitchen gardens."

Just try saying that out loud. One of two things will happen. Either you will elide the "th" into "the" or you will say "th" and then pause before you say "kitchen". Both are wrong and both give far too much emphasis to "th". A much better depiction of how it would sound is:

"One o' t' kitchen gardens."

Even that is not quite right, but it's much closer. The "o'" and the "t'" would actually be slurred together and the "t'" would be barely pronounced. The "t'" is actually more of an absence than a presence. It's not pronounced with the tip of the tongue (which gives an unwanted emphasis). It's more at the back of the throat, and you slide over it rather than say it out loud. It's easy to demonstrate, but very hard to describe...

JANE: From watching episodes of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, I have the impression that different dialects go with different British stereotypes. So, what is the stereotype attached to Yorkshire?

ALAN: Gruff and self-contained but with a heart of gold and a certain dry, mocking wit. How can you tell if a Yorkshireman is teasing you? His lips are moving...

There's also a myth that Yorkshire people are just like the Scots, but without the generosity! We have a saying: "If tha' does owt for nowt, do it for thysen." And while there's a superficial truth to that, there's obviously much more to it.

Do you have dialects in America? You obviously have regional accents, but a dialect is more than just an accent. It has its own vocabulary and grammar. For example, did you know that when I were nobbut a lad I'd oft go laikin' taws on't causey?

JANE: You lost me somewhere around "laikin." Do I get a translation?

ALAN: Nobbut a lad -- nothing but a child (i.e. just a child). Oft go laikin' - often go playing (the verb to laik means to play). Taws - marbles (I vaguely recall Tom Sawyer using this word in Mark Twain's novel. Was Mark Twain a secret Yorkshireman?). On't causey - literally on the causeway. A causeway is a

footpath (you'd probably call it a sidewalk). So, when I was just a little boy I'd often play marbles on the footpath. Easy, eh?

JANE: Easy when you translate it, maybe...

By the way, I think we distinguish between "footpaths" or simply "paths" as unpaved, while "sidewalks" are paved. Both, however, are established walkways, so if you cut across a field, even if you leave a trail, this is not a "path." It only becomes a "path" when lots of people use it.

As for dialects... No. I don't think we Americans have them to the same extent. (By the way, if a reader wants to disagree, I'd welcome comments!)

That doesn't mean that strong regional accents don't lead to different speech patterns. I grew up in Washington, D.C., but summered in an area in southern Maryland called Shady Side. The two areas were within about an hour's drive of each other, but in Shady Side there was a distinct local accent. "Baltimore, Maryland," for example, came out much closer to "Balmer, Merlin."

Another marked difference was that in Shady Side "y'all" functioned neatly as a second person plural, a part of speech I think English - British or American - is sorely lacking. However, when I went to college in the Bronx, New York, the more common second person plural was "youse" or "youse guys."

ALAN: I agree that we need a second person plural and don't have a convenient one. I've noticed "youse" occasionally in Antipodean speech patterns, but I don't think British English (or Yorkshire!) has one. On the other hand, Yorkshire does often use the second person singular thee/thou.

JANE: Another regional difference in speech patterns is speed. A friend of mine loved to tell tales of how when, after college, she moved from New York to Tennessee, she had trouble making herself understood - and understanding. She simply spoke - and "heard" - too quickly, so that even though the words were the same, she couldn't understand them.

Here in New Mexico, there's a lot of Spanish mixed into daily use, but I don't think locals think about it much. You just pick it up. After a while if someone suggests you might want to go take a seat on the *banco* near the *horno*, you just do so. It would actually sound weird if someone said "go take a seat on the built-in bench near the traditional-style oven."

So, no dialects, but, who knows? If the United States had been settled as long as England without the "leveling" influence of mass communications, we might have developed distinct dialects as well.

ALAN: English seems to absorb loan words very well. There are a lot of Maori loan words in New Zealand English. I think pretty much everyone would understand you if you said something like "I'm visiting the whanau this weekend". Whanau (pronounced far-now) means extended family. Words like this are in common everyday use - you see them in newspapers and hear them on the radio and TV and nobody thinks there's anything odd about it at all.

JANE: Loan words would be another fascinating thing to talk about. I'd love to hear more about what words the New Zealanders have adopted from their Maori neighbors - and even more, why this has happened. After all, why not just say "extended family"? Let's take that up next time.

Borrowing Trouble

Maori War Club

JANE: Alan, last week you brought up the question of loan words from other languages that enter English, specifically, Maori words into the local New Zealand version of English. Can you give us a few interesting ones?

ALAN: Well perhaps the most obvious is that Maori refer to non-Maori people as *pakeha*, and many non-Maori New Zealanders like me think of themselves as *pakeha*, even though the word is actually a little insulting in its original context.

JANE: That's interesting. I believe something similar has happened here in the Southwest with the Navajo term *Belacani*. I'd heard that it was a somewhat derogatory term, but two Navajos working with Jim say it's merely descriptive. It means something like "people who turn red in the sun, but are pale in the shade." I can see why early translators would have figured this was derogatory.

Although it hasn't entered into general use, it seems to have lost some of its sting. There's a trading post in Santa Fe called "Belacani."

ALAN: That sounds like a very similar concept. Isn't it fascinating that two utterly different cultures have a word for that idea? The original meaning of *pakeha* is specifically a white person of European descent – it appears to be a neologism coined by the Maori to describe those weird pale-skinned people who turned up out of the blue one day.

JANE: Many years ago, for an anthology called *Visions of Liberty*, I wrote a short story set in New Zealand called *Pakeha*, in which the word and the qualities it has come to stand for are central to the tale.

So, tell me some other Maori words that have entered New Zealand English.

ALAN: There are lots of other examples. We are all of us, of course, *Tangata Whenua*, which translates as "the people of the land". Obviously, that is the Maori description of their own place in the world as first settlers, but those of us who feel a strong sense of identity with the place where we live could equally well describe ourselves that way.

There are times when our Government makes unpopular decisions and naturally we all want to protest and make our feelings known. Most countries would have a protest march and a demonstration, but we have a *hikoi*.

A meeting held to discuss important matters is a *hui*.

We all like to eat, and food (*kai*) is an important part of everyone's life. The sea (*moana*) surrounds us and provides a rich harvest of *kai moana*. Barbecues are very popular, of course, but so are *hangi* where the food is wrapped in leaves (these days they use aluminium foil) and buried in a pit lined with hot stones and just left to itself for hours and hours. In the evening, you dig the food up and have a feast.

JANE: Here we go with food again... I love seafood. Go on...

ALAN: But don't confuse a *hangi* with a *hongi*. The latter is a greeting where you touch foreheads and noses with another person in an encounter. It serves a similar purpose to a handshake and is often used together with a handshake on formal occasions, particularly when taking part in a *powhiri*; a Maori welcoming ceremony which has become very much part of our culture. Visiting dignitaries are often greeted with a *powhiri* when they arrive in the country. I was once honoured with a *powhiri*. I found it to be a hugely emotional experience, very touching.

JANE: Not that I don't think you're worthy, but was there a special occasion for your *powhiri*?

ALAN: Well, yes and no. My parents-in-law were visiting from Australia and we took them on a tour of the South Island. We visited a place that offered "A Genuine Maori Experience". It was obviously geared very much towards tourists, but nevertheless it was a perfectly genuine reflection of Maori protocols.

A young lady called Tina who was dressed in traditional costume and who had the proper facial *moku* (tattoo) introduced herself to us and welcomed us.

"You," she explained, "are visitors to our land. But before you can be properly welcomed, we must know who your chief is. Which one of you is the chief?"

Every eyeball in the audience clicked into place and stared at me.

"Are you the chief?" asked Tina.

"Yes," I said, "I suppose I am."

"And is the beautiful woman beside you your queen?"

"Indeed she is."

And so I became a chief for a day and Robin became a queen.

Tina led us off into the forest, explaining points of interest to us along the way. Suddenly an enormous tattooed Maori warrior jumped out of the bush and confronted us. Eyes popping, tongue sticking out, he waved his spear and roared a challenge. He placed a small, leafed branch on the ground and retreated. I picked it up and held it, thus indicating that I was coming in peace.

I was astonished at the overwhelming emotion of the moment, the sense of taking part in a truly foreign and yet at the same time oddly familiar ritual. There was a feeling of spiritual rightness about the moment. I felt very strongly the deep cultural heritage with which I was now involved. It was all extremely moving,

Later, as we left, I planted the small leafed branch that I had been presented with in the soil. It seemed wrong to take the branch away with me. It belonged here in the forest. But I couldn't bring myself to simply discard it either. Probably it won't take root, but nevertheless planting it seemed like the right sort of gesture to make.

JANE: That's all very interesting, but are these really loan words, or are they just Maori words that you have learned? To me there is a big difference. I know a Spanish word for "watermelon" is *sandia* - and so do most locals, since the mountains that border Albuquerque to the east are called the "Sandias." However, I have never been offered a slice of *sandia* anywhere. Therefore, to me, it is not a "loan word."

However, burrito, chalupa, quesadilla have all become loan words. They are used by preference, even when American marketers have tried to introduce terms like "wrap" for burrito.

ALAN: Good point! Let me think about that and I'll discuss it with you next week.

Have I got a Word For You!

ALAN: Last time you asked me if the words I was using were really loan words or were they just Maori words that I'd learned. In other words, I suppose, when does a word truly become part of the language?

New Zealand and Earrings

One of the words I used last time was *hui* - an important meeting. By a strange coincidence, one of the items on the television news tonight was a report on a *hui* that had taken place that day. And the word *hui* was used without any translation or qualification. It was just assumed that everyone knew what it meant. So I think we can safely say that it really has become part of the everyday vocabulary.

Other words are perhaps a little more suspect, and while you would certainly be understood if you used them, I doubt that you would use them often, if at all. I drink too much beer and eat too much food and so I have a *puku* (a belly). Men with a *puku* are often *Kaumatua* (respected people, usually elderly). They tend to have a *puku* because, being tribal elders, their lifestyle tends towards the sedentary. So a *puku* is a mark of authority and influence. Such people have much *mana* – which is to say prestige, authority, charisma and great spiritual power.

JANE: "Mana" - as in the term that is now commonly used to mean "magical energy"? I never realized it had a Maori root. That's fascinating.

ALAN: The word "taboo" also has a Maori root - their word for the same concept is *tapu*.

JANE: Since I live in New Mexico, I am casually familiar with a great number of Spanish words. Some are simply substitutions or equivalents for English , such as using *avenida* rather than "avenue," but some do reflect things or ideas that aren't common in American culture.

One of these came up in an article I wrote back in December of 2010 when I talked about coming of age rituals. This is the *quinceanera* (tilde over the second "n" for you purists), which is celebrated on a girl's fifteenth birthday. I've often wished the secular "Anglo" culture in which I live had something similar.

At the risk of getting too serious, do you think the Maori loan words serve a cultural need for those outside of Maori culture?

ALAN: I'm not sure it works that way. James Nicoll, a Canadian SF reviewer once said, "The problem with defending the purity of the English language is that English is about as pure as a cribhouse whore. We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary."

In other words, English speakers seem to absorb words from the languages that surround them without even thinking about it. It's just something that we do.

Though as with your example of *quinceanera*, one very good reason for borrowing a word is because we don't have an adequate word for the concept it describes.

Consequently when my cat died earlier this year, we held a *tangi* for him. Essentially the word means to weep, or lament but it is now usually used to mean a funeral celebration which, while being a sad occasion of course, is also an opportunity to celebrate the life and achievements of the individual being mourned. Speeches (*korero*), both formal and informal, are given. I wrote an article celebrating Porgy's life rather than making a speech, but nevertheless I felt that it was part of his *tangi*.

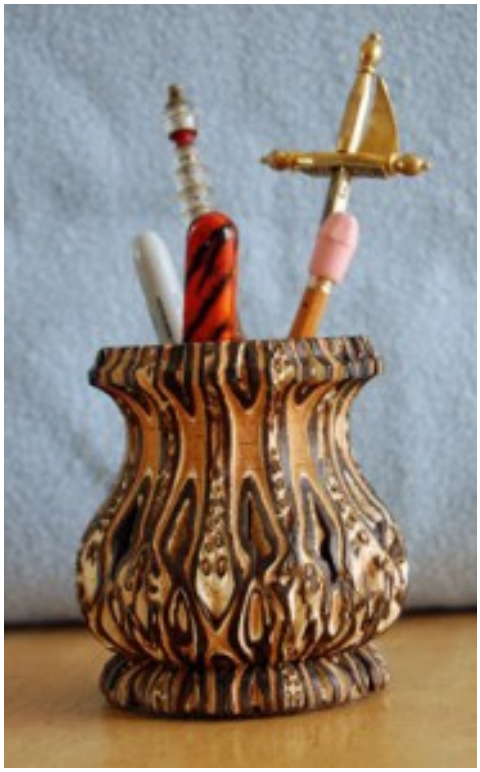
JANE: Porgy was a good cat. His courage in facing illness certainly made him worthy of a *tangi*.

Now that I think about it, while food and custom are places where loan words enter a language, the

arts are another. I'd enjoy discussing that next time.

Conversing on Art

JANE: Alan, art is a place where a I see a lot of loan words here in New Mexico. Our State Fair has three or four different art shows. Through them, I've become familiar with the difference between *bultos* and *santos*. Both are New Mexico Spanish religious art. A *santo* is a flat panel elaborately painted and often with a carved border. A *bulto* is a three dimensional sculpture. Both use traditional iconography associated with different saints. The artists who make these are called *santaros* and are highly revered.



Ponga Pencil-Holder

ALAN: Absolutely; art is a very strong cultural influence. Maori have a tradition of tattooing (*moku*) that goes back many hundreds of years. The designs are formal and meaningful and often sacred. The current fashion for tattooing has seen an upsurge of Maori-influenced tattoo art.

JANE: When I was in New Zealand, the gift shops were full of Maori art. In fact, I still use the pencil holder I bought then. I believe it was carved from some sort of giant reed, and the striping is the natural coloration of the wood.

ALAN: Yes - it's called *ponga*, and the striping effect is really very attractive. You can also get jewelry (and weapons!) carved from native jade (greenstone; the Maori word is *pounamu*). Native woods, mainly kauri and rimu, also lend themselves to carving and they have a beautiful finish. Again, traditional, often sacred, Maori representations have had a considerable effect on contemporary carving.

JANE: It's good to hear that Maori art has been allowed to evolve into contemporary carving as well. There's something sad about a formerly living traditional form become nothing but tourist junk.

Here in New Mexico, the traditional arts are also alive and evolving. At the State Fair there were a couple of paintings after the manner of *santos*, but using superhero style as well. Without reading the title of the painting, I could tell Jim what three saints (Michael the Archangel, St. Frances, and Saint James) were depicted just from the symbols assigned to each superhero. I found it a fascinating blending of the modern and the traditional.

ALAN: The Maori influence is also seen in areas other than the visual arts. My wife Robin sings in a *kapa haka* group. If you wanted to be completely traditional about it, a *kapa haka* choir would sing only Maori songs. But these days, while traditional songs are still a large part of their repertoire, they also sing many other songs as well, but in a Maori style of course. This involves choral singing accompanied by traditional dance movements and, depending on the song, a solo chant on the backbeat rising above the choral accompaniment. The effect is eerie and dramatic. I love *kapa haka*; it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Robin is Australian, but that doesn't matter. Her group has a Chinese lady and several *pakeha* ladies without a trace of Maori ancestry between them. I was chatting once with one of the actual Maori members of the group and I told him that when I watched the performances I liked to play the game of "spot the Maori". He laughed.

One reason that Robin loves singing with the group is because of the Maori songs. Many Maori words begin with the letters "wh" which is pronounced "f". And so a perfectly legitimate word like *whakenuia* (no – I don't know what it means) comes out sounding really rude. Robin claims that Maori is the only language that allows her to shout the f-word at the top of her voice without giving offence.

JANE: Excuse me... I've got to swallow a giggle.

Sometimes the cross cultural loans here in the U.S. get incredibly complicated. The squash blossom

necklace is my favorite example of this. As a gardener, I was always puzzled why these were called "squash blossom" necklaces, because the "blossoms" looked nothing like those of the squash.

Then, at a museum, I learned the explanation. When the Spanish taught silver-smithing to the Indians, they wanted the Indians to execute designs that would sell in the European market. Therefore, the Indians were taught to make a design the Spanish had adopted from Moorish invaders - a pomegranate.

So we have American Indians making for the Spanish market a Moorish design...

ALAN: That's fascinating. However, I thought I read somewhere that the American "Indians" prefer to be called "Native Americans," since, after all, they have nothing to do with India.

JANE: Ah... Actually, they have more to do with India than you might imagine...

Let me answer your question first. Here in New Mexico, "Indians" rather than "Native Americans" is preferred. Even better is to know what the person's tribal affiliation and use that - something that can become amazingly complicated given the amount of inter-marriage between tribes.

ALAN: Tribal affiliations are very important here as well. Maori define themselves in relation to their *whanau* (extended family), *hapu* (a clan, or larger kinship group) and *iwi* (tribe).

JANE: And now for the tie between American Indians and India... There's a reason that the patterns on early Navajo rugs look like something that might come out of India... Once again, the market - in this case, the American market, rather than the Spanish - found it easier to sell such patterns and the trading posts encouraged the native weavers to manufacture such. Over time, the art has evolved, but the influence remains.

ALAN: Ah! So Columbus was more correct than he realised...

JANE: That’s true! I’m sure Cristobal Columbo would be very happy to know he had found India after all.

Mysteries of Measurement

Measuring Systems

JANE: Alan, the other day, after you asked me what a "brownie" was and I sent you my recipe, I realized that you might not be able to use it because the measuring systems we employ are quite different. Then I realized I had no idea what you would use as equivalent measurements for teaspoons or tablespoons or the like.

ALAN: Actually it didn't bother me - partly because I grew up using imperial measurements in England and partly because I'm notorious for not measuring ingredients when I cook. I tend to keep the proportions of things roughly right but that's about as far as it goes. People have learned to stop asking me for recipes:

"How much liquid should I use?"

"Twice as much as you have rice."

"So how much rice should I use?"

"Half as much as you have liquid."

It's too frustrating!

JANE: I could have possibly done my part to get revenge for your friends by confusing you.

Over here, an informal way of measuring butter or margarine in a recipe is to say so many "sticks," since a pound of butter is usually divided into quarter pound "sticks" which also happen to measure to half a cup or eight tablespoons. It's very convenient - indispensable, really - if you're used to it.

So we have sticks but not stones for measuring weight - I believe you folks used to use "stone" as a measurement of weight. Utterly confusing for an American.

What is a "stone," anyhow? Are they used anymore? And is it part of what you're calling "imperial measurements"? Do you prefer one type to another?

ALAN: Sixteen ounces is a pound and fourteen pounds is a stone. It's actually a very convenient unit - someone who weighs 140 pounds (your phrasing) would weigh 10 stones (my phrasing). I'm much happier with small numbers than with large ones. I have no idea if the British still use stones since they have gone metric now, and I haven't lived there for about thirty years, but certainly it was common usage for all of my (English) life.

I studied science at school and university and the sciences work exclusively in metric, so I'm actually quite happy to work with either metric or imperial units, but (perversely) I cannot convert the one to the other. England was just starting to go metric when I left and New Zealand had been metric for donkey's years when I arrived. So I've been happily immersed in both systems all of my life. But even under the metric system some things never change.

Centuries of dedicated research have proved that the pint glass is the ideal size for drinking beer. Smaller quantities leave the drinker unsatisfied and larger glasses are too heavy to lift. But a pint is perfect. Imagine my horror when I discovered that an American pint is roughly 20% smaller by volume than a British pint. If I drank beer in American pints I would die of dehydration. Not enough liquid...

JANE: Yes! I recall Jim expressing delight about how he discovered the English pint when he visited England.

The American tendency to skimp carries over to non-alcoholic liquid measurements as well. When I was a kid, most drinkables came in pints, quarts, and half-gallons. Then - in what we were told was the beginning of a transition to international standards - instead of getting a half-gallon of soda or milk, we were expected to settle for 2 liters, which is a smaller amount. And somehow, gee-whiz, the price stayed the same.

And the overall transition to "international standards" never happened.

Jim, by the way, is very accustomed to making conversions between metric and "imperial" (although we just call this "real") measuring systems, since archeology made the switch many years ago. He's rarely happier than when he can find a good tape measure in meters.

I need to deal with metrics in my collaborations with David Weber, since the Honorverse uses metrics. I'm okay with the larger measurements, but somehow describing someone's height in centimeters seems all wrong. I'm not sure most of my readers will have any idea what height anyone is, either.

Another area where Jim is more sophisticated than I am is British currency. He's a coin collector, so has the basics down. I, however, spent a troubled childhood trying to figure out why people in England paid for things by weight for big items (pounds), but in "real money" that is, pennies, for little purchases. And I fear I never got crowns, half-crowns, shillings or the rest of them straight.

It made reading any story where money was important completely confusing.

ALAN: Ah yes! LSD - or pounds (livres), shillings (solidus) and pence (denarius). British currency was always a conspiracy to confuse foreigners and it succeeded brilliantly. I was very sorry to lose it. After all, how can you possibly tell the time using the twenty-four hour clock if you don't understand pre-decimal British currency?

JANE: Huh?

ALAN: Simple! 1500 hours is 15d (fifteen pennies) which is one shilling and three pence (1/3d - one and three). Disregard the shillings and consider the 3d as three o'clock. Try doing that with dollars and cents!

JANE: I'm still hopelessly lost. Try again. And don't forget to explain why you use pounds, which, as far as I'm concerned, is a measurement of weight!

ALAN: The pound (currency) was originally defined as being equal in value to the weight of one pound of silver. There were 12 pennies in a shilling and 20 shillings in a pound. Hence 240 pennies in a pound. A crown is 5 shillings (60 pennies), but they were special coins minted only to celebrate special occasions - as a child I had a coronation crown, and another that was minted when Winston Churchill died. Half a crown is therefore two shillings and sixpence (2/6d which is 30 pennies). And that's why 15d is three o'clock in the afternoon. See?

JANE: Not really, but I'll take your word for it. Thanks for trying!

Two On Tea

American Versions

JANE: Well, Alan, in a few weeks I'll be helping host the Author's Tea at our local convention, Bubonicon. To clarify, this is not a Tea for the authors, but rather a Tea hosted by some of the authors.

In addition to teas contributed by a local tea room, we provide a massive spread, including sweets, savories, and an assortment of fresh fruit and cheese. Moreover, in many cases, the authors themselves do the baking.

Thinking I might vary my usual offerings, I pulled out an English cookbook I was given some years ago. I immediately got stumped. I hope you could help me figure out some of the ingredients.

ALAN: I'll do my best - but I tend to be much more of a consumer than a producer in this area.

JANE: Okay. Here's the first. A recipe for Saffron Buns calls for "strong flour." Any idea what that is?

ALAN: Ah! As it happens I do know the answer to this. Strong flour is specially designed to induce anaphylactic shock in people who are gluten intolerant. It is milled from unbleached wheat and tends to have a brownish colour. It has a hugely high gluten content and is mainly used for baking brown bread.

JANE: But isn't that the same as whole wheat flour? I figured that the "wholemeal" flour mentioned in a couple of recipes fit into the puzzle there. I wonder what the equivalent of "strong flour" is here. Maybe some of the bakers in our readership can help.

ALAN: Now I'm lost. I have no idea whether or not strong flour and whole wheat flour are the same thing. This is definitely one for the readers.

JANE: All right, here's a new one. The same recipe calls for either currants or sultanas. I have baked with currants, but not with sultanas - in fact, I'm not even sure what a sultana is.

Let’s see... My dictionary gives a variety of definitions. Since I'm betting the recipe doesn't want me to include "a female member of a sultan's family" or an exotic bird, I'm guessing what's indicated is a raisin made from a pale golden grape.

Any idea which would be better? (Currants or sultanas, not birds or female sultans, that is.)

ALAN: I've always considered raisins, currants and sultanas to be equivalent. They are all essentially just dried grapes of various kinds. Currants are black and wrinkled. Sultanas and raisins are lighter brown, less wrinkled and much sweeter. This is true for both fruit and female sultans, though it is less true of birds. On the other hand, the older the female sultan, the darker and more wrinkled she tends to become...

JANE: I'm going to quibble here. Currants are a fruit that grows on a bush. You can eat them fresh, but mostly they are sold dried. In both forms, they are called "currants."

However, raisins start their lives as grapes. So, apparently, do sultanas.

ALAN: Ah! We've found another linguistic difference; quite a subtle one this time. Your statement about currants puzzled me so much that I actually had to go and look it up on them there interweb thingies. What I found astonished me.

According to Wikipedia, in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the word "raisin" is reserved for the dried large dark grape, with "sultana" being a dried large white grape, and "currant" being a dried small Black Corinth grape. Wikipedia insists that Americans (alone in the English speaking world) call these last "Zante currants." It even has a photograph of a packet of Sun-Maid Natural California Zante Currants to prove it.

As far as currants being a fruit that grow on a bush, I'd call those "blackcurrants" or "redcurrants," but

never just currants. Also I don't recall ever seeing dried blackcurrants, only fresh ones. Perhaps we have another cultural divide here?

JANE: We must. For one, I'm about as American as you get, and I've never heard of a "Zante" currant. For another, a popular landscaping shrub here is the golden currant (*Bibes aurcum*). There is also the wax currant (*Bibes cereum*). I'm sure there are other varieties. So currants are not merely another word for "grape."

As an aside... Prunes start their lives as plums. However, after decades of being associated with old people who have "bowel" difficulties, the American market has decided to make an effort to re-market prunes as "dried plums."

Now it's your turn...

ALAN: Prunes! No such euphemisms as "dried plums" here. We call a prune a bloody shovel. Oh no, that's spades...

I have a lovely recipe for pork, cooked with apples, prunes and sage. I make it regularly; Robin and I are both very fond of it and the cats enjoy the off-cuts from the raw pork.

JANE: Sounds wonderful!

ALAN: Have you considered providing a Devonshire Cream Tea?

Nowadays you seem to be able to get pale approximations of the real thing almost everywhere you go, but in my youth it was available only in Cornwall and Devon, in the deep southwest of England.

We used to spend our annual summer holidays down there and every year we would gorge ourselves. The cream (clotted, or clouted cream) was thick and heavy, often with a slight yellow tinge because it was so full of fat - full of goodness, as my mother used to say. We would spread jam on freshly baked scones, smear thick dollops of cream on top and stuff our faces. It is a hideously unhealthy meal but truly blissful.

Can you get proper clotted cream in America? A lot of the settlers in Australia (and to a lesser extent New Zealand) came from the south-west of England and so cream teas are quite common over here.

JANE: Whoa! Slow down.... Before I tell you whether or not we can consider a Devonshire Cream Tea, I need to ask, is the only difference the inclusion of clotted cream?

ALAN: Yes - it's just scones and jam with clotted cream. And pots of tea, of course. You simply can't have Tea without tea.

JANE: Sounds lovely, but I doubt we could manage a cream tea for Bubonicon.

I do believe you can get clotted cream, but whether or not you would consider it "proper" I can't say. That's the problem with words - they only go so far.

One of my fondest eating memories of my long-ago trip to New Zealand was the morning that I decided to eat "light" and took a selection of fruit and yogurt from the hotel buffet, rather than the meat and egg-oriented meals I'd been eating. The yogurt was, by far, the best I've ever had - creamy, rich, and incredibly indulgent. If I'd known about it, I would have skipped all the bacon and other stuff and just eaten that.

ALAN: Now I'm puzzled again. Isn't that what yoghurt is always like? What does yoghurt mean to you?

JANE: Uh, oh... I see we're heading off on another tangent. Let's save yogurt for another time... And you're not off the hook for tea items. I haven't even gotten to the confusion of sugars.

ALAN: We haven't even discussed tea itself...

JANE: Next time, definitely, next time.

Tea and Yog(h)urt

Tea. Anyone?

ALAN: Last week you noted how surprised you were by the thick, creamy consistency of yoghurt in New Zealand. I found this rather puzzling. I was also intrigued by the fact that we both had different spellings for the word - you say yogurt and I say yoghurt as the old song very nearly has it. So just what is American yogurt like?

JANE: Well, when I was growing up, yogurt had a strong "sour" note that I didn't like at all. Combined with a texture not as thick as custard (or what we would call "pudding"), which was too thin for me to find appealing, it was not on my list of favorite foods. This would probably be in the late seventies or early eighties. Even mixing in jam wasn't enough. I still didn't like the flavor.

Now, before I go further, I should note that this "sour" note was not the same as what you find in what we call "sour cream." I like sour cream - a lot. When my sister and I were young, in the summer, we'd sometimes walk to the country general store. If we had enough pocket money, we'd splurge on a little container of ice cream. However, a few times I got a container of sour cream instead and found it just as delightful.

So it wasn't "sour" alone. It was a particular sour that I didn't like in yogurt.

Commercial yogurt manufacturers now seem to have eliminated a lot of this sourness and to be adding something to thicken the consistency. In the last year or so, variations on yogurt - particularly Greek-style, which is marketed as having "twice the protein" of ordinary yogurt - are becoming more widely available. I've tried most of these, but none of them have lived up to my memories of that glorious New Zealand yogurt some sixteen years ago.

ALAN: Obviously the extra "h" adds to the texture. My cooking tends towards the low fat end of the spectrum and when recipes call for cream I always substitute low fat ("weight watchers") yoghurt. It works very well – even the very low fat yoghurts (less than 1% fat) are still thick, creamy and tasty.

Now, before I forget, there remains the fact, as I said last week, that you simply can't have Tea without tea.

JANE: That's absolutely true. For Bubonicon's Author's Tea, the teas are donated by the St. James Tea Room, a lovely establishment here in Albuquerque. I've been informed by those who have reason to know that St. James serves a credible English High Tea. I certainly have enjoyed my visits there

For the Author's Tea, Pati Nagle usually arranges for three different teas of varying types, one traditional black tea, one scented tea (black or green, usually), and a lighter tea which could be green, white, or rooibos.

Is such a variety typical if you're just having tea with Tea at home?

ALAN: These days yes, it certainly is. I've got half a dozen different kinds of tea in my cupboard and the supermarket shelves are positively packed with all manner of different teas and infusions. There's even a specialist shop in central Wellington which sells nothing but tea and there, of course, the range is just mind-bogglingly huge.

A couple of months ago Robin and I went to a presentation about tea. It was given by a man from Dilmah (a tea exporter based in Sri Lanka -- they have a huge presence in New Zealand and their teas are very popular here). It cost us $10 each to get in and we each left with about $30 worth of free samples that we are still drinking our way through, so I think we got a bargain.

It wasn't always so. When I was a child in England, there was only one kind of tea. There were quite a lot of different tea companies: Typhoo, P. G. Tips, and (my mother's preferred brand) Hornimans. But they were all interchangeable. Tea then was a strong, brown drink served with milk and sugar and drunk almost non-stop throughout the day. I had read about tea being served with lemon but I'd never

seen anyone drink it that way. I once asked my mother about it.

"Oh no," she said quite firmly. "That would never work. The lemon would curdle the milk."

JANE: Just as an aside, are you aware that the autobiography of the physicist Richard Feynman is titled *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman* because when he was in college and invited to his first formal reception he was asked if he wanted milk or lemon. Nervously, he responded "both" and the woman hosting the event said dryly, "Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman." This stung so much that he never really recovered, but with typical humor turned it around and made use of it.

ALAN: I've certainly read the book, but it was many years ago and I'd forgotten that particular incident. How nice to know that I have something in common with him – he's one of my heroes.

These days both Robin and I drink our tea without any milk or sugar at all. However I must admit that we are regarded as a little odd. Most people that I know still prepare their tea in the traditional way.

How do Americans drink their tea?

JANE: Well, as I've noted elsewhere, I'm mostly a coffee drinker. When I drink tea, I also tend to drink it black. One of the delights of working on the Author's Tea has been that I've learned certain teas are enhanced by just a touch of cream or a little sugar.

Based on observation, I'd say there's no dominant choice here.

However, although when it comes to hot drinks I'll choose coffee over tea, I do enjoy iced tea. When I make it, I brew the tea (it's brewed hot, then allowed to cool) with lots and lots of mint from my garden. This makes a very refreshing hot weather drink.

Touching on regionalisms, again, for many years you could tell how far south you were by whether you were asked if you wanted sweetened or unsweetened cold tea. At extremes you wouldn't be asked at all. In the north, cold (or iced) tea would arrive unsweetened and you would add your own sugar. In the south, it was the reverse. For a someone like me who prefers unsweet drinks, this was a shock and I quickly learned to ask for unsweetened tea.

ALAN: I'm with you on this. I really dislike sweet drinks; they taste quite horrible.

JANE: Has iced tea caught on in New Zealand - or England for that matter?

ALAN: No, not at all -- iced tea is a barbarism. I have noticed bottles and cans of iced tea sitting in the soft drink section of the supermarket. However I've never seen anybody except visiting Americans drink it. And nobody would ever dream of making iced tea from scratch at home.

JANE: All this talk about sweetening reminds me. I need to ask you about some of the odd sweeteners I've encountered in my British cookbooks. Maybe next week...

So Sweet!

Caster and Sugars

JANE: One thing I enjoy about my cookbook of British tea treats is how even the terms I can easily figure out seem more exotic. For example, the book calls for "vanilla essence." We call that vanilla extract which sounds very practical and rather scientific.

On the other hand, to be fair, "bicarbonate of soda" sounds very medicinal. Our usual term is "baking soda."

One recipe that is particularly evocative is for a fruit gingerbread. This must be a very sweet (rather than spicy) version because it calls for not only black treacle, but also golden syrup and caster sugar, whatever that might be. Oh! And that's only for the bread itself. The icing calls for icing sugar, more golden syrup, and crystallized ginger.

So, what is black treacle? Does treacle come in other colors?

ALAN: As it happens, I learned all about syrup and treacle as a by-product of my organic chemistry courses. Don't worry; I won't blind you with science.

JANE: Go ahead. I missed chemistry entirely. (Maybe someday I'll wander back to that story.) I need to be educated.

ALAN: "Syrup" is a general term for any gooey, viscous, highly concentrated sugar solution. You can make your own syrups by dissolving vast amounts of sugar in water and I believe there are recipes that call for exactly that. Treacle, on the other hand, is the name given to syrups that are specifically a by-product of the process of refining sugar.

Depending on exactly how you treat the raw sugar cane (or sugar beet) you can end up with a very black treacle (sometimes called molasses) or a much lighter and sweeter amber coloured treacle which, confusingly, is called golden syrup. Why is it called golden syrup rather than golden treacle? I don't know. Why is a raven like a writing desk? It's just the way that languages work.

JANE: Black treacle is molasses! Revelation!

All I remember about golden syrup is that Paddington Bear was addicted to it. When I was a kid, I thought it was canned honey, but I gather it's something else entirely.

ALAN: Golden syrup does look rather like clear honey and the taste is similar. You can generally substitute one for the other in recipes. And I suppose that's why Paddington Bear liked it so much. After all, if Winnie the Pooh liked honey...

JANE: And caster sugar? To me, "casters" are those little wheels your chair rolls around on. How do you get sugar from those?

ALAN: Oh that's easy. You sprinkle sugar on the floor and roll the furniture around on it so as to grind it very finely.

Actually, you don't - a "caster" is really a very fine sieve or sprinkler. Caster sugar is very, very, very fine-grained sugar that can pass easily through the caster, so that it can be sprinkled on the top of your baking. Sort of like a salt shaker, except it's for sugar and the holes are a lot smaller. My grandmother had a beautiful silver Georgian caster of which she was extremely fond. I imagine the gadget is called a caster because it lets you cast your sugar around with gay abandon. Because caster sugar is so fine grained, it also dissolves very quickly which comes in handy sometimes.

JANE: Interesting. My international dictionary didn't know about the sieve-type caster. I believe in this country very fine sugar is often called "bartender's sugar," probably because it has to be to properly dissolve in cold drinks.

Now, last time you mentioned you didn't much like sweet drinks. Is there any sweet that has won you over?

ALAN: No, not really. I seldom indulge in baked goods. But there's one exception to that, the thought of which always makes my mouth water and brings back many happy memories. Parkin is a moist, sticky cake made with oatmeal, ginger and treacle. In Yorkshire we eat it mainly on bonfire night - 5th November, Guy Fawkes:

Remember, remember the fifth of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot...

We used to call the celebration plot night. My childhood memories are full of cold, dark November evenings, with everybody well wrapped up in coats, scarves and gloves, our breath steaming in the chill. There's a huge bonfire burning and sparks are flying everywhere. Potatoes are baking in the hot ashes, trays of parkin are being passed round and the air is full of the smell of gunpowder from the fireworks...

Strangely, I don't recall eating parkin at any other time of the year. Only on plot night.

JANE: I'm the peculiar baker who can pass up sweets - although I like dark chocolate almost too much. However, Jim does like sweets, so I have an outlet for my desire to bake. I make him oatmeal cookies and banana bread on a regular basis. When I'm doing a local book signing, I usually make either brownies or cookies for those people who've been kind enough to show up.

Now, your earlier mention of molasses reminded me of something interesting about the production of sugar - it leads to the production of rum.

ALAN: Yes - all the sugar producing countries have a very profitable sideline in rum. In my part of the world, the Pacific Island nation of Fiji is a sugar producer and they make the most appalling rum you ever tasted. Every time I go there, I make sure to buy a bottle because it is so unbelievably cheap. But it really is quite undrinkable except when mixed with enough Coke to drown the taste. I dislike Coke as well (a singularly horrible drink) but the combination of the two revolting things turns out to be marinally less revolting than either of them separately. On a good day you might even call it palatable. It's probably something to do with chemistry again.

Robin and I have actually just spent a fortnight luxuriating in the sun on a Pacific island. Itwas our mid-winter holiday. Let me tell you all about it...

JANE: Let me run and refill my coffee mug...

A Fortnight’s Holiday

JANE: So, Alan, last time you promised to tell about your fortnight's winter holiday on a Pacific isle.

By the way, when I was first reading British fiction, the term "fortnight" really confused me. I could tell from context it was a measurement of time, but "fort" didn't fit in with any usual time measurements. It was a real revelation when I suddenly realized "Wait! Fort! Could that be short for ‘fourteen’"?

You folks certainly don't make matters easy for us Americans. I mean, you could have at least spelled it "fourtnight."

ALAN: That's right. It's simply a contraction of the phrase "fourteen nights" - i.e. two weeks. A few hundred years ago we also used to talk about a "sennight" which is a contraction of "seven nights" – i.e. a week. "Sennight" has long since disappeared from the language, probably because we've already got a perfectly good (and much shorter) word for it (a week).

But there is no other word for a fortnight, and it is such a useful word that we've kept it alive. For example, both Robin and I get paid once a fortnight. If there wasn't a word for it, we'd never receive our salary, and that would never do.

Winter in August

JANE: Indeed, it would not. When you mentioned your "winter" holiday when I was sweltering in ninety-five plus degree temperatures here, I did feel a momentary shock. Electronic communication makes it too easy to forget you're on the other side of the world.

How cold does it get in New Zealand in the winter, anyhow? I know that because I live in New Mexico, lots of people think "Southwest," "hot," "desert," and are shocked when I tell them we have four seasons, right up to and including snow.

ALAN: Winters here tend to be rather on the chilly side. The prevailing winds blow straight off the Antarctic ice and they don't stop until they hit New Zealand. Most winters see the South Island blanketed in snow. The North Island generally manages to avoid that (except for the ski fields on the mountain tops, of course). But this year the winter was particularly bitter and, for the first time in living memory, snow fell down to sea level in Wellington.

For a time it looked as if Robin and I were going to be cut off by the weather and wouldn't be able to get to our Pacific island paradise for our winter break. The snow was creating havoc with the flights in and out of Wellington. But we were lucky, and we managed to escape ahead of the storm front.

JANE: And I am definitely glad you did... Now, I've kept you from talking about your holiday long enough. What did you do on your Pacific idyll?

ALAN: The first thing we did was rejoice at the absence of snow. Then we put on shorts and tee-shirts and sun-block and sat by the swimming pool sipping beer. Occasionally we swam to cool ourselves off.

JANE: Other than avoiding the snow – of which I highly approve – that doesn't sound worth leaving home for. What about outside the resort?

ALAN: There was a beautiful beach lagoon just outside the hotel. There was deep blue, slightly angry water outside the reef. But inside the reef the lagoon was calm and green. I've never seen a reef enclosing a lagoon before, but it was just as I'd imagined it from reading *Coral Island* when I was a child.

The sea inside the reef was full of multi-coloured fish which were obviously quite accustomed to having portly pakehas splash around them. They swam and shoaled so thickly that you almost felt you could walk on a living carpet of fish.

JANE: I've never seen a "wild" live reef, although our local aquarium has a nice "tame" one. I'm always impressed when people can grow coral in captivity. What else did you see?

ALAN: We left the coast and wandered up the road a little. A signpost pointed up a dilapidated side track. "Prison," it said. "And Craft Centre."

We walked past the Kikau Hut Restaurant. 200 metres further on we came across another sign. "Kikau Hut Restaurant", it said. "200 metres back."

We walked further along the road until we came to a dilapidated, tumbledown shack. A huge sign hung from it: "Ministry Of Infrastructure and Planning."

I think Rarotonga must have been settled by surrealists.

JANE: Yes, Dali painting given reality... Go on!

ALAN: We took a trip on a four wheel drive jeep into the thick, jungly interior of the island. The jeep struggled up a steep incline and stopped on a plateau. We got a perfect view of "The Needle," a thin spire of rock that stands tall at the top of a mountain. Robin positioned me very carefully and took a photograph of me with The Needle growing out of the top of my head. It was a perfect partner to the photo she already had of me with a coconut palm growing out of my head.

JANE: Hmm... This sounds like the start of a new trend. Since Jim's the one in our family who wields the camera, I believe I will strongly suggest he not join in. I'm photo-shy enough as it is. I love coconuts, though. Did you eat any fresh ones?

ALAN: We did. We even learned how to husk a coconut. "You need a special tool," explained the teacher. "We call it a *ko* – in English, that translates to a sharp stick."

He stuck the stick in the ground, pointy side up. Then he rammed the coconut down on to it so that the point came right through the husk and out of the other side. He pulled the coconut off the stick, detaching the husk, turned it round and jammed it down again. He did that four times and then peeled the whole of the husk away from the nut. Then, with the blunt side of a machete, he cracked the nut in two. He passed around the lower half which was full of clear juice. We all took a sip. It was warm and sweet and very refreshing. He carved the flesh from the nut and passed that round as well. I found it rather tough and chewy and a bit tasteless. Robin had two helpings.

JANE: I'm with Robin on fresh coconut, although my absolute favorite is shredded coconut dipped in dark chocolate. This is one of the many ways Jim and I are well-suited. He hates coconut, so I always get those pieces from a box of candy without feeling in the least guilty. He, in turn, gets to eat the creams which, with the exception of an occasional chocolate cream, I could go to the end of my life without ever tasting again.

ALAN: Yuck! But then I never did understand chocolate. I can't remember the last time I had any and it wouldn't worry me if I never had any again.

Beer, on the other hand, is much more interesting. In Rarotonga I made a point of drinking the local brew (Cook Islands Lager), which was quite tasty.

JANE: You seem rather fond of beer. As I've mentioned, I'm a non-drinker of such, but Jim loves a good beer and I often buy him something exotic for a gift. I always get puzzled when confronted with ales and beers and lagers and porters and all the rest. Do you have any advice for me about British - or even more exotic - beers?

ALAN: Oh, lots and lots! Perhaps next time?

Drawing of the Dark

Novels with Power, by Powers

JANE: So, Alan, as I thought about where to start asking questions about beer, I ended up with a question about books instead. Have you ever read Tim Powers' early novel *The Drawing of the Dark*?

ALAN: Indeed I have. It was the first Tim Powers novel I ever read and it turned me into a huge fan, mainly because it was about beer, of course. Unfortunately, much as I love his books, I've found all his other novels to be vastly inferior to *The Drawing of the Dark.* No beer!

Actually that's not true. Many of Powers' novels do feature beer but not to the same extent as in *The Drawing of the Dark* where the lore of beer is central to its plot. And don't forget, I'm English – beer is our national religion. How could I help but love the book?

JANE: I had the funniest initial encounter with *The Drawing of the Dark.* I was still living in Virginia and one of my gaming group members - Bill Tedder - came over. He was reading this cheesy-looking paperback while we waited for the others to arrive. The title was in brilliant yellow highlighted with orange. The art showed a white haired man in a vaguely medieval outfit battling a gargoyle wearing nothing but a pair of very brief briefs, platform shoes (no kidding), and tribal tattoos.

The title didn't raise my estimate one bit. *The Drawing of the Dark* seemed like the title of the worst of bad heroic fantasy.

When I said as much, Bill just grinned and said something along the lines of "Give it a try. You might be surprised." He loaned me the book then and there, since he'd read it before.

Boy, was I surprised! The "dark" turned out to be dark beer and the tale itself a convoluted saga of reincarnation entwined with the myth of the Fisher King. I loved it. The book made me an avid reader of Tim Powers' work.

ALAN: What a strange coincidence! I also found the book in an odd way. One weekend I was terminally bored. I'd completely run out of things to read. I popped down to the corner shop to buy some milk. The shop had a very small collection of books for sale, perhaps a dozen or so. They all looked like utter rubbish, but I was desperate for words so I grabbed the only one that looked even vaguely SF/Fantasy oriented even though I'd never heard of the author, and I took it home along with the milk. It was, of course, *The Drawing of the Dark* and the weekend quickly stopped being boring as I raced through the book, chortling at all the lovely jokes and reveling in the complex plot.

JANE: I think I've read all of Tim Powers' novels - including hunting out a couple of his earliest efforts. I never failed to enjoy one of his books, but for the longest time I found myself thinking "He's almost got it. He's almost got it. He just didn't quite..."

Before we go further, I'd going to nod to those people eavesdropping on our conversation and try to explain what type of novel Tim Powers writes. I suppose a definition would be "alternate history fantasy," but Powers manages to do something more. After reading one of Tim's books, I become convinced that his version of history is the real one and the stuff in the history books is missing crucial details.

ALAN: Yes - it's that verisimilitude that gets me every time. His novel *The Anubis Gates* is a time travel story in which a group of scholars travels to early nineteenth century London to attend a lecture by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Things go wrong and they end up stranded. Along the way they encounter the famous poet, William Ashbless. The plot is extremely convoluted and the evocation of bizarre London lowlife is brilliantly done even though it bears no relation to reality whatsoever. I was so drawn into the book that by the end I was absolutely convinced that Ashbless was a real poet and I was gobsmacked when I eventually found out that Powers had invented him.

But my very favourite of his novels (after *The Drawing of the Dark*, of course) is *Declare*. The novel is about the life and times of Kim Philby the infamous Soviet spy. He's a legendary figure in England -

Burgess, MacLean, Philby and Blunt, the so-called "Cambridge Spies," have all entered the folklore. Powers manages to breathe new life into the legend and the very twisted supernatural ending of the novel is a tour de force.

My least favourite of his works is *Last Call*. I really don't enjoy it at all, mainly because all the way through I felt that things were going on under the surface that nobody was telling me about. All the characters seemed to know stuff that I didn't know, and none of it was ever explained. I spent the entire novel feeling bewildered and frustrated. For once, Powers' talent for sucking the reader into the world of the novel deserted him. It's the only Tim Powers novel that I failed to finish. And I've read all of them, including his very early and very hard to find stuff.

JANE: Interesting how different our reactions were. As I was saying, I always came away just a little disappointed from a Tim Powers novel. Then came *Last Call*. Now, my disappointment wasn't because the books were bad - indeed, a flawed Tim Powers novel was, for me, still far better than most of the stuff being published. It was because I felt Powers wasn't carrying his idea through all the way. There would be a problem with pacing or an issue too easily resolved (or not resolved at all).

Then I read *Last Call*. It's a complicated story, touching again on some of Power's favorite themes, interweaving old myths, magics, and legend into - in this case - a contemporary setting. I liked the main characters and felt they were better fleshed out than many Powers had written in the past.

By coincidence, I was reading *Last Call* to keep me occupied on my flight to a World Fantasy Convention. It's a long, complex novel, and so I didn't finish it. I kept sneaking time between events to read it and even brought it along to the banquet, hoping to find a moment between speeches to finish.

I was attending this banquet as a Avon Books author and so was Tim Powers. I'd met him a time or two before and, since I had his book in hand, I started telling him how much I liked it. I was particularly concerned about the fate of the character Arky. I remember telling Tim that it wasn't that I was hoping for a miracle cure for Arky's cancer (which had been Arky's goal at the start of the novel), but that I hoped, if he had to die, he'd go out well.

Then I realized that this book was a keeper, so I asked if Tim would sign my copy. He did so, writing as follows: "For Jane! - Hoping you approve of how Arky turns out - & (- just between you & me -) I hope that, an hour from now, this has won the World Fantasy Award. Cheers, Tim Powers".

Hard as it may be for those of you who follow these things, I hadn't realized *Last Call* was on the awards ballot. As I quickly scanned the program, I realized that there was a strong group of contenders that year. *Last Call* was definitely not a sure fire to win.

When the time for the novel award came, my heart was pounding as hard as if one of my books was on the ballot - I mean, how could I have been such as idiot as to be nattering away at an author who was hoping his book might win? What would I say if it didn’t? I sneaked a glance over at Tim and found him watching me!

Well, *Last Call* did win, and all was well. I could relax and offer sincere congratulations... Whew...

Alan, I can understand why you had this feeling that "things were going on under the surface that no one is telling you about" when you read *Last Call* because, well, that's pretty usual for a Tim Powers book. The funny thing is I had a similar reaction to *Declare*.

Would you like to hear my theory why?

ALAN: Indeed I would. I find it very strange that we both had the same reaction, but to two completely different Tim Powers books. Perhaps we could do that next time? I need a glass of beer to drink and a good book to read. I wonder what book would be appropriate...

Risky History

Alternate Histories

JANE: Well, Alan, last week we left beer behind to talk about the works of an author we both enjoy - Tim Powers. In the process, we made the startling discovery that one of my favorite of his works - *Last Call* - is one of your least favorites - and one of your favorites - *Declare* - is one my least favorites.

I spent several days mulling over this and think I may have figured out why.

I think our different reactions to these books has to do with one of the risks an author takes when writing alternate history. How the story impacts on the reader is related in some fashion to how familiar the reader is with the portion of history being alternated.

For example, you say that the "Cambridge spies" have entered folklore. Well, maybe British folklore, but certainly not the folklore for this fairly well-read American. Kim Philby was a vaguely familiar name to me. That's it. So I had to read *Declare* without knowing the background , and ended up wondering what (other than certain supernatural elements) was the "alternate" and which the reality.

Conversely, the settings of *Last Call* are very American. Many of the historical figures - especially the gangster-types - have been glamorized by film until they have become part of American folklore.

ALAN: That would certainly make sense. I grew up in an England that seemed to have an unholy fascination with the Cambridge Spies. There were lots of newspaper stories as new revelations emerged. There were TV shows and countless novels. Alan Bennett wrote an utterly brilliant play called *An Englishman Abroad* which was about Guy Burgess living his life in exile in Moscow. You wouldn't have had any of that.

JANE: Absolutely. I'd like to re-read *Declare*, but I wonder if I should read some of the historical background first. By contrast, the settings and characters in *The Drawing Of The Dark* and *The Anubis Gates* belong to what we might call a shared historical background. We might not know the details, but we've heard of the main characters and know a little about them.

ALAN: Yes - a lot of the background in those novels is common coin - though, if pressed, I would be unable to produce more than vague wafflings about the details. I'm very aware of the time and place in general, but not in particular. That's probably all to the good. Powers has an ability to place what feels like real details into the folk memory we share. It's what gives his books that convincing extra edge. It also means, of course, that if his audience doesn't share that folk memory to begin with, they are almost certainly going to be lost, since Powers never makes what he's adding explicit. Hence the similar reactions we both had to two different books.

JANE: I have another example... When Jim read *The Stress of Her Regard,* a Tim Powers novel which features Byron, Shelley, and a bunch of their associates, he kept asking me how much of what the characters were up to had actually happened since his encounter with these figures had been limited to a poem or two in high school English. It made for some great discussions between us, but it could be said we read very different books, because I was bringing to Powers' novel my extensive knowledge of the characters, their lives, and how they met their ends.

ALAN: Again, I was happy with *The Stress Of Her Regard* because (to a certain extent) I'd come across many of these people at school. I had an absolutely brilliant English Literature teacher who always took great pains to put things into context. And he liked gossip. He was particularly good at the salacious details of love affairs and other scandals. So much of this came up in the classroom, perhaps just enough to leave room for me to fall into Powers' verisimilitude trap. And so I quite enjoyed that book as well.

JANE: As we've been chatting, I've been thinking that the term "alternate history" really gets applied to two very different types of fiction. What Tim Powers writes could be called "alternate explanation

history." Thus, when readers finish *Last Call*, they understand the deep, secret reason behind the utterly crazy idea of building a massive city in a desert, filling it with water features, and catering to gambling.

ALAN: I like to think of it as applied paranoia. It plays with our secret fears, almost to the extremes of rabid conspiracy theories. Secret histories are always enormous fun to read about and Tim Powers is one of the very few authors to have realized this. He is also, without a shadow of a doubt, the very best at writing it convincingly.

JANE: Then there is the other type of alternate history - the type Harry Turtledove writes so often. Here you take a recognized historical event, change it in some way (for some weird reasons, some American readers are addicted to stories where the South won our Civil War), and then go forward from that point.

ALAN: And that's by far the most common type. Turtledove is by no means the only practitioner, though he's certainly the most prolific. I've enjoyed several of his books but by their very nature they do tend to be a little bit formulaic; and I'm not sure there's much that can be done about that. It's inherent in the nature of the beast.

JANE: I've written a couple of stories that could fall into the Powers model. There's my recent *Like the Rain* in the anthology *Golden Reflections* and my older piece *Three Choices: The Story of Lozen* in the anthology *New Amazons*. Both of these play off of American Indian history - the Pueblo revolt and the Victorio Wars - so I suppose I fell into the trap of alternating history that most of my audience wouldn't know well enough to know what I was playing with. In both cases, the inclusion of supernatural elements made history make more sense.

I don't think I've ever written a "change history from this point" story, but as soon as this goes on-line, I bet I'll remember one.

ALAN: From a writer's point of view I suspect the Powers model is easier to follow because revealing deeply secret and entirely fictional histories requires much less research into historical realities than the Turtledove model does. Writers who follow the Powers model are generally dealing with folklore which can be twisted in all kinds of ways to suit the plot whereas writers who follow the Turtledove model have to fit their stories into known history and that means they have to get the details correct. So they really need to research it to the nth degree or risk losing their audience , particularly if the historical period they deal with is a well known one such as the South winning the Civil War or the Nazis winning World War II. Since you do this kind of thing for a living and I don't, perhaps you could comment on that next time?

JANE: Absolutely, especially since I am aware just how much research the "secret history" approach takes if you want to do it right!

Which Is Tougher?

A Few Old Friends

JANE: Last time, Alan, we were discussing what I think of as the two types of alternate history fiction. One is the Tim Powers model, where history itself is not changed, but the reader gets an entirely new - often supernatural or science fictional - explanation for why and how things turned out the way they did.

The other is the type where a limited number of historical events are changed, then the author carries the situation forward. This might be called the Harry Turtledove model, since he's done so much of it. Typical examples are the South winning the American Civil War or the Nazis winning WWII.

ALAN: Indeed so. It's always seemed to me as a reader that the Turtledove model would be much harder to research and write than the Powers model because Powers is free to disregard the nitty gritty detail of the period. If he comes across contradictions (or makes mistakes!) he can blame it on elements of his supernatural background.

For example the clown/magician Horrabin in *The Anubis Gates* allows Powers to play very fast and loose with the politics and sociology of nineteenth century London. Whereas the Turtledove model depends for its effect on legitimate historical and social constructs that simply have to be right or the story won't work. If the Nazis win WWII and invade England you can't disregard the role that Oswald Mosely and the Duke of Windsor would have played. And from the point of view of the man in the street, you would have to discuss the reaction to German lager appearing in English pubs. At that time you rarely saw lager for sale in England. The British predominantly drank bitter, a beer of quite a different character.

Ha! I knew we'd get back to beer sooner or later.

I don't think you agree with me though. Why is that?

JANE: Well, I can't really speak to the "Turtledove model" because I've never done an extended piece of that sort. However, I can think of an easy way around the difficulties you suggest. Since the author is changing a few big elements, why not remove Oswald Mosely or the Duke of Windsor, too? On the other hand, why would you want to do so? After all, wouldn't the entire fun of writing such a piece be tracing down the details that would be changed and playing with them?

ALAN: I suspect there are some things that are just too fundamental to change and still take the reader along with you. Both Mosely and the Duke were strong Nazi sympathisers and would have had a prominent role to play in a post-war Nazi government. The only way you could ignore them would be to kill them off. Keeping them alive but not allowing them to influence events would probably not be acceptable to the reader who knew anything about the real historical record.

JANE: I agree wholeheartedly. As I said, what would be the fun of writing an alternate history that didn't embrace such complications? It would be like drinking instant coffee - something of the character would be lost.

By the way, I love your inclusion of lager as an alternate history element. That's the sort of subtle detail that would really make an alternate history piece of that sort "sing." Maybe other classic British dishes would change. Bangers and mash might be made with a different sort of sausage, horrifying the purists, for example.

ALAN: Wagner instead of Elgar at the last night of the proms! Oh my goodness, the horror!

JANE: By the way, have you read Turtledove's *Ruled Britannia*? I felt that in that novel Turtledove did a brilliant job of taking on a bunch of the changes that would occur if the Spanish Armada had actually won - and having Shakespeare recruited to write propaganda plays for the opposing side and then, very author-like, falling in love with both projects to the point that he sometimes forgets just how much

is on the line... For me, this was a book that showed how much alternate history can do.

ALAN: Yes indeed. That's one of his very best. It's well thought out and well written. And it isn't part of a ten book trilogy. That's a huge point in its favour from my perspective.

JANE: Darting back for a moment, I can say that the Powers model is far from easy. For one thing, to make it work, you need to be absolutely accurate as to the historical model for which you're providing an alternate explanation. Otherwise, the story doesn't work.

Let me use my recent novella *Like the Rain*, from the anthology *Golden Reflections*, as an example. One of the most remarkable events in American colonial history is the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when a relatively small group of unrelated (and often antagonistic) Indians managed to throw the much better armed and armored Spanish military completely out of the area. This wasn't a short-term victory, but one that lasted for over a decade.

I decided to provide an alternate explanation for this, but this first meant making myself absolutely familiar with the material. The trick was finding real events for which I could provide another explanation. When I learned that the Spanish depositions included such things as Popay - the leader of the Revolt - apparently having supernatural advisors and performing miracles like shooting fire from his hands and feet, I was well on my way. When I learned that Popay had killed his own son-in-law, I had the heart of the personal conflict.

ALAN: I agree that the initial situation and premise has to be correct in terms of the real (whatever that means!) world. But after that it seems to me that you are free to diverge quite a lot.

JANE: Not really. All divergence must go on behind the scenes, so details of the actual event must be perfect. But, I do follow what you're saying.

ALAN: Speaking again as a reader, rather than as a writer, I find that the Turtledove model needs to stick so close to reality that the smallest thing can break the willing suspension of disbelief.

For example, in Connie Willis' novel(s) *Blackout / All Clear* which are set in England during WWII, she has children playing "parcheesi", a word I'd never heard in my life before. And that immediately took me out of the book and back into my lounge. I did a bit of digging and found that the game she was referring to is the game I knew as "Ludo". She is perfectly correct in having the children in her novel play the game (it was very popular at that time) but the use of the wrong name jarred so much that for me the spell of the book was momentarily broken. However I'd have accepted it in a Powers-mode novel simply because of the general strangeness that world view invokes.

JANE: Interestingly enough, right after you brought up the Willis books, a friend who is an absolute stickler for historical details mentioned she'd just read *Blackout*. Now Sally once got taken out of a historical novel because one character was wearing overalls before they were invented. So I figured she was the perfect person to ask about the ludo/Parcheesi problem.

She chuckled and admitted she hadn't been aware of Willis's error, so it hadn't bothered her. Then she raised the possibility that Willis had not known either - and if you don't know there is a question, you can't ask it.

ALAN: And that's what makes the writer's job so hard! I suppose we each have our own areas of knowledge and expertise and our own individual breaking points. The overalls would have gone right over my head...

JANE: No, Alan... Overalls are stepped into. You can't pull them on over your head... Sorry. After all our discussions of clothing, I couldn't resist.

ALAN: But remember that from your point of view I am upside down at the bottom of the world. You'd be amazed at the difference that makes to the wearing of clothes...

After all that research, don't you get the urge to write a straight historical novel? Both Turtledove and L. Sprague de Camp (another brilliant alternate history novelist) have done just that.

JANE: Ah... That's a complicated question. Let's go for it next time!

Living History

JANE: Last time we started out talking about alternate history fiction which led Alan to an interesting question. Alan?

Historical. More or Less...

ALAN: So when you do all this historical research, do you feel inspired to write a straight historical novel?

JANE: Actually, I don't. People often ask me why I write science fiction and fantasy. If they read the genres, this question is usually just curiosity - rather along the lines of "How did you come to buy a house in that neighborhood?" or such. However, people who don't read SF/F tend to ask the same question guardedly, as if expecting I'm going to start telling them about the UFO that landed in your yard or the fairies that were my bestest friends when I was a little girl.

I write SF/F because I like the skiffy approach. "What if?" has been the kick-off for so many of my short stories and novels. Although some could argue than any fiction deals with "what if?" to a point, no other genres deal with it better or more creatively.

ALAN: That's certainly true and it's a large part of the reason why I like reading SF/F so much. But, done properly, historical novels can also play with this a little bit. Just like SF/F, they can be used to illuminate strange and unfamiliar (dare I say alien?) societies and customs. I'm thinking here of James Clavell's marvelous novel *Shogun* which follows the adventures of a shipwrecked English sailor in seventeenth century Japan. The society it portrays is so bizarre (to Western eyes) that even though it is actually a straight historical novel you can easily think of it in SF terms as a "first contact" story, except that the aliens are neither bug-eyed nor green and they have the proper number of limbs...

JANE: I'm sure this was the case when *Shogun* first came out, but I think it would seem less so now. I read *Shogun* for the first time in the late 1980's, I found it a great read, but I didn't find the Japanese culture any more alien than that of the European. They both seemed cultures of their time and place. Now, admittedly, my fondness for mythology means I've been reading about different approaches to the same problems since I was quite young. Maybe that influenced my reaction to the sense of difference.

ALAN: The book definitely presents a culture of its time and place, no argument there. But looked at in a wider context, and with modern prejudices, the society comes across as very weird and therefore hard to appreciate. Hence the analogy I drew with other more sfnal alien cultures. I think it helps to consider the culture the book presents in isolation rather than thinking of it as the culmination of a series of historical forces. The latter tends to bring the imagination down to earth with a bit of a thump!

JANE: I can see that.

I have written at least one "straight" historical piece. Back at the turn of the century (sorry, I couldn't resist), I was asked to contribute a story to the anthology T*he Blue and the Gray Undercover: All New Civil War Spy Adventures*, edited by Ed Gorman. Although these were historicals, because they were spy stories, they also had a bit of that "secret history" element you mentioned when we were talking about Tim Powers' work a few weeks back.

I did a ton of research and wrote about how the pivotal battle of Stony Creek might have come to happen through the interplay of various historical figures who could have been - but might not have been - involved. It was fun, but it was also very "what if." I don't think I would have been interested in writing a straight dramatization of those same events. That would have felt like reportage.

This doesn't mean I don't read historical fiction. I do, but I'm not sure I'd want to write it more than occasionally.

ALAN: Turtledove has written a series of four novels set in ancient Greece. They were published under the transparent pseudonym of "H. N. Turteltaub" and again they manage to bring a very strange (in our terms) society to life. Using the same pseudonym, he's also written a novel about the life and times of the Emperor Justinian, a very odd man indeed. And L. Sprague de Camp wrote several historical novels of which my favourite is perhaps *The Dragon Of The Ishtar Gate* where he has some very interesting theories about just what that famous dragon might have been in real life. I'm not sure what this proves, if anything, but they certainly provided me with a lot of good reading.

JANE: If we're mentioning authors who do a great job with making historical settings come to life while still showing the "strange" elements, I'd like to mention John Maddox Roberts, author of the long-running *SPQR* series of mysteries. Unlike two other authors who have written mystery series sent in ancient Rome, John writes about convincing late-Republic Romans, not Americans in togas. I wonder if this is because John also writes SF - and often in collaboration with Eric Kotani, who is Japanese! Now that I think about it, John has also written at least three alternate history novels as well.

ALAN: I'm not surprised that you like these kinds of books. I suspect that there's a large crossover between SF/F fans and fans of certain kinds of historical fiction. I'm thinking here particularly of the Hornblower novels and of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin books. There are many analogies to be drawn between voyages across the sea and voyages across space and the strange and wonderful things to be discovered at the end of the journey. I don't want to belabour the obvious, but isn't the fact that your friend David Weber has described his Honor Harrington novels as being directly inspired by the Hornblower books significant here?

JANE: Well, sort of.... I believe Weber pitched the project to Jim Baen as "Horatio Hornblower in Space," but Weber has always asserted that his inspiration was less the fictional Hornblower than the non-fictional Admiral Lord Nelson. So, you could say that Honor Harrington and Horatio Hornblower begin from the same historical source. However, the shared "H.H." of their initials was certainly Weber's way of acknowledging that he was not the first to begin at that source.

ALAN: A fair point. But the fact that the analogy works at all, let alone that it works as well as it does, suggests that there's some truth to it.

JANE: Oh! I agree. Weber certainly never denies familiarity with the Horatio Hornblower novels - and had (at least at the last point we discussed the matter) deliberately avoided the Patrick O'Brian novels lest there be a temptation toward influence.

By the way... I'm also a fan of the O'Brian novels. Jim started me on them when we were courting and we continued reading them together after we were a couple.

Now, speaking of Jim reminds me... We meant to discuss beer. I'll admit, by now I know what he likes, but I'm still not sure whether all those terms - ale, porter, stout, lager, and suchlike - really indicate different drinks or if they're just culturally different terms for the same thing.

How about filling me in?

What's In A Beer?

A Confusing Throng

JANE: As I mentioned last time, I really know very little about beer. In fact, until I got together with Jim, I just figured ale and beer were two different words for the same drink - regionalisms, so to speak. Is this the case, or is there a "real" difference?

ALAN: These days there is no real difference and the terms are used interchangeably. Only an extreme pedant would insist that they were two different drinks. Originally ales were simply fermented grain products which did not include hops, and beers were fermented grain products which did include hops. But you can see how far we have come from that original distinction when I tell you that India Pale Ale is one of the hoppiest drinks imaginable! The hops give the beer its distinctive bitter taste and also act as a preservative. India Pale Ale was originally brewed for the British troops in India and so it had to survive a long sea voyage and still be drinkable at the other end. So it is very, very (say "very" a few more times) hoppy indeed.

JANE: At least I can be "hoppy" that I have a reason for having been confused!

Since we talked about Tim Powers (and he mentions it) - I'd like to know what a "bock" is. For a while, Sam Adams here did a "triple bock" as a seasonal item. It smelled and tasted - to me - more like port. So if you know...

ALAN: Bock is a very strong lager that was originally brewed in Germany. Despite being a lager, some of the bock brews are quite dark. The triple-bock is very strong indeed. They partially freeze the beer and remove the water ice, leaving the concentrated alcohol and grain extracts behind. It's called freeze distillation, and it can give quite interesting tastes and textures to the final drink. That would account for the port-like smell and taste that you noticed.

JANE: Ah! I've heard of that technique, but for making a brandy-like drink from wine. I encountered it first in a novel where the author clearly wanted strong drink, but at a technological level where distilling was impractical.

ALAN: I'm interested to hear that Sam Adams brewed it. I drank some Sam Adams beer when I visited America many years ago and I was very impressed with it. American beers have a poor reputation in the rest of the world. They are thought of as weak, watery and tasteless. The SF commentator Dave Langford once remarked that you can get a hangover from drinking American beer, but you don't have the pleasure of getting drunk first. However I found the Sam Adams brews to be extremely palatable. Are there any other American beers of a similar standard?

JANE: I can't name specific brewers - but I bet some of those reading this can. I do know that what are being called "artisanal" or "craft" beers (all you American beer drinkers, please feel free to correct me if I have missed a subtle difference between these two) are becoming quite popular.

Now, as I've said, I'm a non-drinker, but I will taste something if people are saying it is interesting. Beer usually disappoints me. To me it smells wonderful, but tastes like stomach upset. However, a few weeks ago, I tried a craft beer from a place up near Taos that was the first beer I thought I could drink.

I know there's a trend here toward beers that are include odd ingredients. Just the other day, I read about a beer that included cherries, another that included hibiscus flowers... I'd be curious whether the trend towards odd ingredients in beer is common "over there" and, if so, what you think of it.

ALAN: Using odd ingredients is very much an old brewing tradition, particularly in the Trappist monasteries of Belgium and Holland. Trappist monks aren't allowed to do very much at all, they can't even talk to each other! So to keep themselves occupied they have spent several hundred years perfecting the art of brewing some amazing beers. I once had a Trappist brew made with so many cherries that the foam on the top was bright pink! That was a very surreal experience. It was also, at

least in my opinion, an extraordinarily disgusting drink. But then I don't really care for cherries all that much.

JANE: When we were talking about how a good writer of alternate history remembers the subtle changes, you said something about lager. What is it that distinguishes a lager from other types of beer? Why would it have taken the Germans to bring it into England?

ALAN: Lagers are made with a yeast that sits at the bottom of the fermenting vessel and grumbles away slowly to itself. Other beers, particularly those brewed in the UK, use a different yeast that forms a foaming crust on the top of the fermenting liquid. The yeast used in bottom fermented beers works best at lower temperatures than the yeast used in top fermented beers. The final result also tastes better if served chilled whereas the top fermented beers taste better when served at room temperature. Until relatively recently, lagers were primarily a European beer and the top fermented brews were largely British.

JANE: Wow! Obviously brewing beer is much more technical than I ever imagined. How many different kinds of beer are there in the world?

ALAN: There are probably as many different kinds of beer as there are different kinds of wine, and for much the same reason. We recently had a beer festival here in Wellington. It was called Beervana, and it had 212 distinctly different beers available for tasting, almost all of which were brewed here in New Zealand. And that's just one small country! Imagine the range of beers available in Europe where they've been brewing the stuff for hundreds, if not thousands of years!

JANE: Did you taste all 212 beers?

ALAN: No - I only managed about 10 of them before I had to (reluctantly) give up. But each was distinctive, each had its own flavour and texture. And of course, being a beer festival, Beervana was also full of beer snobs talking learnedly about aftertastes, chocolate flavours on the palate and crispy smoothness. Beer snobs are just as bad as wine snobs. Have I ever told you about CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale?

JANE: No, you haven’t. How about next time?

On CAMRA

JANE: Okay, Alan, last time you promised to tell me about CAMRA.

Campaigners

ALAN: Ah yes! By the late 1960s, most of the craft breweries in the UK had been absorbed into big conglomerates and a dull uniformity had settled over what was now essentially a mass produced and rather bland drink. Four beer enthusiasts, incensed at what they regarded as the loss of a great brewing tradition, formed CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale) in 1971. They seemed to strike a chord and people joined the campaign in droves. As a consumer based pressure group it proved to be remarkably effective and it gave a new lease of life to the few remaining small breweries. Even the big conglomerates started making craft beers again and many new breweries sprang into existence.

JANE: I bet you have some colorful example of beers that were saved from extinction.

ALAN: One very famous beer that was saved from extinction by CAMRA is Theakstones Old Peculier. Note the peculiar spelling. It is quite a strong beer and rumour suggests that the name derives from the fact that if you drink a pint of it you feel very old and very peculier! And you lose the ability to spell.

A close friend of mine spent his honeymoon in a carefully chosen small pub that served Old Peculier on tap. By the end of the honeymoon he and his wife, with a little help from the locals, had drunk the pub dry.

"We've none left," said the landlord. "You'll have to drink bitter instead."

And so they did.

JANE: Hm... I can think if more interesting ways to spend a honeymoon, but at least this one wasn't boring or routine! What other weird beers are there?

ALAN: When I lived in Nottingham, the local beer was brewed by Shipstones. Of course you will have immediately spotted that "Shipstones" is an anagram of "honest piss."

JANE: Actually, I wouldn't have caught the anagram. I'd probably have figured that a shipstone was what you used to holystone a ship's deck and that the name dated back to the days of tall ships.

ALAN: As it happens, the beer was named after one James Shipstone, the founder of the brewery. However the anagram is very appropriate as the British often call beer "piss". An evening's heavy drinking is referred to as being "on the piss" and when you are quite drunk you are, of course, "pissed" .

I gather Americans find this usage confusing?

JANE: Well, not this American. I mean, it sort of follows. Drink too much beer and then, well...

Now, the more common meaning for "pissed" over here is "angry" or "disgusted." Even that meaning would sort of make sense when applied to someone who has had too much to drink, since drunks are notably obstreperous.

ALAN: Since you don't use the word "pissed" in the same sense that we do, what words do you use to describe someone who is drunk?

JANE: The one that first springs to mind is "trashed." Then there are some impolite ones like "sh-tfaced" which I won't spell lest a spam filter gets annoyed.

"Drunk as a skunk" evolved into "skunked." This, of course, maligns skunks, who, as far as I know, are not known to get inebriated. Birds do though, and bears, both of which species have been known to deliberately seek out fermenting fruit for the buzz.

Ah... That's another one. Buzzed!

In the *Firekeeper* novels, Firekeeper won't drink alcohol because she's already familiar with the vulnerability caused by such indulgences.

"Wasted." "Gone." "Tanked." I'm sure there are others that make the activity seem more attractive, but right now the only ones I can think of strike me as being, from an anthropological point of view, indicating very little pleasure coming from the activity.

Interesting...

ALAN: In the north of England, being drunk is sometimes referred to as being "slewed as a newt". I'm really not sure why newts, alone among reptiles, are considered to be the archetypal drunk. However the expression sometimes morphs into the spoonerism "nude as a slewt" which I am really rather fond of.

JANE: Colorful indeed. Actually, with your wisdom about what we might call the "lore of pissedness," maybe you can answer a question a friend raised the other night. Why is the phrase "take a piss" when, logically, it should be "leave a piss"?

ALAN: You've got me there! Certainly you always leave it behind and seldom if ever take it away with you except under most unusual circumstances. But since when did logic have anything to do with bodily functions?

Since we seem to be heading towards toilet humour again, perhaps I should point out that Shipstones was a temperamental beer that needed very careful cellaring. It often hovered on the cusp of undrinkable and it didn't take much to push it over the edge. Drinkers beware!

I once saw a graffito that said: Has the bottom fallen out of your world? Drink a pint of Shipstones and the world will fall out of your bottom!

But in its defense, I must say that a properly looked after pint of Shipstones truly was a magnificent beer.

JANE: You're using the past tense. From that I assume that CAMRA did not save Shipstones?

ALAN: Alas they did not. The brewery was taken over by one of the big conglomerates and the last true pint of Shipstones was brewed in 1991. The beer continued in name only for a few more years but the heart and the taste had gone out of it. It no longer exists.

JANE: That's actually rather sad. It always puzzles me when big business takes over something delightful and regional, then makes it generic and boring.

ALAN: Unfortunately it seems to be the way the world works. We should chat about that sometime. But while we are on the subject of beer, and drink in general, I'd be interested to find out if prohibition is still an issue in America?

JANE: Not exactly, but the laws that do regulate drinking alcohol can be as colorful and strange as the slang for being drunk. Sometimes they even create the problem they're trying to alleviate. I wonder if it's the same there.

ALAN: Indeed it is. Some of the rules and regulations that surround the consumption of alcohol here are both weird and wonderful.

JANE: I'd like to chat more on this, but it's time to go write fiction. How about next time?

Prohibition Reconfigured

Yo Ho Ho

JANE: Well, Alan, last time you asked if Prohibition was still an issue here in the United States. The answer is, as with so many things, yes and no.

The "no" is that there is no longer a Federal law prohibiting the drinking of alcohol on a national level. However, there is a crazy quilt of state and county regulations that make the issue confusing to say the least.

For example, in the same state you may have "dry" and "wet" counties. As far as I can tell, all this does is raise the revenues for sale of alcoholic beverages in those "wet" counties bordering the "dry," but maybe it makes the people who live in dry counties feel more secure.

ALAN: We used to have something similar in New Zealand, but the "dry" and "wet" areas were suburbs in the same city. Every time there was a local government election, the dry suburbs would also have a referendum to see if they should become wet. The dry suburbs seem to have completely vanished now. Our liquor laws were extensively revised a few years ago and now you can buy beer and wine in the supermarket (and even at the corner shop) along with your groceries. Strangely, the supermarkets aren't allowed to sell spirits.

JANE: Our supermarkets can also sell spirits - also called "hard liquor" – at least in New Mexico.

Another restriction is against selling alcohol on Sunday. Even in relatively cosmopolitan Albuquerque, you cannot buy alcohol on Sunday before noon. I guess morning is for religion but afternoon is for watching sports - a religion that cannot be practiced by many of its devotees without alcoholic stimulus.

ALAN: Again we used to have something similar but now, since the bars and shops and supermarkets are open seven days a week, that restriction too has completely disappeared. Interestingly, it still seems largely impossible to buy alcohol on Sunday in Australia - their liquor laws are much more restrictive than ours.

JANE: Supermarkets handle the Sunday restriction by putting a rope as a symbolic barrier between the public and the booze. I've often envisioned how it must be when a duly appointed clerk removes the rope and the panting customers rush in to get their supplies before the Big Game starts.

I believe that sales of alcohol are also regulated on Election Day, although I cannot remember right off if that's all day or just part of the day. I think this one dates back to the bad old days when the custom was to get voters drunk and then encourage them to vote for your candidate.

ALAN: That's bizarre! In our elections, touting for votes in any way, shape or form on election day is illegal and anyone found trying to influence the voters in that manner would quickly find themselves in court facing stiff penalties. Even the hoardings have to come down the day before the election.

JANE: Uh, hoardings? That doesn’t have anything to do with dragons, does it?

ALAN: Hoardings are synonymous with billboards. But I tend to think of hoardings as temporary structures (often raised in peoples front gardens), whereas I think of billboards as somehow being more permanent.

JANE: Certainly the days when voters would get drunk at the candidates expense are over, but billboards and signs remain up. The only restriction is that any such must be moved a relatively short distance from the polling places – I think a hundred feet.

Another restriction on drinking surrounds the legal age to drink. These rulings can get confusing in the extreme as, once again, they vary from state to state. When I was in college in New York State, the

legal drinking age for wine and beer was 18, but 21 for hard liquor. I assure you, students can get quite "pissed" on beer and wine. They just need to process more liquid to do so.

Later, I believe still during my college career, the law was changed to 21 for all types of alcoholic beverages. This was really annoying for those students who, at 18, had been legally permitted to get trashed, but now could not do so. Did this stop them?

ALAN: Of course it didn't! Our legal drinking age has oscillated a bit as well. Currently it is 18 but there are moves afoot to try and raise it again. Part of the problem here is our tradition of the six-o'clock swill. It used to be that the bars all closed at 6.00pm. And so everyone would leave work dead on the dot of 5.00pm, race down to the nearest bar and spend the next hour hurling as much beer down their necks as they could manage before they got chucked out into the street.

The six-o'clock swill is long gone now, but the culture of binge drinking that it encouraged is still very much with us and many people, particularly young people, seem to think that the best way to spend an evening is to get paralytic as quickly as possible and then spend the rest of the night throwing up, picking fights and driving very fast.

I doubt that raising the drinking age again would stop this behaviour. That would require a cultural change rather than a legal change

JANE: I'm a little confused here. Is the six-o'clock swill a New Zealand thing? I'm sure I've read British novels where "last call" (as in the title of the Tim Powers novel we discussed a few weeks back) comes much later.

ALAN: Yes – the six-o'clock swill is completely Antipodean. The British licensing laws are something else again. They were originally introduced at the start of WWI because the Prime Minister (David Lloyd George) didn't want the munitions workers to be too drunk to make artillery shells. And so the pubs closed mid-afternoon, re-opened in the early evening and closed again at 10.30pm. All that nonsense was finally done away with early this century and now, as I understand it, pretty much anything goes.

JANE: I really like the historical roots to that. Here I'd love to know the source of some of our really weird regulations. When I moved to New Mexico in 1994, it was illegal for a liquor store to sell a drink in a glass. However, in some parts of the state, there were liquor stores with drive up windows where it was possible to purchase a bottle and a glass - complete with ice.

ALAN: I can't match that! But I do have a strange term for you to ponder. Sly grog refers to the illegal sale of liquor, often homemade (with an implication of poor quality). It is sold from unlicensed premises and, of course, the government gets no revenue at all. Sly grog has also largely vanished now. It was another reaction to the lunacy of the six-o'clock swill, but since you can now legally buy alcohol here twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, there seems little point in it any more. I suppose that sly grog shops were the equivalent of the American speakeasy. I think it is a lovely phrase, beautifully descriptive.

JANE: Moonshine is our poetic equivalent for illegal liquor - probably because it was made at night, by moonlight. Other names for illegal liquor are far less attractive: hooch, bathtub gin, rotgut. Home brewing remains a tradition, though. You can easily buy kits for making your own beer and wine. Occasionally, the amateurs become professionals. My friend Pati Nagle's brother Darragh has a small but successful meadery – nice stuff, light, not thick or sweet.

That reminds me... A week or so ago, we were discussing how when a local gem gets taken over by larger businesses, so often what was unique is lost. I'd like to ask you about local gems next time...

When Goose Isn't

Colonial Goose

JANE: So, Alan, a couple of weeks ago, we were talking about how conglomerates can take over a local specialty - your example was Shipstones beer - and then make it generic and boring.

The same thing happened with a ginger ale that Jim and I both drank as children and loved - Vernors. We're still hunting for one with the same rich, spicy taste. We've found a couple of good ones, but none are Vernors. The ginger ale that comes out under the name Vernors is nothing like the original.

ALAN: Dandelion and Burdock.

JANE: Pardon me?

ALAN: When I was a little boy I used to drink a fizzy, soft drink called Dandelion and Burdock. There are recipes for it dating back to at least the thirteenth century, so it is quite an old and traditional drink. By the time I came across it, of course, I doubt if it was still being made from dandelions and burdock leaves. If it was, farmers would be growing them as cash crops instead of exterminating them as weeds. So I was probably drinking the usual mish-mash of artificially flavoured sugar water. But nevertheless it had a very distinctive taste, utterly different from anything else I've ever had before or since.

There's a shop in Wellington that sells only British produce. It has a large clientele of nostalgic emigrants. Robin went there and, at enormous expense, bought me a can of Dandelion and Burdock for my birthday. It tasted just as I always remember it tasting. So everything is not all doom and gloom...

JANE: I'm glad to hear that. I wonder, if I went to New Zealand or even Australia (your Robin's stomping grounds) - what are some local tastes I shouldn't miss?

ALAN: Ah! The archetypal Antipodean food is vegemite and/or marmite. The vegemite/marmite battle is one of the great religious debates down here. Both are things you spread on toast and both are made by doing horrible things to brewers yeast that has become exhausted after brewing too much beer. See - beer is central to absolutely everything that is important in life!

Both substances look like they might be useful for lubricating axles and both, as far as I am concerned, taste revolting. Robin, being a true Australian, swears that vegemite is the one true spread and insists that marmite is only for wimps and expat brits. And who am I to tell her she is wrong? The One True Vegemite is manufactured in Australia by Kraft Foods at their Port Melbourne factory. Accept no substitutes. Marmite is a substitute...

JANE: "Revolting"? That's an opinion, not a flavor. How would Robin describe it? Sweet? Spicy? Salty?

I'm not saying your opinion isn't valid - one reason Jim and I eat out is there are things I like (mushrooms, for example) that he finds revolting and things he likes (sweet and sour sauce, which to me is just sweet), that I don't like.

ALAN: I asked Robin what vegemite tastes like to her and she said, "Just like marmite, only more."

So I asked Robin's mum and she said, "It tastes like very strong gravy."

We've got a jar in the cupboard so I tried some to see if it was as bad as I remembered. It was worse! I found it overpoweringly salty and sour.

JANE: Well, I guess I'd try it, but I can't say I anticipate the experience.

What about lamb or mutton? I was amazed by how many sheep I saw when I was in New Zealand. Neither lamb nor mutton are highly popular in the U.S. I am in the minority in liking them. I probably do because both my mother and grandmother knew how to bring out the best in both lamb and mutton.

ALAN: Perversely it's almost impossible to get decent lamb or mutton in the shops here. We export all the good stuff and all that's left for local consumption is rather poor quality; full of fat and gristle. The occasional good batch does turn up, of course, but it's the exception rather than the rule and it tends to be snatched up by the restaurant trade.

However the one good bit of lamb or mutton that you can always rely on is Colonial Goose, which is unique to New Zealand.

JANE: Okay... This sounds fascinating. Tell more!

ALAN: Colonial Goose is a leg of mutton which has been deboned and stuffed with breadcrumbs, onion, parsley, thyme, honey and dried apricots. It is marinated in red wine and slowly roasted. It is just as delicious as it sounds. Apparently the early colonists, bereft at the scarcity of geese in their adopted country, tried very hard to emulate it with local ingredients. I've never had goose myself, but I'm told that our version is a reasonable facsimile.

JANE: That sounds good, except, maybe, for the honey. I'm not really fond of sweet sauces. One of my on-going complaints here is that so many restaurants think they must serve lamb covered in a mint jelly glaze. Yuck!

ALAN: I suppose every region must have its own characteristic food. I've heard about green chile as something popular in your part of the world. It's not common here, except in Asian and Indian restaurants of course. So, tell me, what makes it so special?

JANE: That’s going to take more than a few words. Let me get back to you later!

Green Chile and Kumera

Various Chiles

JANE: Well, Alan, to tell you properly about green chile, I need to go back in time to when I first visited New Mexico. I was surprised by two things. First, the people who wrote menus couldn't spell. Secondly, they'd include "chile" as part of many dishes and then forget to put it on the plate.

Let me explain the source of my confusion. For someone living in the Eastern United States in the late eighties, "chile / chili" meant one thing - chili con carne, a dish made with meat, beans, onions, tomatoes, and some (often very little) chili powder. Much of this was so mild as to be able to masquerade as pencil shavings.

In New Mexico, "chile" is the proper spelling. Formally, it refers to members of the capsicum family, often called - because of a confusion created by Christopher Columbus - "peppers," even though they are unrelated to the plant that provides the stuff in your pepper shaker. Informally, "chile" usually refers to long (sometimes eight inches or more) tapering peppers that have a nice flavor and a wide variety of "bite" - although, I must note that to someone unaccustomed, even the mild has quite a bite. There are lots of sub-varieties, but I believe what is usually called "chile" is grouped in the Anaheim chile family.

Green chile is the less ripened version of this particular chile. It is such a part of New Mexico food and tradition that, in the autumn, almost every grocery store has a big roaster outside. People buy their chiles by the twenty pound sack. Chile is almost a religion. "Red or Green?" is the official state question. (Yes. We have a state question. We also have official state neckwear.)

I remember one year asking one of the postal clerks if he'd gotten his green chile yet. He said, "Ah, we're not getting much this year. Just forty pounds or so."

ALAN: The mind boggles! I find it hard to imagine using that amount of chile in a lifetime, let alone in just a season. And what's the roaster for? Do you actually roast the chiles?

JANE: Definitely. The fresh chiles are roasted, then peeled. This is not an easy task and should be done wearing gloves. Even the mild chiles will cause the fingers to burn and the hot ones can cause blisters. The end result is used to make sauces, salsas, stews, and as an ingredient in other dishes. I never really liked meatloaf until I started putting in a few tablespoons of green chile.

ALAN: Inspired by this information, I actually went out and bought some fresh chilis and cooked up a large dish of this and that. Unfortunately the chilis turned out to be so mild and bland that I had to stir in a tablespoon of sambal oeleck to give it some bite. There's a nice fusion of cuisines - Mexican and Indonesian!

JANE: Well, all I can say is that you must have gotten a wimp variety. New Mexico green chile doesn't need help from anyone and will kindly lend a grace note to any dish. Here you find chile added to everything from corn muffins to meatloaf to peanut brittle. No bland and inoffensive food is safe. Many people feel the New Mexico climate makes a difference, that the same type of chile grown elsewhere - say, California - will not have the same range of flavor.

ALAN: That feeling that the local conditions add something special to the flavour that simply cannot be reproduced in other areas is not uncommon. Sweet potatoes, for example, are grown in many countries but we feel that our own variety, the kumera, is something quite special. It can do everything that ordinary spuds can do and it's really rather yummy. Kumeras come in various varieties and flavours, much as potatoes themselves do. You also sometimes see taro, imported from the Pacific Islands, but I really don't like that. It's very bland and starchy.

JANE: We're beginning to see a great variety of sweet potatoes here and, happily, people now realize that they taste good without being smothered in brown sugar and marshmallow fluff. For years I thought I hated sweet potatoes, but, as with so many things, it was the preparation I didn't like.

You mentioned mixing Mexican and Indonesian cuisine. One thing I remember fondly about my visit to New Zealand was the interesting variety of foods, but I also gathered this was a relatively new phenomenon.

ALAN: When I first came to live in Wellington there was exactly one Chinese restaurant in the city and no other ethnic restaurants at all. And the one and only Chinese restaurant served very bland, flavourless food. The waiter always made sure to put a large plate of bread and butter on the table. People who didn't like the nasty foreign muck filled up on the bread and butter while their friends ate chicken chow mein and felt sophisticated. Nowadays it's completely changed - ethnic restaurants of every description are everywhere.

JANE: When I was in New Zealand in 1995, an article I read in the hotel magazine said that yours was a country which was finally discovering how exciting food could be, partly because of the influx of Chinese and other immigrants with the impending transfer of Hong Kong.

ALAN: Yes, we've had a large number of immigrants from all over the world and we've gone from being a bi-cultural society (European and Maori) to being very multicultural. And that's certainly been reflected in the food. The science fiction writer David Brin once said that if the aliens from the stars ever landed in California they'd be overwhelmed by people rushing up to them and crying, "Have you got a new cuisine?"

Well - I don't think the aliens landed here but nevertheless I've observed exactly the same phenomenon over the last few years. You name it and I'm sure we have a restaurant that serves it. And that's really quite amazing in a country as small as this one. I wonder what will happen if the aliens ever do land here...

JANE: Aliens and food. My first published short story - *Cheesecake* - dealt with that, oddly enough.

Anyhow, I bet the folks reading this could bring up other regional favorite foods, both here in the U.S. and there at the bottom of the world. How about it? Anyone want to step up to the table?

Gunpowder Plot

Paddington Celebrates

JANE: So, Alan, you e-mailed the other day that you'd just celebrated bonfire night. Is that the same as Guy Fawkes Day?

ALAN: Yes that's right. Guy Fawkes was attempting to blow up Parliament and assassinate the King (Guy Fawkes was "the only honest man ever to enter Parliament" as somebody once quipped). The plot failed and he was captured. He and his co-conspirators were horribly tortured and put to death. In 1605 an act of Parliament designated November 5th as a day of thanksgiving for deliverance from the plot. And from that day forward, Guy Fawkes was burned in effigy every year and fireworks were set off to commemorate the merciful day when God delivered the English Protestant monarch from the machinations of the evil Catholics...

JANE: Let me make sure I've got this right. You set off fireworks and light bonfires to celebrate explosives not going off.

ALAN: That's right. Impeccable logic, isn't it? When I was a child (and when my parents, and their parents and their parents before them were children) we would take great pleasure in making an effigy of Guy Fawkes. We'd take him round the village asking everyone we met for "A penny for the Guy." The money we collected would be carefully saved and spent on fireworks. We'd also spend weeks and weeks going round houses collecting rubbish with which to fuel our bonfires; we'd raid other people's bonfire collections and steal the good bits for ours (and our collections would be raided in their turn). And when November 5th came around we'd bind our Guy firmly into the bonfire and burn him. We'd set off all our fireworks and we'd eat parkin and we'd bake potatoes in the hot ashes of the fire.

JANE: Well, even if it makes me seem stupid, I'll admit that this custom always confused me and gave me a desire to reverse events so that Parliament was indeed blow up. I think I first encountered a reference to it in a Paddington Bear book. Let me go check... Yes. It was in *More About Paddington*. Paddington's good friend Mr. Gruber explains the background, but since the book was written for a British audience that presumably already knew, the explanation was brief.

ALAN: Indeed so – we all learned about the history of it at school so it really is common knowledge.

JANE: Moreover, as an American child, the idea of celebrating Parliament not getting blown up was confusing. Parliament is the Bad Guy (yes, I meant the pun) in basic American history books - or at least they were when I was a kid.

ALAN: Well indeed – it's one of the many troublesome institutions that caused you upstart colonials to rebel. And who can blame you?

JANE: But you're in New Zealand now, does the celebration have the same historic roots or is it just an excuse for a wild party?

ALAN: Actually, it's all starting to fade away. New Zealand inherited the celebration as part of its British colonial history. But both here and in Britain the tradition is dying out. There are very few bonfires (fires are dangerous and they cause pollution!) and children no longer make their Guys and no longer beg for money in the street (begging is bad!). And of course the religious aspects of the celebration long ago ceased to have any significance at all. These days much more emphasis is given to Halloween.

When I was a child, Halloween barely rated a mention. Absolutely nothing happened on that day. We were all keenly anticipating Guy Fawkes night a week later. But now, probably because of the influence of American TV and movies, Halloween is really starting to come in to its own as interest in Guy Fawkes fades.

JANE: Actually, Halloween has become a bigger celebration over the years here, too, and lost a lot of its negative edge. Nasty "tricks," such as throwing eggs on people's cars or windows, gave the day its alternate name of "Mischief Night ."

When I was a kid, very few adults dressed up and those who did usually stayed home to answer the door for trick or treaters. Even kid's costumes were often hand-made or put together out of things already around the house. These days costumes and make-up are on sale everywhere. Adult costumes are common, as are costume parties. Jim and I went to one this year. I was a tiger and he was a "movie cowboy sidekick."

I think the appeal is that it's all fun, geared to immediate family and friends, and involves large amounts of candy.

ALAN: I'm not sure we really understand Halloween properly yet and I'm certain that we're getting bits of it wrong. When the children come round for trick or treat I sometimes say "I have no treats for you, so you'll have to do a trick for me." The end result is usually a very bewildered child.

JANE: I bet!

ALAN: Of course the basis of Guy Fawkes celebrations is a thanksgiving that a terrible event never happened. You have a thanksgiving in November as well, don't you?

JANE: We do indeed. In fact, next week our Tangent will be on Thanksgiving itself. Come up with some good questions and I'll tell you all about it.

Not Just Turkey Day

ALAN: Since you are celebrating Thanksgiving today, can you tell me just what it is that you are giving thanks for?

Our Kettle Grill

JANE: The short version is that the Pilgrims, some of the original settlers in the New England region, decided to throw a harvest festival and invite a bunch of the local Indians who had helped them to survive those first hard years.

The historical reality is, of course, a whole lot more complicated and constantly being revised. In fact, some more radical Native American groups have tried to stop Thanksgiving as an official holiday because they feel celebrating the beginning of invasion and, in some cases, genocide is sick.

My feeling, however, is that Thanksgiving is a celebration of whatever you feel thankful for in your life in general and in the year that has gone by in particular. I actually get offended when people refer to it as "Turkey Day," as if eating huge meals is the only point.

ALAN: Does it happen on the same day every year or is it a moveable feast like Easter?

JANE: Thanksgiving moves around. It is always the fourth Thursday in November. Many schools and businesses are closed for a four-day weekend. Because of this, Thanksgiving is actually the busiest travel date of the year (since not everyone celebrates holidays with religious roots). Perversely, it is the one holiday when Jim and I do our best not to travel.

ALAN: I hate traveling when everybody else does – the roads are so full and the traffic moves so slowly. Robin and I always stay hermit-like at home at the start of long weekends. What do you do if you are not visiting family?

JANE: My own childhood provided me with a good example that you can have a festive and active Thanksgiving even when family is far away.

When I was a kid, despite my maternal grandfather being the only relative who lived at all close, we still managed to have a huge party. My mom had a gift for finding people who would otherwise be alone for the holiday. She would then invite all of them to a sit-down dinner. To enable us to do this, we constructed a table that stretched - no exaggeration - from one end of the house to the other, enabling everyone to sit together.

These days, sometimes Jim and I are the "orphans" and go to someone else's house, but because we like to cook, we also often entertain people here. Last year, my mom came to visit and we had some friends in as well. We ate a large dinner, then settled down to play Trivial Pursuit. The game went on so long that we were all able to have second helpings of the excellent pies one of our guests had brought – very satisfactory for all.

ALAN: How do you cope with cooking the turkey that, according to the books I've read, seems to be such an integral part of the Thanksgiving celebration? We generally have turkey at Christmas and I've always found the birds to be far too large to fit into the average oven. Or maybe everybody I know has a smaller than average oven…

JANE: Jim and I have a kettle grill and cook the turkey outside. My parents did the same thing. Not only does this make for an absolutely wonderful turkey, but it frees the oven up for other things.

ALAN: Sorry – but what's a kettle grill? I've never heard the phrase before.

JANE: I'll supply a picture… I believe this type of grill was popularized by a company called Weber. My folks had one long before they were common and people often asked what the weird thing in our yard was.

With the lid off, they work pretty much like any other grill, but the high, domed lid makes it possible to cook in it almost as you would in an oven. For the turkey, we divide the coals into two separate sections. The drip pan goes in between so, not only do we have drippings for gravy, flare-ups from fat hitting the coals are minimized.

ALAN: It sounds like a cunning device. Impressive!

JANE: I do find it amusing that turkey – a bird so American that Benjamin Franklin actually suggested it as our national emblem – has become a centerpiece of British Christmas. We've adopted so much from you that it's nice to know it has gone both ways. I think goose was more common before, wasn't it?

ALAN: Oh, the British aren't proud. We'll steal good ideas from anyone. Yes – there was a time when goose was on the menu, but that time is long gone. I've never seen it served.

American movies and books always seem to have football games as the centrepiece of the celebration. Is this really the case or is it just a movie cliche? It seems weirdly inappropriate to me, given what lies behind the idea of Thanksgiving.

JANE: Sadly, yes. Football games have become inseparable for some people from celebrating Thanksgiving. My mom tried to resist this, but finally had to give in and permit a small television in a side room so that the addicts could get their fix.

Fortunately, for me, Jim can do without Thanksgiving football, so unless we're at someone else's house, we have a more traditional celebration centered around food, games, food, conversation, food, and… Well, food. I don't do nearly as elaborate a meal as my mother did, although last year we came close. You see, for my mother, ravioli are part of a traditional Thanksgiving meal.

ALAN: Ah, ravioli! That famous Native American dish. I've read so many exciting novels that describe the central American plains teeming with herds of the wild ravioli. I gather that they are dangerous beasts and few hunters escape unscathed from their encounters with the fearsome ravioli, particularly in the mating season. You must be very proud of your mother's hunting skills. Tell me more!

JANE: Alan, you are a very silly person, true to the heritage of the island nation that gave us Monty Python. I am proud of you. Heritage is so important to holidays.

Genetically, my mom is half-Italian. However, since she was reared near her Italian relatives, when it comes to holiday foods, the Italian influence dominates. So our Thanksgiving meal would start with homemade ravioli in red sauce. Then, because my mom wanted Thanksgiving to celebrate our multi-cultural heritage, we'd move on to a course of homemade kielbasa and kapusta (a cabbage dish) from my father's Russian side. The kielbasa, by the way, was a homemade fresh sausage, nothing like the salty, smoked version.

By the time the turkey came out, people were looking cross-eyed and stuffed already. I swear that the year the turkey platter flipped in my "Uncle" Bill's hands and spread some turkey (there was more) on the floor some people actually looked relieved!

ALAN: Robin's birthday is 17th November, very close to Thanksgiving. Perhaps next year, to show how thankful I am to have her in my life, I'll cook her an American Thanksgiving dinner. With asparagus of course. It's at its best right now and I dearly love it.

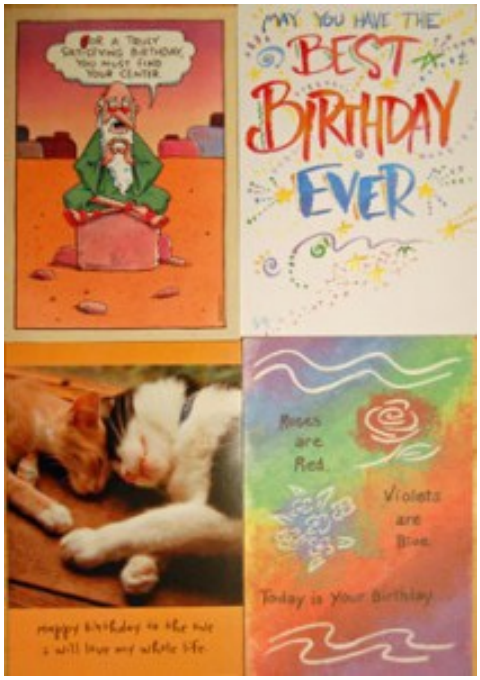
JANE: I'll happily supply menus. I'm curious. When I was doing research for *Fire Season*, my collaboration with David Weber, I was surprised how many different birthday customs there are. Are there any particular British birthday customs?

ALAN: A few…

JANE: Then tell me all about them! And to all of you who are sharing this holiday – or its aftermath – with us, may you have much to be thankful for!

Happy! Happy! Clap! Clap!

JANE: So, Alan, you promised to tell me about particularly British birthday customs.



Birthday Cards

ALAN: I presume that you sing "Happy birthday to you..."? Well, in 1960s England there was a record request programme on the radio which was specifically for children and whenever a birthday request was received the DJ would play a jingle of a rather adenoidal child singing a subtly changed lyric:

Happy birthday to you
Squashed tomatoes and stew
Bread and butter in the gutter
Happy birthday to you

This was enormously popular and I will swear that a whole generation of children grew up quite ignorant of the proper words.

JANE: Here the traditional "Happy Birthday" song took a blow some years ago.This is the story as I heard it.

A number of chain restaurants were making quite a big thing out of birthday celebrations which would often include a free slice of cake for the lucky guest.In order to get this, however, the guest had to submit to the indignity of a large chuck of the wait-staff gathering to sing "Happy Birthday to You," loudly and, in the best Harry Potter tradition, off-key.

This was ruled as "for profit" and a lawsuit was brought by the owners of the song, insisting they were entitled to compensation.So the restaurants wrote their own, usually horrible, songs.The one I really hated began with "Happy!Happy!"followed by loud, synchronized clapping.Probably the only good thing about this was that since it was chanted, rather than sung, it wasn't as likely to be off key.

Even this seems to have died out, so those of us who aren't celebrating birthdays don't need to suffer.

ALAN: I once came across a birthday card much decorated with birds, pairs of sheep and ethereal looking hippopotami. The lyric inside read:

Hippo birdy two ewe...

JANE: Yes.That originated (I believe) with the artist Sandra Boynton.I like her more whimsical work quite a lot.I had a tee-shirt that depicted a very serious rodent wearing a curled wig playing a piano.The slogan read "Gopher Baroque."

I still have a coffee mug my sister Susan gave me back when I was teaching that shows why "The Little Joys of Teaching are Without Number." It reminds me why I'm happy to be struggling to make a living as a writer.

But I have taken us off topic.Tell me about British Birthday Cake.

ALAN: No birthday would be complete without cake. But this caused my mother enormous problems because, as a child, I had a great intolerance for eggs. The slightest trace of egg in anything I ate would make me ill for hours.These days I can eat them if they are well-diluted with other things so cake is back on the menu. However I don't regard it as much of a treat.

My mother solved the egg problem by digging out her wartime recipes. Many basic foodstuffs were unobtainable or severely rationed during the war and much ingenuity went into devising substitutes. Apparently you ***can*** make cake without eggs (I have no idea how), though it sits rather heavily in the tummy.

But tradition and my parents insisted that there must be cake, with a candle for every year on it. I was

utterly hopeless at blowing the candles out so I never got any wishes granted. What a shame.

JANE: Well, at least you never had to try and blow out an entire doll!One year my mom carefully made me a cake that looked like a princess in a big skirt.There was a doll in the center and her hair caught fire…I can still remember the weird smell of synthetic hair and burning sugar.

ALAN: That sounds like fun!

JANE: I guess every family has personal twists to the celebration. My brother and I have the same birthday. No.We're not twins.We just have the same birthday. My parents did somersaults to make sure neither of us felt cheated.On alternating years, one of us would have a "kids" party, while the other got to invite the grown-up friends.

My sisters' birthdays were exactly a month apart, so they got the same arrangement. It worked.

ALAN: Birthdays that are so close together can cause problems. My mother's and father's birthdays were 11th and 13th November respectively, closely followed by Christmas. Therefore, I used to have a huge financial crisis at the end of every year. After my parents died I got quite nostalgic over my missing annual financial crisis so when I learned that Robin's birthday was 17th November I absolutely ***had*** to marry her.

JANE: July was Parents' Month in our house. Both birthdays and their anniversary. I was horrible about getting the dates right. My dad's birthday was my particular short-coming. I'd send a card, but then call on what I thought was the date. Usually, I was wrong, but Dad seemed amused.

ALAN: Sometimes birthdays clash with other celebrations. My mother's birthday (11th November) is also Armistice Day. Robin's father's birthday is Christmas and when he was small he bitterly resented the fact that he only got one set of presents. So now he celebrates a half-birthday in June so that he gets two sets of presents, just like everybody else.

JANE: I like how Robin's father handles that. A couple of my nieces and nephews suffer from a similar conflict. I wonder if they'd like the change?

Birthday meals in my food-oriented family were always a big thing.The birthday child chose the menu. One year, when my brother was about six, he decided he wanted hotdogs and snails. (My mother never called things by fancy foreign terms.We ate snails and squid – not escargots and calamari.) My mother bravely built a menu around this request.

ALAN: The best birthday party I've ever been to was for Robin's niece. She was 5 years old and her mother had hired the school hall and a children's entertainer. So the hall was full of sticky, shrieking children having enormous, but well supervised, fun while the adults congregated in a side room and sipped champagne. That's the way to do it!

JANE: Sounds a bit overwhelming, but then I wouldn't be drinking champagne.

ALAN: To each their own. Perhaps our readers could tell us how they celebrate birthdays in their families…

Sex and Violence

JANE: Alan, in the comments to one of my blog articles, you brought up something really interesting about American versus British attitudes towards sex versus violence. Because it's more fun, let's start with sex. Are you serious that a flash of a bare breast really doesn't cause panic and public outrage on British TV?

Sex and Violence

ALAN: Of course it doesn't. What's scary about breasts? Generally speaking they are very beautiful. I remember being amazed the first time I saw some imported bit of American TV and all the ladies had square lumps on their chests because their breasts had been pixellated. It must be very hard to buy bras when your breasts are square…

JANE: When was this? Wouldn't the pixelation have been on the side of your broadcasters?

ALAN: I don't remember when it was, but it would certainly have been in the original. Generally speaking, we don't pixellate.

My first televised breast was probably some time in the mid 1960s. My father had just bought a colour TV because the BBC was about to start broadcasting a docudrama about the life and times of Casanova. The programme did cause something of a stir as I recall, mainly because everyone was very jealous of the actor who played Casanova. What a wonderful job he had!

JANE: I note that no one envied the women. This does cast a doubt as to how wonderful this Casanova was…

ALAN: Good point! Obviously the actor himself didn't have a good point… Now a question for you – are American bed sheets really L-shaped? If American TV is to be believed, after sex all men lie back and relax with their hairy chests in full view and all women lie back with the sheet pulled demurely up to their chin. Robin and I tried it once, just to see if we could make it work. We couldn't. Our sheets are rectangular, they cover each of us equally.

JANE: No, they're not L-shaped! The men push the sheet down and the women get the slack. This has nothing to do with prudery. It has to do with staying warm. As you noted, men have hairy chests. Most women are not gifted with fur, so they need sheets. <grin>

ALAN: Hmmm. Perhaps I'd better buy Robin a shaving set for Christmas. Oh, sorry! That's one of the cats. How did he get there…

When you go below the waist, things get even more peculiar. There's a hugely popular stage show in Australia called *Puppetry Of The Penis* which demonstrates the ancient oriental martial art of genital origami to great effect. I've never seen the stage show, but I have seen excerpts from it on television (no pixellation) and the DVD is freely available in the shops. Anyone can buy it, there aren't any age restrictions on it.

JANE: I've heard of this. It sounds very silly to me – and a bit painful. Since I'm not much of a television watcher, someone else will need to fill us in on whether this show is widely available in the U.S.

Since origami involves twisting and folding, one could argue that this puppetry combines sex and violence. You were very eloquent on the subject of American televised violence. Would you mind re-stating for those people who don't read the Comments?

ALAN: Certainly. I've observed with some disquiet that over the last few years American prime time television (and, I suppose, by implication American culture in general) has tended more and more towards an everyday acceptance of the appallingly graphical depiction of ever more grotesque

violence. Blood, guts, and dismembered body parts fill our screens night after night and they are presented to us in lovingly detailed and lingering close-ups.

I find programmes such as *CSI* and *Bones* and *NCIS* and all the rest of them almost impossible to watch. I'm not squeamish; I have a first aid certificate and I've seen real blood and I've treated real injuries. Nevertheless the glorification of violence on these programmes, the voyeuristically gleeful concentration on the details of hideous injuries, the lingering close ups of decomposing bodies (thank goodness we don't have smell-o-vision yet), the casual acceptance of violent death, the assumption that might is right and all you need is a bigger gun or a bigger knife to win the day against any opposition, and the fact that this state of affairs is considered to be normal (even desirable) – all these things combine to sicken me and they send my fingers racing for the channel changer or the off switch.

Frankly, I'd much rather watch a naked couple making love. There's more truth and beauty and magic and poetry in that than there is in any amount of blood, guts, and maggots.

JANE: I've wondered about the same thing. The most common justification I've heard goes as follows: If we don't show violence in a graphic fashion, then viewers will think people die neatly and easily and don't rot, like in the old movies where someone would stagger a few steps and collapse dramatically, with minimal blood and guts.

Certainly, there's some justification to that approach, but then, by the same logic, sex scenes should be as graphic as possible to encourage everyone to see how much fun sex can be.

ALAN: I completely agree.

JANE: The reality is, however, that Americans aren't as desensitized to graphic violence as it might seem – or at least this one isn't. I do worry about the impact on younger people. Jim and I saw the first *Spiderman* movie in the theater. Sitting behind us was a father and his young sons. I can't say precisely how old they were, but certainly no older than ten or eleven.

During the big fight between Spiderman and the Green Goblin, Spidey is trying not to hurt the man he knows is his best friend's father (and someone who has been sympathetic to his own scientific dreams). Consequently, Spidey is getting badly hurt. Behind me, I heard one kid say in an agonized tone of voice, "Dad, why doesn't Spiderman just hit him!" Rather than seeing the conflicted emotional text, all this boy was learning was the need to hit harder. That troubled me.

Another example: I know a young man who, from childhood, has been prone to nightmares. His parents continue to let him watch whatever he wants, then wonder about their son's suffering nightmares and sleepwalking. If we're going to have all this graphic violence, I wish there was some sense of what is and isn't appropriate for young imaginations – and more willingness to moderate.

I could keep going, but I'll stop here since otherwise I'm going to start seeming closed-minded.

ALAN: It's a question of degree. Perhaps TV violence has grown too extreme and TV sex is not extreme enough.

JANE: That's a thoughtful way to look at the question. Perhaps we can discuss where to find the balance in the comments.

Christmas is Coming!

The 12 Guinea Pigs of Christmas

JANE: Everywhere I go, I hear Christmas carols. Decorations are appearing both in neighborhoods and in stores. Even the weather seems to be trying to get into the holiday spirit. We've had several light dustings of snow.

And for you, Alan, it's mid-summer… Does that have an impact on how you feel about the Christmas season? I mean, I've celebrated Christmas in warm climates. Both Jim and I have family in Arizona, but even so, it's still winter there, even if there's no snow.

ALAN: Sometimes Christmas here is very cooperative and we get cold temperatures, clouds and drizzle which gives a nice traditional English feel to it. But usually the weather is beautiful – warm, sunny, and cheerful. For me, the highlight of this time of year is seeing the pohutukawa trees in bloom. New Zealand has very, very few native flowers. The indigenous plants tend more towards fern-like structures. However the pohutukawa tree is one of the rare exceptions. At this time of the year it starts to cover itself with gorgeous bright red flowers and by Christmas Day it is usually at its most magnificent. People who can't pronounce pohutukawa often refer to it as New Zealand's Christmas tree, which is an absolutely perfect name for it.

JANE: The pohutukawa sounds lovely. I'd like to see one someday.

My personal favorite part of Christmas is actually Christmas Eve. I love the tingle of anticipation, but it's not just that. When I was a kid, every year my mom would plan a variation on the traditional Italian seafood dinner. Specific items might vary, but there was a lovely sense of ritual in the simmering of the clam and lobster spaghetti, the sizzling of stuffed squid, and all the rest.

ALAN: I didn't know about that Italian tradition. Could you elaborate on your squid rituals?

JANE: Seafood for Christmas Eve dates back to when that was "meatless" day for the Catholic Church. However, the way the Italians approached the challenge, there was no suffering involved.

Not everyone eats squid, of course, but it's a personal favorite in my family. One year, when I was in high school and Mom was in law school, Mom decided she couldn't find the time to clean the squid. My sister Ann and I couldn't bear for the squid to be left out, so we begged to learn how to clean it.

I remember with great fondness standing shoulder to should with Ann over the twin kitchen sinks, twisting squid apart, pulling out the guts, cleaning off the outer membrane until we had a nice heap of white squid bodies ready to be stuffed with seasoned bread crumbs. The tentacles were simmered with garlic and pimentos, then served as a topping for crackers.

Yum!

ALAN: Christmas food is quite special in our house as well. Since I cook every day during the year, I refuse to do it at Christmas time. I regard Christmas as the chef's holiday. So our simple Christmas fare consists of easily put together things from the fridge and the fruit bowl. I always make sure to stock up on the staples (whole grain bread, ham, smoked salmon, fresh strawberries and raspberries, champagne), and even some luxuries such as cheese. Yes – to me cheese is a luxury. I'm not supposed to eat it (too much fat) but New Zealand makes some of the most beautiful cheeses in the world and I can't resist a brie and a stilton, a gouda and a cheddar. So at Christmas I indulge myself sinfully. To echo you: Yum!

JANE: My other favorite part of Christmas is the decorations, especially putting up the tree. It was always such a wonderful ritual. Carols playing. Cookies baking. Dad stretching out the lights and seeing what bulbs were out… Then putting on the ornaments. There was that wonderful day when the parents decided you were old enough to handle the fragile ornaments…

That led to a pretty funny tradition of its own.

ALAN: What is that?

JANE: My sister, Susan, is five years younger than the next sibling in line. So, just as she was toddling about, ready to help, the rest of us were allowed to handle fragile ornaments. Mom solved the problem by buying a couple boxes of unbreakable red "velvet" balls for Susan. Susan would then hang these all with remarkable efficiency on one or two branches and make a beeline for the fragile glass.

We would quickly hand her other unbreakables, but Susan knew what she wanted – the most fragile pieces available. It made for a rather fun game – especially since, later, someone would go in and spread the red velvet balls around so we didn't have one lower limb all red. Susan always noticed.

I think she has those balls for her own tree these days.

ALAN: Do you have real trees? Or do you use artificial ones?

When I was a child, our tree was one that my father had made himself out of crepe paper and wire coathangers. He was actually a very talented craftsman and he could make wonderful things from the most unlikely materials. I suppose it came from his experiences during the war when pretty much everything was unobtainable and people learned to make do. Anyway, every year the tree came down from the loft and was carefully draped with baubles and a plastic Santa Claus perched proudly at the top. We would also fasten loops of string across the room and hang our Christmas cards on it.

JANE: Your father must have been very talented, especially for crepe paper to survive year to year. When I was a kid, we always had real trees. Taking care of the tree was my job, so every day I'd squiggle underneath and carefully pour water into the stand. I never missed, because I knew if the tree started shedding needles, that was it and I wanted the tree to stay up as long as possible.

When the tree was finally taken down, it was tossed into the street for trash collection. I'd feel horrible, almost as if I'd lost a pet. Consequently, although I love the smell of "real" trees, my tree now is artificial. Sometimes I'll buy pine boughs for the scent, but never a tree itself, because I know a tree died to be a disposable ornament.

ALAN: I must confess that these days I'm a bit of a curmudgeon as far as Christmas rituals go. (Bah! Humbug!). Our tree is a small plastic model about two inches tall which sits on top of the television. Also I never send Christmas cards to anybody (and therefore I never receive any either) because I regard the habit as a bit of a commercial ripoff which benefits only the card manufacturers. One year I seriously considered putting an advert in the personal column of *The Times* saying that this year I would not be sending Christmas cards. Then I planned on sending everybody that copy of the newspaper in lieu of a card. I never got round to it, but I still think it's a good idea.

JANE: Oh… I do Christmas cards. I love getting them, too. Jim and I have two lengths of brocade chord on which we hang the horizontally-oriented cards. The vertically-oriented cards fit into a special wreath. We have a basket for extras and Christmas letters. We read all of those, delighting in catching up with people. I used to do handwritten notes in each card, but stopped the year we lost my father, my grandfather, and a couple of beloved pets. I knew I'd commit suicide if I had to write that news over and over again. So now I do a general newsletter and still often write something by hand as well.

However, I seriously dislike e-Christmas cards. In fact, I've been known not even to open those when they arrive in my in-box.

I'm behind this year, so I'm going to go and address a few more envelopes. (Yes. I do these by hand.) I'll take out fresh cookies (yep, I make my own) and a cup of coffee. Wish you were close enough to join me!

ALAN: Me too!

Almost Here!

JANE: Well, Alan, I'm starting to feel quite excited and full of Christmas cheer.

Cookies for Santa

My packages are in the mail and just about all the decorating is done. Christmas Eve is just around the corner. And then…

ALAN: And then it's time for bed because Father Christmas is coming tomorrow!

My parents would force themselves to stay up until about 3.00 am to make sure that I was really sound asleep and then they'd put a huge pillow case full of excitingly wrapped presents just inside the door of my bedroom before they went off to bed themselves. In retrospect, I can't help thinking that they brought the full horror of what came next on themselves…

An hour or so after my parents went to bed, I'd wake up, spot the pillow case that Father Christmas had left for me and start investigating all the parcels. Often there would be drums to bang, racing cars to *vroom, vroom* around the bedroom, and science kits (batteries included) with which the adventurous boy could make door bells, air raid warning sirens and atomic bombs. One year I got an electric kit which contained an induction coil with two bare metal handles. I connected the batteries, turned the circuit on and grabbed hold of the handles. A massive electric shock threw me out of bed on to the floor, and I screamed with mingled pain and pleasure.

JANE: Oh, no! How did your parents react to your scream?

ALAN: Much as they did to all the other Christmas noises coming out of my bedroom. "Go back to sleep!" my father would yell every year. He was a very naive man, with no understanding of the ways of children. My mother would put on her red flannelette dressing gown and come into my bedroom. Between jaw breaking yawns, she would examine my presents with me and agree that, one and all, they were the best presents ever.

I miss that excitement. Presents in our house this year will be rather boring. I'm buying Robin two new front tyres for the car and she is buying me two new tyres for the rear wheels.

JANE: I must admit, Jim and I are suckers for surprises and special gifts. Sometimes we can't manage a surprise. This year, Jim is getting a piece of pottery by Michael Kanteena, a local Indian potter who specializes in recreations of ancient works. I saw Jim making eyes at this one pot and knew I couldn't skip it. However, most years, as the song says, "We try to surprise one another."

Being American, we had Santa Claus, rather than Father Christmas, but the excitement and anticipation was the same. My parents did a lot to build it up. First, we were threatened with unmentioned penalties if we woke them too early (too early was still pretty early). Even so, we'd wake before. Then we'd creep into my brother's room (it was closest to the stairs) and whisper until it was time to wake the folks. Then we'd march downstairs and head for the stockings and investigate the unwrapped Santa gifts under the tree. When this was done and we'd eaten something (Santa always included nuts and tangerines in the stockings) and my folks had coffee, we'd open gifts ceremonially, in order of age, with the youngest handing around packages.

Christmas morning was colored with scattered wrapping paper. I still enjoy that, so, if we're at home, the paper is all over the floor and the cats are jumping in and out of it, batting bits around and getting into any and all available boxes. If we're traveling, we follow the custom of the household. My father-in-law takes great pleasure in grabbing each piece of paper, practically before it hits the floor, and either folding it up or stuffing it in a trash bag. I admit, that startled me, some, but now I see it's a game for him and take pleasure in that.

ALAN: Another very important Christmas Day ritual that dates from my childhood is listening to the Queen's Speech. We would all make sure to huddle round the television set and turn up the volume. Queenie herself was always nicely dressed, sometimes formally and sometimes in a cozy twinset and

pearls. Her hair was freshly permed. There was always a lavishly decorated Christmas tree in the background of the picture and Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. She spoke to us with the precisely enunciated, glass-etching vowel sounds of the English aristocracy.

"My husband and I..."

I feared for the integrity of our cathode ray tube, but it always survived unscathed.

JANE: Does the Queen still make a speech these days?

ALAN: Oh yes! I understand that in England it is still an important ritual, not to be missed. However it's of much less importance here because the royal family is not an everyday part of our lives. Interestingly though, when I took out New Zealand citizenship, I was required to swear allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, Queen of New Zealand. Presumably she is quite a different person from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, Queen of England to whom I owed allegiance as a birthright.

JANE: Lacking a monarch, our televised rituals tend to be movies or themed programs. When I was a kid, we watched several. My favorites were *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. When Jim and I got together, I introduced him to both of these. He introduced me to the movie *White Christmas*. Now, every year, we try to find time to watch all three before the holiday, if at all possible, although sometimes *White Christmas*, which is quite long, has to wait until after.

ALAN: When I was a child, for some strange reason the Christmas TV movie always seemed to be an impossibly young-looking John Wayne in *Stagecoach*. These days it tends to alternate between *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound Of Music* and *The Wizard Of Oz*.

And now it only remains for me to say *Nga mihi o te Kirihimete* to you and Jim and to all our readers.

JANE: *Feliz Navidad* to you and Robin and everyone else! And wherever you are, in summer or winter, at home or on the road, Merry Christmas (or whatever your name for the winterfest may be) to you all...

Ringing in theYear


Let's Celebrate!

JANE: For the last couple of weeks, we've been talking about the flurry of Christmas season activities. I suppose, in light of how much I enjoy some of these, it's going to sound strange, but I also love the week between Christmas and New Year.

When I was a kid, that week was a time when school (and homework) was comfortably distant. There were new things to play with and still quite a few interesting things to eat. Then, at the end of the lull came New Year's Eve. My parents often held a semi-formal party. It was a great Coming of Age ritual when you were considered old enough to get dressed up (girls in long gowns), and try to stay up until midnight.

ALAN: It's very exciting the first time you watch the calendar tick over. Let's pretend it's midnight (it MUST be midnight somewhere) so that I can be the first to wish you Happy New Year.

JANE: And a happy, healthy, and catastrophe-free 2012 to you. Happy New Year's!

ALAN: I've often wondered where that extra "s" came from. I hear it a lot in American movies and it always sounds strange. Since there's an apostrophe lurking in there I presume it's a possessive – so the obvious question is Happy New Year's what?

JANE: Happy New Year's Day… Or New Year's Eve. Americans like to shorten things. Often the apostrophe gets left out of pre-made decorations and therefore adds to the confusion.

ALAN: How bizarre! Of course I get to say it long before you do because New Zealand is the very first country in the world to get the new year (well, apart from Antarctica of course, but I'm not sure that really counts). When the millennium turned over, Robin took great joy in ringing her parents in Western Australia and accusing them of being behind the times because they were still living in the last century.

JANE: I used to live on the East Coast, so I was on the earliest time zone for the U.S. New Year. When I moved to New Mexico, I was startled to get "Happy New Year" phone calls when – for me – it was only ten p.m. I don't think I've ever felt quite the same about "seeing in the New Year" since. Some years, Jim and I even go to bed before the big moment. Last year, though, we saw the year in with our next-door neighbor and that was rather nice.

ALAN: There have been times when we have stayed up to see in the New Year with a glass of champagne, but these days mostly we sleep through it because we are old and boring.

JANE: New Year's Day itself can be a let-down. I suppose it's because too many people are recovering from the late night before.

Some years my mom would experiment with a new recipe, but that's about as far as New Year's Day rituals went. Therefore, I was surprised when I went to college to learn that many people had important New Year's Day customs, often related to inviting in luck and prosperity for the coming year.

ALAN: The British traditions are based around this idea of inviting luck and prosperity into the house as well. How do you approach it? I'm curious to see if the British customs have survived their journey across the Atlantic, or if you have developed your own.

JANE: Well, one custom was to put money – loose change would do – on the windowsill, outside the window itself, if possible. This was to invite more money to come after. Another was that pork should be served as part of the menu, because it is rich and would make you rich. I suspect the "richness" was not just cash in pocket, but also in other good things.

ALAN: What interesting ideas! We've got first footing which describes the first person to cross the threshold of the house as the New Year dawns. Traditionally, the first footer should be a dark haired man who brings a gift to the house, symbolising all the gifts that, hopefully, will flow through the door

as the year advances. Often, for some odd reason, the gift will be a lump of coal. This can lead to a flurry of door knocking just after midnight as first footers travel the neighbourhood. Coal is hard to obtain in these modern central-heating days, so today's first footers usually bring food and drink with them.

JANE: Why a dark-haired man? Do you know?

ALAN: There's a suggestion that it dates back to the days of the Viking invasions. A blond stranger turning up on your doorstep generally signified all kinds of trouble. Women (and grave-diggers!) are regarded as unlucky first-footers, though I've been unable to discover why.

Once the New Year has arrived, or sometimes even before, New Zealanders set off on their annual holiday away from the hustle and bustle of work. Remember, it's the height of summer here. For all practical purposes, the entire country is closed during late December and January. Don't try and do any business deals here early in the New Year; your phone calls, faxes, letters and emails will go unanswered until February. I work for New Zealand Telecom which is officially closing down on December 19th and not re-opening until January 16th. However staff will still be trickling back in dribs and drabs until well into February. This is not untypical.

JANE: Wow! This is hard to imagine. Apparently, Americans have trouble taking vacations, a problem that electronic communications has only exacerbated. I remember having Christmas dinner last year with a man who couldn't stop checking his messages. He explained with great calm that he had Important Investments he had to track. Sheesh!

I must admit, I'll write, but since I enjoy writing, that's not quite the same. Jim is very good at taking time off. This year he plans to attempt three weeks. He's doing well so far. Last year he got called in early to deal with impending field projects, but he's being quite stubborn.

I hope you enjoy your long time of relaxation.

ALAN: I find I have trouble NOT taking vacations. But of course I regard work as an irritating intrusion into my hobbies.

Meanwhile, let's end as we began – Happy New Year('s)!

Explosive Landscape

Volcanic Basalt

JANE: Hey, Alan! I bet you didn't know that volcanoes make me think of you.

ALAN: It must be my explosive personality, or perhaps the sulphurous smell of my feet?

JANE: Well, you do have an ebullient personality (and Robin is the only person I know who can answer the question about your feet).

Actually, my association has more to do with my visit to New Zealand all those years ago. The other day, Jim and I were driving west in Albuquerque. We'd had snow and scattered whiteness was outlining the volcanic cones on the mesa further west. You wouldn't know this, but what is typically called the West Mesa here isn't actually a mesa at all, but the debris from a volcanic flow. My dad had a Masters degree in geology. First time he came to visit me here, he commented. "You do realized the lava stopped right there."

Dad indicated a point about two tenths of a mile from my house. I'd never really thought about where all that black basalt came from. It doesn't look particularly liquid, like the popular depiction of a volcanic flow, but that's what it is: stopped lava.

So, you and I both live in geologically active land. Yours is just a lot more – uh – volatile. I remember being told that one of the islands was so new that it wasn't there when the first European settlers arrived.

ALAN: New Zealand sits on the boundary of the Australian and Pacific tectonic plates. All plate boundaries are hazardous places to be and New Zealand is very geologically active as the recent tragic earthquakes in Christchurch have made clear. Further north we have volcanic areas and the Taupo area in the middle of the North Island is particularly active. Mount Ruapehu has had several minor eruptions in my lifetime. The mountain itself is a film star - it played the part of Mount Doom in Peter Jackson's *Lord Of The Rings* movies. Typical typecasting in my opinion.

The largest recorded event in historic times happened on June 10th 1886 when Mount Tarawera erupted. Earthquakes were felt throughout the North Island and the mountain exploded spectacularly. A plume of ash rose 10km into the sky and molten lava streamed down its sides. Several villages were buried in ash and mud. The world-famous Pink and White Terraces, large expanses of delicately tinted silica, were completely destroyed.

And Lake Taupo itself is the product of a prehistoric volcanic eruption. The evidence suggests that the eruption must have been significantly larger than Krakatoa. Probably it was the largest eruption ever to have taken place anywhere on Earth. I'm very glad I wasn't around when it happened…

JANE: Another thing I remember about New Zealand was the hot springs. We have them here in New Mexico, too, but none of the people who go to wallow in them seem to realize that this indicates volcanic activity leaking up toward the surface.

Weren't the hot springs important to the Maori way of life? I seem to recall they cooked in them.

ALAN: Yes, that's right. The Maori traditionally cook their food by wrapping it in leaves and burying it in the hot ground. It's known as a *hangi*.

Here in New Zealand, the geothermal areas are so active that they are used to generate about 13% of our electricity. And they are huge tourist attractions of course with their hot pools, bubbling mud and the overwhelming smell of hydrogen sulphide everywhere. The tourists all love the smell – nobody can tell when they fart.

JANE: And it disguises the smell of their feet? <grin> More seriously, how does this make you feel about living in New Zealand. Have you and Robin considered leaving?

ALAN: Yes, we have. In a few years time I will be able to retire with a pension and once I do that it seems likely that we'll move to Western Australia where most of Robin's family live. Western Australia is very tectonically stable. Nothing geological happens there.

JANE: But I'm sure other things do… I've got something else I want to ask you, but I'm going to save it for next time! By the way, officially, Happy New Year!

ALAN: And Happy New Year to you as well.

Geothermic Reads

JANE: Alan, I love what you said last time about Mount Ruapehu being a film star with a starring role in the *Lord of the Rings* movies. It got me thinking about other SF/F stories where an earthquake or exploding volcano is crucial to the plot.

Sleeping Volcano

ALAN: I can think of several, but first I'd like to go off on a tangent. I thought of this after last week's chat.

The volcano chain in the centre of the North Island culminates off shore on a small and *very* active place called White Island. The Department of Geological And Nuclear Sciences (GNS) maintains a webcam there to keep an eye on the activity. Periodically scientists from GNS also visit the island to measure this and that. In 2004 one of them glued a pink plastic dinosaur to a stone on the left of the field of view of the webcam. He quickly became known as Dino and his fame spread far and wide throughout the world. Hits on the webcam went through the roof! Once Dino fell over, and GNS were inundated with emails about it. They had to go and rescue him. Recently the camera has been moved, and Dino now sits on the right of the field of view.

JANE: I love what people will tune in to watch. Maybe I should get a webcam and let people look at my bookshelf or something. Or my garden. Focus on one tomato plant or the bare patch where it used to be…

ALAN: One of the first ever webcams was pointing at a coffee pot. When it was full, everyone knew that it was time for the morning break…

JANE: When I started thinking about geothermal SF/F, I remembered that one of my earliest short stories – never published – featured as background a New York City where the fault that runs along the Harlem/Hudson River system had destroyed most of the area. I knew about this because one of the mysterious buildings on the Fordham University Rose Hill campus (which I attended) was a former seismic recording station. It hadn't been in use for years because the vibrations from the subways confused the signals.

When the East Coast of the U.S. was hit earlier this year with an earthquake, I wasn't at all surprised because I knew there was an active fault.

ALAN: Do you remember the Mount Tarawera eruption I mentioned last time? Alan Dean Foster has written an absolutely stunning novel about it. The book is called *Maori*. It seems that Foster spent his honeymoon in New Zealand which is when he did the basic research. Being an SF writer he couldn't resist injecting some mysticism into the story – there might be moas, and a major character is a rather creepy *kaumatua* (Maori elder). It's a wonderful novel. The sections that describe the eruption itself are brilliantly written and truly scary.

JANE: I haven't read that one, but we may have a copy. Either way, *Maori* is now on my reading list!

Okay. Here's another. Walter Jon Williams' novel *The Rift* is centered around the aftermath of a quake along the New Madrid fault. It's more than a disaster novel because there are some interesting alternate history elements as well.

ALAN: Speaking of alternate history, Harry Turtledove has written a novel called *Supervolcano: Eruption* in which an eruption in Yellowstone National Park devastates the region. I've not read the book, but I assume from the blurb that it follows several groups of characters through an "after the disaster" scenario. These kinds of books were very fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s but they seem to have fallen out of fashion of late. Perhaps they are due for a resurgence.

JANE: I think the disaster novel has become a sub-section of techno-thrillers, but I'm not sure. Steve (S.M.) Stirling's popular *Change* series could be looked at as a sort of after the disaster set-up. He's managed to get double mileage out of one disaster there.

But back to volcanoes and earthquakes.

ALAN: Suits me. By a strange coincidence, Frederik Pohl's latest novel *All The Lives He Led* also mentions a huge eruption in Yellowstone National Park, though in Pohl's novel it happened some time in the past and it has completely disrupted the American economy. The viewpoint character is an American refugee desperately looking for work in Europe.

Is Yellowstone really that dangerous an area? My only knowledge of it comes from the Jellystone Park of Yogi Bear cartoons, which might possibly be less than factually accurate…

JANE: I've never been to Yellowstone, but I'm sure someone reading this can fill you in. My general feeling is that as long as Old Faithful stays faithful, we're okay, but if she ceases in her fidelity…

Oh! Did you ever talk to Vonda McIntyre when she was out there with us in 1995 about the aftermath of the Mount St. Helens explosion? She was so eloquent about what it was like to wake up and find the world covered in ash that I've remembered it ever since. I wonder if she's ever done anything with that in fiction?

ALAN: I certainly remember Vonda's very vivid description of the eruption but I don't recall seeing anything about it in any of her stories.

JANE: Other than mentioning that my *Albuquerque Adept* short story *Hell's Bane* uses the volcanic terrain near my home in an interesting fashion, I'm out of ideas. Maybe someone else can make some suggestions… Earthquakes? Volcanoes? Tsunamis, anyone?

Into the Outback

Outback Steakhouse

JANE: Last week, our friend Chip suggested we go out to dinner at a Australian-themed steakhouse.

ALAN: Good heavens! What on Earth did you eat? Witchetty grubs? If you've never seen a witchetty grub, just imagine a hugely fat, wriggling maggot more than an inch long. I'm told they are quite an aboriginal delicacy…

JANE: No. Nothing like that. It's called Outback Steakhouse and, as far as I can tell, the only thing Australian about the place is the decor. There are lots of kangaroos and boomerangs. Some of these are painted with designs that I think are meant to evoke traditional Abo art. Wait! Is "abo" still an accepted term?

ALAN: No. The accepted term is "aboriginal."

Aboriginal art is really very distinctive indeed, quite pointilliste in some cases, though the dots are rather large. Robin has laid some concrete in our back garden and embedded coloured stones in it to form the shapes of a snake and a goanna (lizard), which is a very aboriginal style. I went to an exhibition of aboriginal art in Melbourne once. It was like nothing else I'd ever seen before and very, very beautiful.

JANE: What Robin did for your back garden sounds lovely. I think an aboriginal style is what the steakhouse decor is trying for, but they get a bit lazy and go for wide stripes in bright colors.

ALAN: That works as well.

JANE: Glad to hear that. Jim has a tee shirt with pointellist aboriginal design featuring various animals. Sharon Weber got it in Australia. We were visiting them and Jim spilled something on his shirt, so Sharon kindly loaned him this one. She looked at it on him and said: "That looks great on you! It's yours."

Maybe in order to understand Australia, I need to start with the basics. Just how Australian is a meal consisting of some form of steak, soup or salad, and a side of your choice?

ALAN: That sounds like a rather ordinary meal to me, something you might get in a restaurant in any country in the world, including Australia, of course. But there's nothing distinctively Australian about it.

However, there certainly are food items that can only be found in Australia, though presumably they get exported as well. Kangaroo is the most obvious one that springs to mind. I think it is a lovely meat. It combines the sweetness of lamb with the texture of beef and is really very tasty indeed. Unfortunately, Robin refuses to eat it because when she was a child, kangaroo was what they fed the dogs with. "You're not feeding me dog tucker!" she tells me in no uncertain terms.

"Yes, dear."

Emu are also farmed quite intensively and the meat is generally available in restaurants. Interestingly it doesn't taste like chicken, as you might expect it to. It tastes like emu.

JANE: Which tastes like? Turkey? Goose? Ostrich? Cheddar cheese?

ALAN: Surprisingly, emu is a red meat. And, unlike other fowl, it is often grilled and served rare (though personally I prefer all my meat a little more well cooked than that). What does it taste like? Well, since you won't let me say it tastes like emu, I think I'd probably have to say it tastes like venison, with perhaps a hint of beef.

Australians are also very fond of their seafood and Moreton Bay Bugs are often to be found on the menu. These are a kind of lobster, which are very popular indeed. I've also eaten crocodile, but that's considered rather exotic and you rarely see it on offer.

JANE: What about side dishes? Are there any typically Australian vegetables or ways of preparing vegetables?

ALAN: No, not really - vegetables tend to be of the English variety, boiled or steamed. However there is a very large emphasis on salads, which are often fruit based (Australia grows a lot of fruit). One of Robin's favourites is made from watermelon and onion as well as the usual trimmings. And remember that we regard salads as semi-vegetables and so they are served with the main course, not as a separate course as you tend to serve them

JANE: Actually, serving salad separately is more a restaurant thing. I think they do it that way to give you something to do while they're preparing the main course.

I'd try a watermelon and onion salad, but I don't think Jim would. He doesn't like watermelon!

I've remembered something else Australian about the Outback Steakhouse, but that's going to have to wait for next time.

ALAN: Fair dinkum, cobber. She'll be right.

JANE: She? Okay… I see we have a lot more to talk about!

Speak Like An Aussie

ALAN: G’day, Jane.


Drowsy Wombat

JANE: G’day back attcha, cobber. Hey… I need to jerk your chain. A couple weeks ago in the comments to my blog you said you prefered when writers didn’t transcribe accents. I believe you particularly protested the use of apostrophes. Now I catch you in the act.

ALAN: Jerk my chain and I’ll flush with embarassment. Oh, look! We’re back to toilet humour again…

JANE: <grin> I’d like to ask about how I might best use language to get across an Australian character. As I said last time, I remembered something else "Australian" about the Outback Steakhouse. The menu was full of what was apparently Australian terms like "bloomin’," "wee dinkum," and "bonzo" or something like that. Sadly, I can’t give you direct quotes because on our last visit I noticed they’d rewritten the menu and eliminated most of these. About the only thing left was a steak called a "Victoria" and a cocktail with "wallaby" in the name.

Do Australians really use expressions like the ones I mentioned or have they fallen out of favor?

ALAN: Well, they do and they don’t. Certainly you will hear phrases such as "fair dinkum" and "bonza" in everyday speech, but often they’ll be used for comic effect, playing to the stereotype as it were. Nevertheless the everyday speech patterns can sometimes be quite colourful. One of the reasons that the film *Crocodile Dundee* was so successful is that it only exaggerated the truth a little bit. Robin came home from work one day, raced into the house, and yelled, "I need a cup of tea! I’m as dry as a dead dingo’s donger!"

JANE: Let’s say I wanted to write a modern Australian character. What language elements would you recommend? And, maybe more importantly, what should I avoid because those terms have become as old-fashioned as "groovy" and "right-on"?

ALAN: That depends on whether your story would be set in a city or in the country. The distinction between the two is vast. People in the outback are very isolated and tend to have a broader, some might say richer, vocabulary than the city dwellers who, being rather more cosmopolitan, tend to speak much like the rest of us, albeit with a distinctive twang. So vocabulary, as is so often the case, tends to be an indicator of both class and profession.

In other words, I don’t know…

JANE: All right. I’ll be more specific. I used the term "cobber" above, but I really don’t know what it means. I’ve simply seen it used as a friendly greeting. Would that still work?

ALAN: "Cobber" just means "mate" or "friend." However, you’d commonly use it to address someone you’d never met in your life before. If the person you were talking to really was a friend, you’d call them by their name. It’s perhaps an informal equivalent of "sir" or "madam." Though having said that, I’m not sure you’d use the term when talking to a woman. It probably corresponds quite closely to "amigo" in your neck of the woods.

JANE: Actually, probably not! I certainly wouldn’t call a stranger "amigo," but I might with a friend. I don’t know if it’s different with guys or people who have lived in New Mexico longer.

"Mate" seems almost classically Australian. So it’s still in use? Is it used for friends as well as strangers?

ALAN: Yes, it certainly is.

JANE: Okay. I’m getting a feel for this. The Outback Steakhouse had restrooms labeled "Sheilas" and "Bruces." Are those terms still in common use today? Would you say "Who’s that Bruce who just

came into the room?"

ALAN: No you wouldn't say that. Though, interestingly, if a woman came into the room you would say "Who's that Sheila?" But if you talked to the man who just came in, and you didn't know his name, you might call him Bruce.

Interestingly, people from Glasgow (in Scotland, which is about as un-Australian as you can get) have the same idea except they call strange men "Jimmy." Robin claims that one of the reasons that she moved to England in the 1980s was that she was fed up of the average Australian male's idea of foreplay: "You awake, Sheila?"

English men, she claimed, had more finesse.

Hopefully, Australians are a bit more sophisticated these days…

JANE: Last week you ended with the the phrase "She'll be right." Do Australians use gender specific language then? Most types of English I'm familiar with that use "she" in that fashion are usually the result of direct translation from another language. An example would be the Italian who says "The pizza, she will be ready in a short time." Stuff like that.

ALAN: The idea of gender specific language is so foreign to English these days that it always raises eyebrows, though it's very common in other European languages. Your Italian example is a good one. The general answer to your question is no, we don't have any real gender specificity. The phrase "She'll be right" just means "Everything will turn out OK." Quite why the female pronoun got attached to it is a complete mystery to me. But then I don't know why ships are always referred to as "she" either. It's just one of those things.

JANE: How about the Australian accent? When my sister studied in England for a year her friends begged her not to try to speak with a British accent (they didn't say what flavor) because they said an American with a British accent sounded like an Australian. So what characterizes an Australian accent?

ALAN: Robin claims that Australians sound the way they do because they speak out of the side of their mouth with the teeth clenched and the lips tightly closed, so as to stop the flies getting in. I've tried speaking that way and she's right! I immediately sound Australian. And so will you…

JANE: Hmm… Let me try that… There's something to what you're saying, but I think I'd need a British accent to get the full effect.

Now, while language and slang are important, as you noted in those same comments, getting the spirit of the character right is more important. Let me warn you! I can already feel the questions piling up!

The Australian Soul

Inquisitive Wallaby

JANE: I'm still thinking about that fictional Australian character. What can you tell me about Australian culture or folkways or whatever? Are Australians really the hard-drinking party animals that automatically come to mind? I know my friend Tori (who studied in Australia for a year) was really impressed that her classmates could party all night and still manage to do well in school. However, students are a special breed the world over. How about the culture in general?

ALAN: Yes, they certainly are the hard-drinking party animals you think them to be. But so are the New Zealanders, the British, the Europeans – in fact almost everybody in the world except the Americans, who have a reputation for being rather prudish about this sort of thing. I remember feeling quite horrified at my first American SF convention when I went to a room party and found only soft drinks on offer. Many times at British conventions I've gone into breakfast clutching a pint of beer because last night's party hadn't finished yet. And I'm not alone in that.

JANE: Okay. So that one's not a stereotype, just cold, hard fact.

Do Australians feel a need to live up to cultural stereotypes or expectations? What I mean is I've noticed that when I'm away from New Mexico, I become acutely aware of the cultural differences between New Mexico and the rest of the United States. I notice the absence of Spanish words, of green chile routinely served with meals, of men with long hair and beards, of both men and women wearing far more jewelry than is typical elsewhere…

I remember one convention long ago – Kansas City, I think – where there was a large contingent of New Mexico authors and fans attending. A rallying cry at some large event was "Chile Eaters over here!" At that time I still lived in Virginia and thought this a very odd way to define oneself. Now I understand completely.

So, is your Robin more Australian than the Australians now that she lives in New Zealand?

ALAN: That's a hard one to answer. Certainly Robin is very conscious of being an expat Australian and she takes every opportunity to emphasise it. For example, she makes a point of wearing yellow and green, the colours of the Australian national rugby team, whenever it seems (in)appropriate. But so many cultural assumptions are built in when you are born to them that I think it's almost impossible to turn them off. It's just something you do, something you take with you whether you are at home or abroad.

The thing that typifies Australian culture for me is its wry, dry humour. They have a truly delightfully ironic way of looking at the world. For example, there was an Australian Prime Minister called Harold Holt. On 17th December 1967, he went for a swim in the sea and never came back. Presumably he drowned. As a memorial, they named a swimming pool after him. It's in Glen Iris, a suburb of Melbourne. You couldn't invent that if you tried!

JANE: That's gorgeous! I bet his ghost appreciated the gesture. I can't resist noting that this is a very wet example of dry humor.

ALAN: Touché!

The other big influence on Australian culture is the way that the sheer size and sterility of the country has affected people's approach to everyday living. Large scale pragmatism is ingrained in the lifestyle. Remember, Australia is mostly desert. Consequently outback stations are widely scattered. They have to be – productivity is measured in acres per cow rather than the more common cows per acre that the rest of the world uses. You need a lot of acres in order to make a living.

JANE: Actually, that sounds a lot like New Mexico. I suspect we have some similar difficulties. How do the Australians handle things like getting the kids to school?

ALAN: Many children at the stations have little or no physical contact with the outside world at all. They can't go to school – the nearest school might be a thousand miles away. And so, since at least the 1920s, Australia has broadcast very high quality educational services across the airwaves. Initially by radio, then television and now the internet. Robin has nieces and nephews in a station way out in the back of beyond, and they go to school via a satellite based high speed broadband connection. And the standard of teaching is very, very high.

JANE: That sounds almost science fictional. It's very similar to how Stephanie Harrington gets her education in Weber's and my books. But you can't send medical care over the net. How is that managed?

ALAN: Again, since the 1920s, a very efficient flying doctor service has provided primary health care to the scattered outback communities. Since you can't go to the doctor, the doctor comes to you. Simple, really.

JANE: Well, I wouldn't say "simple," but certainly admirable. There would be lots of advantages to that model even in a city. No sitting around in a waiting room catching other people's germs. But how are supplies gotten in? The fuel needed to move heavy goods must make everything very expensive.

ALAN: Road trains – huge trucks with several trailers attached – keep the stations supplied. Every six months they drive up, unload the groceries, letters and parcels, then load back up with whatever the station has produced, and take it off to market.

JANE: What about water? As you mentioned, Australia is mostly desert. Desert conditions are one reason that most of New Mexico's population lives in a few urban centers. The folks I know who live "out there" often haul water, but would that work for a sheep station?

ALAN: The stations tend to have their own wells. Some of them even have surface water! Robin learned how to sail a yacht on a lake in the middle of the Tanami desert. It's an intermittent lake – sometimes it's there and sometimes it isn't – but nevertheless it's a lake.

Australia seems to have a lot of intermittent water. The most famous is the Todd River in Alice Springs. It's an old, dried up riverbed where they hold the annual Henley On Todd Regatta. Everybody dresses up as a boat, and they run a race down the riverbed. Unfortunately sometimes it rains and the river gets water in it. They cancel the regatta when that happens…

JANE: I can see my next question already, but I'm going to save it for next time!

Visiting the Last Continent


Drop Bear?

JANE: When you ended last week with a description of the Henley on Todd Regatta, I was rather surprised to learn it was for real. In Terry Pratchett's *The Last Continent* one of the most over the top scenes takes place during a boat regatta on a dry riverbed. I'd assumed this was Pratchett being particularly insane. Now I wonder just how much else I took for fiction is – at least in Australia – pure fact.

If I might, I'd like to bombard you with questions. Maybe you can rope Robin in if you don't know the answers.

ALAN: As a rough rule of thumb, the more outrageous it sounds, the more likely it is to be true. Ask away!

JANE: All right, a large set-piece is the Galah, a parade featuring floats presenting all manner of transvestites. Is there such an event?

ALAN: There most certainly is. The annual Sydney Mardi Gras (there's an irony, naming it after an American festival) is the largest and most flamboyant Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender celebration in the whole world. It employs its own artistic director and every year it showcases the most astonishingly creative floats and costumes that you'll ever see in your life. The parade usually takes place at the beginning of March. It's a huge tourist attraction – people come from all over the world just to see it. It is widely broadcast on Australian TV and it makes untold millions of dollars for the Australian economy.

By the way, Galah is a Pratchettian pun on gala/galah. A galah (pronounced gu-LAR) is a rather raucous parakeet.

JANE: That reminds me… Do wild parakeets ever pick up human language? Pratchett had me laughing hard when Rincewind talks to a flock of wild parakeets, only to find his words echoing back at him in increasingly corrupted form.

ALAN: Yes, they do. The birds are very curious and very intelligent. There are many newspaper stories of bewildered backpackers hearing strange voices coming from the trees in the back of beyond. Expletive laden conversations that almost (but not quite) make sense have been reported. It seems that escaped pets and/or birds that have been released back into the wild have been teaching these fun new sounds to their relatives. According to an article in *Australian Geographic*, the birds are even passing the sounds on to their offspring so it seems likely that English words are now firmly embedded as a normal part of the wild birds' lifestyle.

Robin's brother and his wife had a pet parakeet. Robin says it was so eerily human it was scary. The bird could tell the difference between members of the family, and it would say quite different things to each person. Galahs are natural mimics and they soon pick up a huge vocabulary which they seem to enjoy using.

JANE: How about drop bears? They sounded like koalas with attitude. Were there ever rumors of their attacking by dropping butt first onto their targets?

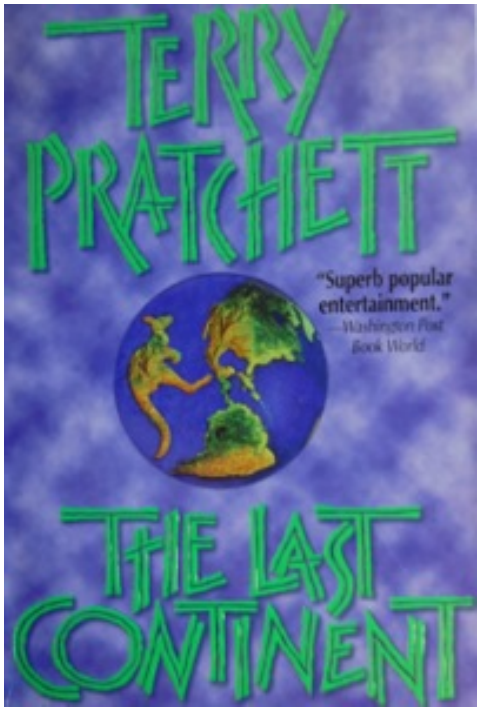
ALAN: Ah! The famous drop bears: carnivorous koalas that live in the tops of trees and drop down on their unsuspecting prey from above. I'll probably be excommunicated for telling you this, but they don't really exist. It's just a story used to tease and frighten gullible tourists and to keep the locals amused. If you want to protect yourself from being killed and eaten by a drop bear, all you need to do is smear vegemite behind your ears. It never fails.

Of course it's always possible that everything I just said is a lie, and that drop bears really are a clear and present danger. Better stock up on vegemite, just to be certain.

JANE: (scribbling note: get vegemite; beware drop bears)

I’ve a few more questions, but I’ll hold them until next time.

Legends of the Last Continent



Our Guidebook

JANE: Okay, Alan, when in Terry Pratchett's novel *The Last Continent*, Rincewind is accused of stealing a sheep, he is astonished to find that everyone wants to turn him into a folk hero. As one fellow puts it, "all our big heroes have been sheep-stealers." Just how firmly is this concept rooted in Australian history and culture? Have criminals become heroes? Given what little I know about Australian history, this must be quite a change.

ALAN: I think the romantic outlaw is part of the folklore heritage of every country. Robin Hood in England, Jesse James in America, Ned Kelly in Australia. Perhaps there's a grain of truth in all of them, and maybe Australia takes the myth further than some other countries do.

An Australian actor called Jack Thompson was researching his family tree for a TV programme called *Who Do You Think You Are?* When he found that he had a convict in his ancestry he said, "Well there you are – I'm a member of the Australian royal family."

These days, that's not an uncommon attitude. There was a time when Australians were a little bit ashamed of their history as a penal colony. Robin's mother would be quite horrified if she found she was descended from convicts (fortunately she isn't – Robin's been digging deep into the family history). Robin distinctly remembers this change in attitude happening in her lifetime. It seems likely that it is a side effect of the general liberalisation and tolerance that was part of the lifestyle of the 1960s peace and love generation. Certainly the baby boomers are very proud of their penal past and now that feeling is quite firmly entrenched.

Colloquially, the Australian outlaws were known as bush rangers. In *The Last Continent*, poor Rincewind gets them confused with park rangers. Let's hope he never meets a real one; there's nothing romantic or funny about armed robbery…

JANE: Thanks, Alan. It's interesting to know when that transition in attitude happened. An archeological article I read recently talked about how many of the early buildings had been destroyed because of their ties to the penal colony past.

ALAN: That's true – though ironically the very first building the convicts built in Fremantle in Western Australia was their own prison, a grim building which remained in continuous use until 1991. These days it's a tourist attraction. When the prison was refurbished prior to opening it to the public, it was discovered that one of the prisoners had spent his evenings drawing beautiful pictures on the walls of his cell. Since this was against the rules, every morning he would gaze his fill on his work and then camouflage his work by smearing his breakfast porridge over the pictures. The next night he would decorate another section of wall. His pictures remained hidden for almost a century, which says much about the quality of the porridge, not to mention the efficiency of the cell inspections.

JANE: Moving back to Pratchett: Was there really a bush ranger called Tinhead Ned?

ALAN: Tinhead Ned is a made up character, but he's definitely an amalgam of the kind of people that populate these legends. The name Tinhead Ned is actually a Pratchettian homage to Ned Kelly who wore a homemade suit of armour with a big metal helmet that covered and protected the whole of his head.

The real Ned Kelly was hanged in Melbourne Jail. The gallows, and the condemned cell where he spent his last hours, are open to the public as somewhat ghoulish tourist attractions. I've sat in Kelly's condemned cell. You can see the gallows from the cell. The execution area is open plan and highly visible.

JANE: How about the ballads? Did Robin get taught these when she was a little girl?

ALAN: Yes, the ballads certainly exist. The ballads and poems are based very firmly on the English and Irish folk tradition. They do tend, on occasion, to be somewhat crudely structured – you will sometimes find the word order of sentences awkwardly changed just for the sake of the (often rather obvious) rhyme. But nevertheless there's an undeniable power about a lot of them.

Banjo Paterson is probably the most famous of the balladeers – he wrote *Waltzing Matilda*, the unofficial national anthem of Australia. He also wrote *The Man From Snowy River* which tells the tale of an attempt to recapture the colt of a prizewinning racehorse which has escaped and is living free with the brumbies (wild horses). They made a film of that one a few years ago…

JANE: *Waltzing Matilda* always makes me cry. It's on a Rod Stewart album I love, but I always skip that one cut. And, you know, I think there's an allusion to that horse in *The Last Continent*. Please, go on.

ALAN: Another very influential bush poet was Henry Lawson. Among other things, he wrote *Andy's Gone With Cattle*. Robin used to teach in a school in a mining town called Paraburdoo in Western Australia, way out in the middle of absolutely nowhere. One year they got an official visit from Princess Anne and Robin led the school choir as they sang:

Our Andy's gone with cattle now
Our hearts are out of order.
With drought he's gone to battle now
Across the Queensland border.

Of course everyone sang out of the side of their mouths with lips and teeth tightly clenched. Robin reports that Princess Anne listened politely but appeared mildly bemused by the whole business.

JANE: "Gone with cattle" – that's so poetic. If I'm translating correctly, this means he's taken up cattle ranching and his family knows he's up against a tough battle because of the continually dry weather.

ALAN: That's exactly right. And the concern with drought is a very real fear. The subject obviously meant a lot to Lawson. He wrote two different versions of *Andy's Gone With Cattle* but both had the central theme of struggling against drought.

JANE: All right! I'm getting the hang of this Australian stuff now. Pratchett is turning out to be a surprisingly good guide. We've got the setting and some of the soul. Now for something completely different…

Meat Pies and Cork Hats

Zoo Roos

JANE: In Pratchett's *The Last Continent*, there's a competition to name desserts after opera divas. What's that all about?

ALAN: Well, everyone has heard of Peach Melba, of course. That's named after Dame Nellie Melba who was a famous nineteenth century Australian soprano. But the quintessential Antipodean dessert is named after a ballet dancer rather than an opera singer.

The pavlova is a meringue with a crispy crust and a soft, marshmellowy interior. It is topped off with whipped cream and fresh fruit. The folklore says that it was created to honour the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova when she toured Australia and New Zealand in the 1920s. Since she toured both countries, both countries claim to have invented it, which leads to endless arguments of course. New Zealanders get quite passionate about claiming the pavlova for their own. The Australians are rather more laid back about it and Robin claims that few people are even aware that the argument exists at all.

In 1999, Te Papa, the National Museum of New Zealand, baked a 45 metre long pavlova to celebrate its first birthday. It was known as "Pavzilla" and was much admired. In 2005 some students from Hawkes Bay in the east of the North Island baked a pavlova called "Pavkong" which was 64 metres long.

So even if the Australians did invent it, we've definitely got the world record. So there!

JANE: Since, once again, we've managed to get onto the subject of food, what about the meat pie floater? As Pratchett describes it, this is a mushy pea soup with a meat pie in it, sometimes topped with tomato sauce. I'm hoping you'll tell me Pratchett made this one up – especially the tomato sauce.

ALAN: I'm afraid I must disappoint you. The meat pie floater does indeed exist. Pratchett didn't make it up, not even the tomato sauce, though some people prefer mint sauce, and malt vinegar is not entirely unknown. It seems to have been invented in South Australia and it is South Australia's one and only claim to fame. Nothing else has ever been invented there. Most Australians don't believe that South Australia actually exists…

The pie floater is traditionally purchased from pie carts in the small hours of the morning after an evening of hard celebration. Apparently it is good for hangovers, though opinions differ as to whether it cures them or causes them.

JANE: If a meat pie floater - especially with mint sauce – is a cure for a hangover, I've just come up with another reason not to take up drinking!

Just one more question… Rincewind invents a hat with corks hanging from the brim to knock out the flies before they can get to his face. Do – or did – such hats ever exist?

ALAN: Yes. And no. It's a stereotype of course, but nevertheless the fly infested Australian outback certainly demands something to keep the insects at bay. It seems probable that the cork hats or something similar did exist at one time. But if they did, they've long since fallen out of favour and the only place you see them now is in souvenir shops where they sell in their millions to the tourists.

JANE: I can just see a sozzled tourist talking through the side of his (or her) mouth and wearing a cork hat through Customs. I'm beginning to appreciate just how much research Pratchett put into *The Last Continent*. But I'm still certain I can catch him out over-exaggerating! Just wait 'til next time!

Strine and Newzild


Kookaburra Sits

JANE: All right, Alan, thus far you've proven that everything from drop bears to cork hats to the galah has some basis in Australia as we know it. However, I'm sure I've found an area where Pratchett went too far… the language.

Based on *The Last Continent*, it seems I'd be safe adding a diminutive to just about anything an Australian character might say. Beer tins become "tinnies," small bottles of beer are "stubbies," even the Luggage becomes "Trunkie." In fact, it seems the more outlandishly descriptive the language, the better.

ALAN: Diminutives are definitely the order of the day in both strine (Australian English) and newzild (New Zealand English). The shorter the word, the less chance there is of a fly getting in your mouth while you are saying it. Relatives are "rellies," vegetables are "veggies," a barbecue is a "barbie," a present is a "pressie" and a pavlova is a "pav." Even the name of the country itself is abbreviated. Most people refer to it as "Oz."

JANE: Oz… That's good to know. I'd wondered if that was a local nickname or one attached by tourists. Here, tourists who think they're being cool and hip refer to Santa Fe as "the Fe." Locals smile politely and then run off to find a corner in which to let loose hysterical laughter.

ALAN: What does Santa Fe actually mean? I assume that "Santa" is "Saint," but "Fe" has me puzzled.

JANE: Actually "Santa" can mean "holy" as well. A saint is a holy person and "Santo" is usually shortened to "San" as in "San Francisco" or "San Felipe." Interestingly, the feminine "Santa" is not usually shortened, so, for example, we have "Santa Clara" pueblo.

With me so far?

ALAN: So, "Santa Fe" is a female saint?

JANE: Not quite. The full name of the city is La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco. (I've left out the accent marks.)

This translates as The Royal Town of the Holy Faith (that's Santa Fe) of Saint Francis. The priests who came with the founding expedition were Franciscans, so they named the city for their patron. I don't know why the name was shortened to "Santa Fe" rather than "San Francisco," since Santa Fe is older than the famous California city of that name.

Oh… And something I would have liked to know when I was a kid reading Westerns. "Fe" is pronounced "Fey" not "Fee."

ALAN: I'd never have thought of pronouncing it "Fee". It's always been "Fey" to me. How interesting that we both made different assumptions about the pronouncing of it.

JANE: Returning to strine… Colorful personal names seem a very important part of Pratchett's portrayal of *The Last Continent.* There's Tinhead Ned. Rincewind finds himself transformed into "Rinso." So… Do you and Robin get colorful nicknames from your Australian family or are such honors restricted to public figures?

ALAN: To an extent, yes. Again, it's part of the use of diminutives. You might logically expect that I'd be "Ally" and Robin would be "Robby". However, for unknown reasons, I remain just plain Alan. Robin is known as Auntie Bob to her hordes of nieces and nephews, though her father calls her Susie. Robin has many more nieces than she has nephews. To their mild embarrassment, she sometimes refers to her nephews as her boy nieces…

Amusingly, Terry (as in Pratchett), which is already a diminutive, often morphs into "Tezza," and Kerry (who is Robin's sister in law) is "Kezza."

And red cattle dogs are all called Bluey, of course – both as a name and as a breed. You can't get any more colourful than that!

JANE: Australian blue heelers are somewhat popular here, but the ones I've seen are blue/grey, not red. And how did Robin become "Susie"? Confusion yet again…

ALAN: That's a mystery – there are no women called Susie in the family at all. Perhaps her father should have had four daughters instead of three. Then he might have actually been able to have the real Susie that he so obviously wanted…

JANE: All right, now for the grand finale.

There's a phrase Pratchett makes the unofficial slogan of his *Last Continent* – "No Worries."

To me, that seems an amazing philosophy for a people who have to deal with not only Australia's barren landscape but less than happy historical beginnings. However, somehow it seems to reflect this inside out , upside down way of seeing everything. Is that the case?

ALAN: I have a tee shirt with "No Worries" in a speech bubble on it. The tee shirt was manufactured by The Really Serious Tee Shirt Company Of Australia. The phrase is extremely common and, along with "She'll be right" reflects an eternally optimistic view of the future. You could probably refer to both phrases as the Antipodean motto and you wouldn't be far wrong. It's quite amazing how those few words sum up a national character so well. But they do.

JANE: So it applies to New Zealand as well?

ALAN: Most definitely.

JANE: Did they adopt it from Australia or is it something that comes naturally from living on the downside of the world?

ALAN: I think it's just a natural part of living upside down all the time. The blood rushes to the head. By the way, I have a question for you…

JANE: That's only fair, given how I've been bombarding you, but let's save it for next time.

And The Name Goes On

ALAN: Last time you mentioned in passing that the full name of Santa Fe is actually La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco. Are long names like that common in your part of the world? And what, if any, is the connection to the city of San Francisco itself?

Snotingehame

JANE: As far as I know, there is no connection to the famous San Francisco. Maybe one of our California-based readers can fill you in on the source of that city's name.

As for the long names, well, the Spanish did like to name in a fashion that left very little out. The town of Trampas, up near Taos, is actually named "Santo Tomas Apostel Del Rio de las Trampas." A rough translation of this is "Saint Thomas the Apostle of the River of Traps."

An even better example is Abiquiu. This word is probably taken from a Tewa (local Indian tribe) word, but no one knows for sure. However, never ones to leave well enough along, the Spanish combined this with a saint's name.

The original village of Abiquiu was Santa Rosa de Lima de Abiquiu. However, after an attack by Indians, the remaining locals asked if they could move and found another village, they named this one Santo Tomas Apostol de Abiquiu. They tended to refer to their new home simply as Abiquiu. Thus, they made life simpler for themselves while confusing generations of tourists.

You see, the famous painter Georgia O'Keefe's Ghost Ranch is located near Abiquiu. Tourists often want to get there, but they can't figure out how to ask for directions. We locals know Abiquiu is simply pronounced "Ab-i-q" and get to have fun when tourists struggle to pronounce it. The most usual variation is something like "Ab-ee-qee-ee."

ALAN: Gosh! Given how many words there are in those names and how long it takes to say them, I'm starting to wonder if the Spanish are descended from Ents!

The religious aspects of some of those names puts me in mind of Halifax in Yorkshire, where I was born. The word "Halifax" is popularly assumed to be a corruption of the phrase "Holy face" – a reference to John The Baptist whose face does indeed appear on the Halifax coat of arms. I'm not quite sure what his connection to a grimy industrial town in the North of England might be. Perhaps he used to visit for his summer holidays…

JANE: Or perhaps he was the patron saint of some important family in the area. Less amusing, but more likely.

ALAN: When I was eighteen, I moved from Halifax to Nottingham, in the heart of Robin Hood country. That's where I went to university. Did you know that Nottingham is a corruption of "Snotingehame" which means "the home of the family of Snot," or perhaps "the town that Snot built"? The unfortunately named Snot was an Anglo-Saxon who settled in the area some time around 600 A.D. The Nottingham area is world famous for its lace industry. I always wondered if the steady production of high quality lace was a ploy to ensure that Robin Hood always had an adequate supply of handkerchiefs…

JANE: Actually, I knew this one. Walter Jon Williams brought it up when he was running a role-playing game for us set in England in 869. Please note the precision of the date. Walter loves history – and has won a couple of awards for alternate history stories. This meant that he kept filling us in on the historical names of places. It gave an oddly fantasy note to real places.

ALAN: Of course, Spanish America does not have a monopoly on long names… I believe New Zealand

has the honor of being the location of one of the longest place names in the world.

JANE: That sounds tantalizing, but perhaps we'd better wait until next time to get into something so long.

Long and Winding Names

Saint Francis Talks With a Prairie Dog

ALAN: We were talking about long place names. Here in New Zealand we have a hill called:

Taumatawhakatangihangakoauauotamateaturipukakapikmaungahoronukupokawhenuakitanatahu

which is (probably) the longest place name in the world. The English translation of this Maori name is "The summit where Tamatea, the man with the big knees, the climber of mountains, the land-swallower who travelled about, played his nose flute to his loved one" which also makes my mind boggle a little bit! Big knees?

JANE: I have a feeling the blog program is going to have trouble spacing a word that long.

I wonder if this man got his big knees from climbing mountains? Maybe it's a reference to swollen joints and he was consuming edible clay as a cure? That would cover "land swallowing."

ALAN: I bet he had a tummy ache as big as the name after he swallowed it all!

There was a little snippet about this hill on the TV a few years ago. A reporter wrote the name down on a piece of paper and went round a group of people in a pub asking them to pronounce it. Everybody made a complete mess of it of course. Finally he approached a cool looking Maori guy who was hunched over his beer and paying no attention to what was going on. The reporter presented his piece of paper and asked the man to pronounce the name. The man glanced casually at the paper and said, "You spelled it wrong." Then he returned to his beer and ignored the reporter again.

JANE: And had he spelled it wrong?

ALAN: Only the man with the big knees knows, and he's not telling.

JANE: I've got a Spanish hill name for you that's almost as good: Nuestra Senora del la Luz de las Lagunitas." The name translates as "Our Lady of the Light of the Little Lakes." This is the name of a volcanic plug in the valley of the Rio Puerco of the East (that is the Dirty or Muddy River of the East; there's one in the west as well).

A now-deserted village in the area had the even more pretentious name of Nuestro Senora de la Luz San Fernando y San Blas. Despite this appeal to the lights of both Saint Ferdinand and Saint Blais, the settlement failed. Today even its precise location is uncertain.

ALAN: Of course, not all place names are necessarily exotic or full of hints about mysterious pasts

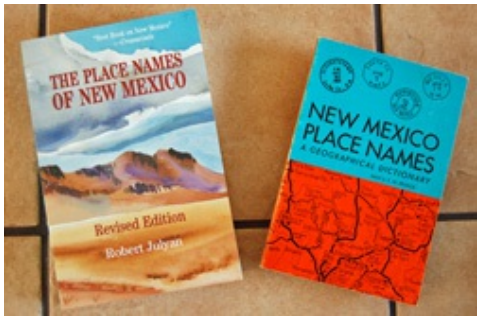
and legends.

I was actually born and brought up in a small village in Yorkshire called Southowram. The suffix "Owram" (I was told at school) is Anglo-Saxon for "on the top of a hill" – so Southowram is the "village on the top of the hill to the south of the town" (the town being Halifax, of course). North of the town was another hill and it boasted a village called Northowram, that is "the village on the top of the hill to the north of the town." Fortunately there were no hills to the East or West of the town…

This unimaginative naming scheme stood me in very good stead when I came to New Zealand which has the aptly named North Island to the North and the even more aptly named South Island to the South. In the north of the North Island, there's a cape called North Cape. To the West and the East, New Zealand also has both a West Cape and an East Cape. It was clear to me that the European names of the various geographical features had all been assigned by a Yorkshireman – as indeed they had. The famous explorer Captain James Cook came from Whitby, which is a small suburb to the North of Wellington, so he didn't have to travel very far to start naming things.

JANE: We have our share of practical names here, but sometimes even the practical hints at something fascinating that happened in the past. And that helps to give a sense of continuity, of roots that anchor the place into the world. It's one of the techniques that an author can use to bring their fictional places alive and it ties in quite neatly to my current fascination with world building, so let's continue next time!

Prosaic Gateways



Incarnations of a Resource

JANE: Well, Alan, we've been talking about place names and how they can be gateways into the history and legends of a place. The funny thing is that, to me, the "prosaic" names are as much a gateway to the mind set of the people who gave the name as the more exotic ones are.

Alan, you were talking about prosaic names. Can you give another example?

ALAN: No worries! In the far north of New Zealand there's a place called the Bay Of Islands – it's a bay; it has islands in it. What else would you expect? Robin and I stayed there once. Round the corner from our hotel was a pub called The Pub Round The Corner.

About five minutes drive from the place we were staying is a beautiful beach with lazy waves. It's just perfect for swimming or for simply sitting in the sun. The beach is quite long; it's called Long Beach. Your turn!

JANE: Your mention of Long Beach reminds me of how confused I was when I went to college and heard people talk about a place called "Lawn Guyland." Everyone spoke about this as if it was a place I should be as familiar with as I was with New York City. Then, one day I realized I did know what they were talking about. Lawn Guyland was Long Island. (This is a long island off the coast of New York; it includes part of New York City.) I wonder if we weren't already a culture with a written language if the original meaning would have been lost to the dialect pronunciation.

Your turn…

ALAN: Not too far away from Long Beach is a flagstaff on top of a hill called Flagstaff Hill. You drive up Flagstaff Road to get to it. There's a church in the middle of Church Street. Ferries run regularly across the bay to a small town called Paihia. One ferry is painted blue; it's called The Blue Ferry. One ferry is painted white; it's called The White Ferry. And one ferry is painted red. It's much faster than the other two and so it's called The Fast Ferry.

Paihia has a mall with 24 shops in it. It's called The 24 Shop Mall. There's a licensed restaurant with a name that cannot be read for the sign outside is written in such a distorted script as to be completely illegible. Possibly the real name of the restaurant is The Illegible Licensed Restaurant, but I'll never know. Your turn!

JANE: Okay… First, I've got to stop laughing… There, managed. Barely…

Especially where it was settled by English speakers, New Mexico has its share of prosaic place names: Cedar Crest, Red River, Grasshopper Canyon, Alkali Lake.

However, often these hint at the humor the pioneers brought with them – or their aspirations for the future. One of my favorites of these is a town currently called Hope. It's original name was Badgerville or Badger, because the residents lived in dugouts, "like badgers." Later, when a post office was located there (this was a sign of becoming a "real" settlement), a new name was needed. "Hope" was chosen, based either on a coin toss or on the "hopes" that the local storekeeper would make more money. Either way, there's a great deal of history in that simple name.

(My source for this story is the fascinating book *The Place Names of New Mexico* by Robert Julyan. Despite its lacking an index and having a rather quirky alphabetizing structure, I highly recommend the book for browsing.)

So even a name that seems pretty ordinary might hide a good story, just as many exotic names when translated prove to be just as prosaic as "Long Island." We both live in areas where the traditions of indigenous peoples remain. I'd love to take a look at the "exotic" names they've left on our landscape and see what they tell us. Next time…

Indigenous Roots

Acoma Pueblo

JANE: We were venturing into the territory of the exotic names attached to our landscapes that connect us to the indigenous peoples who lived here before us and – in places like New Zealand and New Mexico - still live with us.

Alan, you've already given an example in the place of the man with the big knees and the nose flute, but do you have another?

ALAN: Yes I do - but first I need to digress slightly and explain a bit of background. In New Zealand the Maori language is ubiquitous. All the tribes spoke the same language and had a common culture. That influence remains very strong and so Maori names for places are used all the time all over the country, though they may sound a little odd to foreign ears. My favourite is Wanganui (that's pronounced "one-gu-noo-ee"). A local TV comedy programme used to have a segment they called "The Deliberate Mispronunciation Of Maori" and they mangled that into "wan-gan-you-eye", which I found quite hilarious! Even my Maori friends laughed at it.

JANE: I'd like to start with a place I talked about in my blog - Acoma Pueblo. "Acoma" falls into the relatively mundane name category. It translates from its original Keresan as "people of the white rock." In earlier texts, Acoma is refereed to as "Ahacus" and later "Acuco," which shows how often words are transliterated differently by different listeners.

Showing that names are subject to change, Acoma has picked up a modern nickname - "Sky City" - which celebrates its elevated location.

That's just one name, from one language group. Here in the American Southwest, we're blessed with a great number of tribes, each with their own languages. We have Navajo, Apache, Zuni, and Hopi. Although they're frequently lumped together, the various "Pueblo" groups speak languages that fall into several distinct groups: Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, and Keresan.

ALAN: Ah! You've already arrived at the place I was heading to. In Australia, the situation was quite similar to what you have in New Mexico.

The Aboriginal tribes did not have a common culture and there were literally hundreds of mutually incomprehensible languages. Nevertheless, Australia still uses many Aboriginal place names which sound somewhat exotic to our ears and which, because of the different languages, also seem quite dissimilar to each other.

For example, Western Australia is mostly desert, so water is obviously very important. In one Aboriginal language the "oo" suffix means "by water" and so we have towns called Wanneroo and Innaloo. Another Aboriginal language in the same area uses the "up" suffix in a similar context, hence Joondalup and Karrinyup. Those two tribes lived close together and neither could speak the other's language. But their heritage remains.

JANE: Ah, hah! I see now why in his novel *The Last Continent* Terry Pratchett named that one town "Buggerup" and why, despite the obvious joke, the name seemed to fit so nicely into Australian naming structures.

ALAN: I seem to recall that he also had a place called "Didjabringabeeralong" which also seems to fit nicely into this structure but which is, of course, a reference to something else entirely! Pratchett is a very clever man.

Sometimes the sense of history associated with the names used by various indigenous people also shows that no matter how different our cultures are, we all have a shared sense of place and values. This can lead to surprising resonances. For example I once stumbled upon a small, out of the way cottage by the coast in the far north of New Zealand. It had a nameplate attached: "Wharemoana." That translates as House ("Whare") of (or by) the sea ("moana"). In other words, prosaically, Seahouse

or, stretching it a little bit, Seahouses. And the reason that resonated with me is that my father's side of the family comes from a town in Northumberland in the north of England which is called Seahouses. Suddenly I felt at home even though I was on the far side of the world.

JANE: I may be a sentimentalist, but that actually made me tear up. It's wonderful you found a piece of home away from home. I suspect this is the very impulse that leads to so many colonial places being named "New" something - a desire to feel you've brought a bit of home to your new home.

ALAN: And New Zealand is the perfect example of that. Zealand (or more accurately Zeeland) is an area of Holland and I assume that's where the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman came from. He was the first European to see New Zealand, though he didn't land, he just sailed on by.

JANE: This question of names and what they mean to those who live on the landscape brings me to a change I've seen happening during the time I've lived in the Southwest - the reclaiming by indigenous peoples of the names they gave to their landscape. It's a complex topic, though, so I'd like to save for next week.

Taking Back Your Name

Kewa or Santo Domingo

JANE: As I was looking for well-known locations here in New Mexico with names rooted in the indigenous cultures, I realized that most of the places the tourists visit have either Spanish or Anglo names. The best I could find was Taos, which is apparently named for a nearby pueblo. The word from which "Taos" is derived is from the Tiwa language and means something like "in the village." The people who live in the pueblo have a completely different name for their village but, when asked where they lived, they must have replied "in the village."

However, those days are ending. More and more Indian settlements are asserting their right to be called by their original names, not the names others gave them. Santo Domingo Pueblo now is officially "Kewa." In Arizona, the Pima are now known as the Akimel O'odham; the Papago prefer to be called Tohono O'odham.

Even with those groups that have not officially renamed themselves, the trend is such that work by an artist may be identified by both names. So something from Jemez Pueblo may be also identified as from "Walatowa" - the group's name for itself. By the way, "Jemez" is a Spanish version of a Towa word given as "hay mish" - the original meaning of which is still argued about.

ALAN: We are seeing the same kind of thing here. The highest mountain in New Zealand is Mount Cook. It's named after James Cook of course (though interestingly he never saw it!). Its Maori name is Aoraki which is actually the name of a person (an old Maori name for the South Island translates as "Aoraki's Canoe"). In 1998, the government signed an agreement with the major South Island tribe which redressed some of the wrongs perpetrated on them in colonial times. As a result of this agreement, Mount Cook was officially renamed Aoraki / Mount Cook. Both names now appear on maps and both names are commonly used (either singly or together).

JANE: Here there's a neat story about how Washington Pass was renamed Narbona Pass. I'm going to quote from Place Names of New Mexico by Robert Julyan: "The renaming had its roots in the discovery by some NCC (Navajo Community College) students and their teacher, Herbert Benally, that the name Washington Pass honored not George Washington or Washington, D.C., as most Navajo had assumed, but rather Col. John Washington, leader of a US military expedition against the Navajo in 1849."

Well, as you can imagine, the Navajo didn't much care for this. What's wonderful, though, is that the proposed name change was supported not only by Navajos, but by a large number of non-Navajos as well. The new name "Narbona Pass" commemorates a Navajo leader - and advocate for peace - who was killed (and scalped) by the American forces.

This naming blends cultures in that it follows the Anglo tradition of naming for an honored person. The Navajo traditional name was simply "Copper Pass." So in the name two worlds meet.

ALAN: The meeting of two worlds sometimes has strange side effects. There's a big volcano in the west of the North Island. The European name is Mount Egmont but for hundreds of years it was known as Taranaki by the local Maori. The name was reviewed in 1986 and now the names Mount Egmont and Mount Taranaki are used interchangeably. Interestingly the Maori prefix "Tara-" means "Mountain," so Mount Taranaki is obviously a name supplied by the government's official Department Of Redundancy Department.

JANE: Some people find the renaming a nuisance, particularly when the names don't wrap easily around an English-speaker's tongue. Me? I like the challenge. Relatively soon after I moved to Albuquerque, the Navajo reservation area of Canoncito was renamed Tohajiilee. This is pronounced something like "t/d-ha-jo-lee." It's harder to say right, than to spell (which isn't easy). However, I spent a pleasant fifteen minutes or so with a Navajo jeweler who tutored me until, with a big grin, he announced I had it "just right."

ALAN: The Maori language is relatively unstressed and the syllables aren't too hard for a European tongue to wrap itself around. The spelling is largely phonetic since the Europeans who wrote the words down were trying to transliterate what they heard (Maori do not have a written language of their own). There are some rather odd vowel sounds, but by and large it's quite easy to pronounce. However, even though the language is the same all over the country, there are small regional differences of pronunciation. Wanganui, which I mentioned before, is a perfect example. Some people prefer to spell it Whanganui which approximates more closely to one particular pronunciation. Amusingly, after a referendum in 2009, it was agreed that both spellings would be allowed but that official government documents would standardise on Whanganui. There were no rulings on the "proper" pronunciation...

JANE: We're running into something similar here. One complication is that Spanish spellings don't lead to intuitive pronunciations for non-Spanish speakers. A good example is "Jicarilla." This name, which means "little cup" or "little drinking gourd," was attached to several areas and even an Apache tribe.

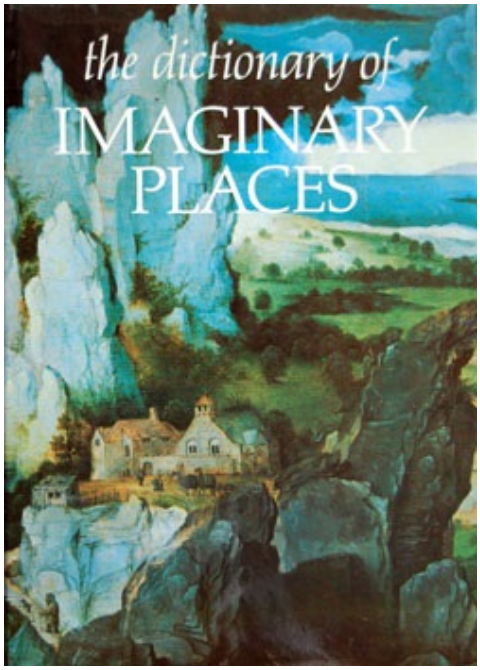
Most English-speakers would pronounce it "ji-ka-ril-a." Its actual pronunciation is closer to "hik-a-ree-a." The quirks of Spanish pronunciation can be managed with a little tutoring.

However, when an Indian group insists on something being referred to by a pronunciation closer to their language, this can cause problems. The Hopi make a ceremonial figure called a "kachina." These have become very popular in art, so much so that other tribes make them for the tourist market. Some Hopi insist that the word is pronounced closer to "katsina" and would like everything changed, but as this has led to a lot of confusion, at least at this point, the change has not become general.

ALAN: I find it fascinating that the places where you and I live are so far apart from each other and yet so similar in the way they work. Is it too trite to say that people are the same the whole world over?

JANE: It's only trite if you forget how very different they are as well.

Naming Imaginary Places



A Source for Imaginary Places

JANE: We've been talking a lot about real place names and what they can tell about the history of an area. Given that we're both readers of SF/F and I write it as well, the logical place to go from here is fictional place names.

As I see it, Tolkien set a really high bar in his books for place names. Not only did he name places and natural features, often they had different names in different cultures.

ALAN: There's no doubt that Tolkien was an absolute genius when it came to naming things. Mostly, of course, this was because he was so immersed in the history (the back-story as it were) of Middle Earth. But he was by no means the first writer to be good at naming things and neither was he the first to work within an invented history.

Robert E. Howard invented a whole mythology and history for the world in which Conan went adventuring. Many of the books which collect the Conan stories together are prefixed with a long and erudite essay called *The Hyborian Age* which goes into this history in great detail. It's an extremely clever essay which sounds completely real and which is very convincing. I think Howard made it so convincing because it was a mishmash of real names ("the Picts") and names which sounded as though they ought to be real ("Aquilonia" - I'll swear that's a province in Spain...). The whole was greater than the sum of the parts and Howard's Hyborian age felt utterly real as a result.

JANE: I didn't read Howard until I was an adult. I really enjoyed the Conan stories. It's a pity how the movies have presented him only as a shallow brawler when he's actually a complex character who evolves throughout his life. I found it easy to imagine that Howard's Hyborian Age fit into real history somewhere.

ALAN: Henry Rider Haggard was very good at this as well. And, like Howard, he did it with a judicious mixture of the real and the imaginary. The Africa in which Allan Quartermain and Umslopogaas lived and died was very real. The lost cities of Kor and Milosis were not. But nevertheless they felt like part of the real landscape and even today the description of Umslopogaas' defense of the Queen's Staircase in Milosis can bring tears to my eyes.

JANE: Now that I think about it, there is a long tradition of fitting imaginary places into our real world. I have a book on my shelf – *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi – that takes a look at a wide range of these from several different genres. I guess making up new places is part of the pleasure of writing.

Of course, there can be too much of a good thing. I remember when I was a kid, I found Tolkien's insistence on everything (and many characters) having multiple names annoying. Rather than adding to my reading pleasure, it detracted from it. I blush now to admit that I preferred *The Sword of Shannara* because things had only one name and it was basically the same plot. To excuse myself, I was very young...

ALAN: There's nothing wrong with youthful follies - we all have them. Personally I was imprinted on Edgar Rice Burroughs at a young and impressionable age. And he too was just brilliant at the naming of names. Burroughs' lost city of Opar, and also Athne and Cathne, two cities eternally at war, were just spellbinding. Again, as with Howard, there were hints of real history to make the story convincing. The cities were lost colonies, probably Phoenician, though I seem to remember that Tarzan also stumbled upon a lost Roman city in one of his adventures.

I was never completely convinced by the city state of Helium that John Carter found on Mars. Even as a child, I knew that helium was actually a gas - it's the gas that makes balloons float and makes people

speak with squeaky voices when inhaled. The mental image of John Carter trying to seduce Dejah Thoris and declaring his undying love in a voice that sounded like Donald Duck always broke the spell of the adventure for me...

JANE: Oh! I also loved Burroughs, especially the Tarzan stories. They had a huge impact on me. John Carter never worked for me, though.

On the whole, though, I like place names that tell you something about the area and the people who settled it. Larry Niven's Known Space was all the richer for me when - as a reader, adventuring, so to speak with the characters - I learned why "We Made It" was called that or why there was a Mount Lookatthat.

ALAN: I find that completely convincing. There's actually a bay in New Zealand called Taylor's Mistake because a ship's captain (the eponymous Mr Taylor) sailed into it under the impression that he was somewhere else entirely. So Niven's names definitely strike a chord with me.

JANE: Great... We've been talking about some of the best, but maybe it would also be fun to look at the worse and the just plain weird. Let's go for it next time!

Mis-Naming Imaginary Places

JANE: Last time we were talking about imaginary place names that work. However, too often I find that SF/F place names seem to have come out of a random name generator and show no sense of consistency or internal logic. Use of such programs can cause another real problem.

Some Imaginary Places

As a writer, I know I favor certain sounds and initial letters almost subconsciously. I've known other writers with this tendency, too... Roger Zelazny, for example, had a fondness for the name "Jack." He uses it in "Shadowjack," "Halfjack," and, I'm pretty sure, a few other places. When it reappeared in "Donnerjack," I pointed this out to him and he just sighed.

Anyhow, when writers use random name generators, they tend to pick similar sounds over and over again, leading to duplication not only within a single book but also within their body of work. Using such programs can be a great way to become generic.

ALAN: Ah, but Roger also had his names of genius. I am particularly fond of the Dung Pits of Glyve where Jack of Shadows gets resurrected. And you have to admire the sheer cheek of placing the Dung Pits at the West Pole of the world!

JANE: I'm the last person to argue if you want to say Roger was a brilliant writer. I certainly agree. He was another writer who had the skill to interweave real place and imaginary places in a fashion that helped make the imaginary more real.

There's one writer I know - but won't name, because what I'm going to say isn't kind - who has such similar names and name structures repeating in some of his books that I get confused as to which series I'm reading. Turns out he uses a random name generator and then picks what "sounds good." And, of course, what sounds good is often the same type of sound.

ALAN: Oh, guessing games! I love guessing games. Let me see...

JANE: Nope. Not telling...

And then there are the just plain stupid place names... They can work, like the Cliffs of Insanity in *The Princess Bride* - in which everything is meant to be exaggerated, but I am amazed how often, especially in the work of newer writers, these come up. It's as if these fictional places were named by real estate developers looking to sell suburban housing.

ALAN: My particular *bete noir* in this area is the practice of stuffing names full of apostrophes. It seems quite common, particularly with writers who are just starting out (though Anne McCaffrey did it all her life long). Just what are the apostrophes meant to indicate? Xhosa clicks? Glottal stops? Contractions? Again I find that they break the spell of the story while I puzzle out how to pronounce them.

JANE: I think the apostrophes are meant to indicate contractions, indications where something has been left out in pronunciation. Certainly, that's what McCaffery intended with her Dragon Riders of Pern. When you became a Dragon Rider, you lost vowels... I was never sure why.

Sometimes using apostrophes works when the writer is trying to indicate how a language has evolved away from its original meaning, so that parts of words are missing. An example might be a futuristic piece where New York has become N'Yawk. Mostly I avoid apostrophes even when transliterating languages where they are used to indicate pauses or sounds not found in English. When I was writing *Changer's Daughter* (aka *Legends Walking*), I learned that one of the most common transliterations of Yoruba used both apostrophes and lots of accent marks. I decided to leave most of these out because they'd drive a reader insane - but I did apologize in my Afterward for doing so.

ALAN: Personally I'm glad you left them out. No apology was necessary as far as I am concerned.

Fictional place names lend themselves well to humour. Pratchett's Ankh-Morepork springs to mind here. But actually there's a better example which isn't related to SF at all.

On April 1st 1977, the *Guardian* (a newspaper in the UK) published a travel supplement which gave glowing reviews of a trendy holiday destination in the Mediterranean - the island paradise of San Seriffe. All the carefully described locations on this island were named after font faces and typographical conventions, though sometimes the names were slightly abused so as to make them look and sound more real (so san serif became San Seriffe, for example). It's probably one of the best April Fool jokes ever played. Enormous numbers of people were so convinced of the reality of San Seriffe that they even tried to book themselves holidays there, much to the confusion of their travel agents!

JANE: I love it!

And so we come full circle. We started with real place names, digressed into imaginary places in fiction, and finally we finish with an imaginary place that many people were convinced was real.