



#164 (August 2026) for FAPA mailing #356 from Fred Lerner

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is produced for private distribution through the

Fantasy Amateur Press Association

and limited circulation outside the FAPA.

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GSTK

Simplicity and Patience

"I will not say the day is done, nor bid the stars farewell"



ABROAD AND AFLOAT

I indulged my fascination with islands (*Lofgeornost* #163, May 2026) in April, on a seven-day Lindblad National Geographic cruise in the Azores. First I had to get to Ponta Delgada, the largest town in the archipelago and the *National Geographic Orion's* point of departure. (This was the ship aboard which I cruised through French Polynesia two years before.) There aren't too many options for the traveller: unless I wanted to take a long non-Euclidean detour through Lisbon I would have to fly there on the Azorean carrier, SATA. This airline has a well-deserved reputation for cancelled and delayed flights; my trip from Boston was delayed by nearly an hour, as was my return flight. I flew in SATA's misnamed "Comfort class", which provided me ample opportunity to imagine how uncomfortable things were in the Economy cabin. The dinner I was served looked and tasted like it had come straight from a high school cafeteria. Fortunately the travel time was only five and a half hours in each direction.

Downtown Ponta Delgada is a warren of narrow streets (often a single lane) and narrower sidewalks (only a couple of feet wide). But it's easily walkable, and except for a few waterfront hotels it's laid out on a human scale. There's a church every few blocks, a large enclosed farmers' market, and the small shops and businesses that one might expect to find in a small city.

I would not have expected to find a synagogue in the Azores, but the map I had been given showed one.

Naturally I set off to find it. This wasn't as easy a task as one might expect. Streets in Ponta Delgada change names with bewildering frequency and the signage seems to have been installed more to confuse invaders than to guide visitors. The synagogue itself was undistinguished from the surrounding buildings, and is nowadays more a well-kept museum than a functioning house of worship. But in addition to the artifacts and documents on display there was a carefully restored sanctuary, laid out in the Sephardic manner.

The first Jews came to the Azores in the 16th century. They were "New Christians" fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, which correctly suspected them of secretly maintaining their ancestral religion. I was told that a shipload of them was reported to the authorities as having been lost at sea, as the Inquisition was not too popular in the islands. The Inquisition did not pursue the issue, and Jews seem to have got along tolerably well there.

Late that afternoon the *Orion* departed for Horta, on the island of Faial. After breakfast aboard ship it was time to begin our exploration of the Azores. Each day there were several activities on offer, graded Leisurely, Moderate, or Strenuous. My experience on previous Lindblad expedition cruises had taught me that Leisurely would consistently be the best choice. (I vividly remember the hike up a mountain in French Polynesia where I reached the trail's end only with one guide pulling me from the

front and another pushing from the rear.) So I boarded the bus that offered a “Panoramic Tour of Faial”, the highlight of which was a visit to Capelinhos, where in 1957 a volcanic eruption destroyed many buildings and deposited enough ash to add nearly 2400 square kilometers to the island’s landmass.

We returned to the *Orion* for lunch aboard, and afterwards visited Peter’s Café Sport, rendezvous for transatlantic yachtsmen and sailors. I drank a glass of their signature passionfruit-infused gin and tonic and looked in at their Museu de Scrimshaw to see the whale teeth and bones that whalers decorated. As at the Icelandic Maritime Museum I was suitably impressed by the devices that seamen devised to occupy their idle hours.

We sailed overnight to Pico, the youngest island in the Azores (it’s only 300,000 years old). Its soil is divided into narrow vineyards by *currais*, piles of volcanic stones that protect the vines from salt water spray as well as from winds. As a Vermonter I am familiar with the use of stone-walls, though we have traditionally employed them to keep sheep where we want them. I didn’t see any sheep on Pico, but there were plenty of vines. At a local cooperative called Criação Velha we got to taste several of the local wines, which were pleasant enough but nothing to bother bringing home. That afternoon we sailed to Velas on the central island of São Jorge, whose volcanic soil is devoted to cheese. (There are twice as many cows as people on São Jorge. As a Vermonter I felt right at home.) Naturally we had the opportunity to taste some; I couldn’t help thinking that some Pico wine would have been an appropriate accompaniment.

The next morning we were on Terceira, where the morning’s “leisurely” activity was another bus tour around the island. After lunch we walked through the island’s capital, Angra do Heroísmo, and visited its cathedral. I did not learn of the Cemitério Judaico until I returned to Vermont, else I would have stopped to look at its nearly 200-year-old remains of a Jewish community that came to Terceira from Morocco. (I should have suspected its existence, as there’s a village called Porto Judeu a few miles down the coast.)

We were meant to sail to Santa Maria the next day, but rough seas prevented that. So we returned to São Miguel, where we began the day at Furnas crater. This is a sort of natural outdoor kitchen, where *cozidos* (stews assembled from meats, potatoes, and vegetables) are cooked by lowering them at dawn into calderas, small puddles of volcanically heated water. At lunchtime they are brought to nearby restaurants for a hearty meal.

A short walk from our restaurant took us to Parque Terra Nostra, a botanical garden founded in the 1780s. by a Boston merchant called Thomas Hickling. It later came into the hands of the Viscounts of Praia and later Vasco Bensaude. (The Bensaudes were a Jewish family who came to São Miguel from Morocco two hundred years ago.) The extensive collections of endemic and exotic plants exceeded the time available to appreciate them properly. Should I ever find myself on São Miguel again I shall make sure to spend at least an entire day there.

Our final day in the Azores began with a brief walking tour of downtown Ponta Delgada, after which we were free to explore the city on our own. The highlight of my walk was the Jardim António Borges, a large park on the edge of downtown. Unlike American parks it was laid out without interference from tort lawyers; visitors were deemed capable of safeguarding their heads from low-roofed tunnels and their legs from steep stairways. The garden was not limited to indigenous plants. I was especially taken with a New Zealand Christmas Tree, a gaudy plant much too large ever to fit into someone’s living room. In a small pond I watched a mother duck wrangling her fourteen ducklings, while nearby a small black hen looked forlornly at her single chick.

Walking toward the waterfront I encountered Fort São Brás, which once defended Ponta Delgada’s harbor and now serves as a military museum. Its exhibits emphasise the Portuguese army’s role in maintaining its colonial rule in Africa, and serves as a reminder that the British and French were not the only ones to maintain a far-flung empire well into the twentieth century. Then I returned to the Marine Atlântico’s dreary hospitality room, to wait for my ride to the airport, where I entrusted myself to the doubtful mercies of SATA.

I think that my memories of the Azores will be shaped less by noteworthy æsthetic or historical sites than by the overall impression of the archipelago’s human scale settlements and topography. There’s something about those islands that reminds me of what I find so attractive about Vermont.

I wouldn’t normally think of taking two cruises only a few weeks apart, but after I had booked my place on the Azores cruise I received a notice through the Columbia Alumni Association of a nine-day trip around the Adriatic sea. The itinerary looked promising, and I was curious to try a different cruise line. Gohagan & Company had chartered the Atlas Ocean Voyages’ *World Traveller*. (They called it a “yacht”, which is not how I would describe a 198-passenger vessel.)

The cruise began at the Croatian port of Dubrovnik. (How could one resist travelling to a place called “Dubrovnik”?) To get there I took an overnight Austrian Airlines flight from Boston to Vienna, and then four hours later caught a connecting flight to Dubrovnik. We boarded the *World Traveller* and set off on our cruise the next morning.

My first priority, of course, was acquainting myself with the layout of the ship. It was a bit more luxurious than the Lindblad vessels I was accustomed to. My cabin had a balcony, and there were several observation decks (one of which had a pool – and a bar). A space called “Paula’s Pantry” offered an all-day selection of grab-and-go sandwiches and snacks. As with the Lindblad fleet the *World Traveller* had no casino or night club.

After breakfast (an extensive buffet, with seating both inside and on the adjacent deck) we disembarked for a guided walking tour, the first of several on the trip. Though Dubrovnik was founded in the 7th century it is essentially a mediæval city – at least that portion of it within the 10th-century city walls. I had hoped to walk their circuit, but the crowds and the heat dissuaded me. (Nor did I manage to see the 14th-century Asimov Tower, which I have reason to believe was *not* named after a certain 20th-century science fiction writer.) Still, there was plenty to see within the walls: the Large Onofrio’s Fountain, whose two-storey height was abridged by a massive earthquake in 1667; the Franciscan friary with its pharmacy and library; and the warren of narrow streets that I soon learned was typical of coastal Dalmatian cities. After lunch aboard the ship we returned to the city for a tour of the Rector’s Palace, which now houses the Museum of Dubrovnik, and the Maritime Museum in the Fort of St John.

The next morning found us in Montenegro, one of the lesser-known successor republics to the former Yugoslavia. (In some circles it is famed as the site of the dalliance between Irene Adler and Sherlock Holmes that gave Nero Wolfe to the world.) Kotor is another mediæval walled city, which a sign proudly proclaimed to be the “home of 10,000 cats”. Many of these were evident, displaying themselves lazily along the streets as was the case elsewhere along the Adriatic’s eastern shore. I wondered if this was a legacy of the long Turkish occupation of the Balkans – the Prophet Mohammed was famously fond of cats. Across the sea in Italy they were hardly to be seen.

But by 1420 Kotor became an outpost of the Republic of Venice, and the 12th-century Cathedral of St Tryphon in the heart of the city and the manmade island of Our Lady of the Rocks testify to the dominion of Christianity. A short speedboat ride took us there, and forty minutes

was more than enough time to see the church, whose legend is more interesting than its reality. In 1452 an icon of the Madonna and Child was found on a rock in the bay, which mariners celebrated by throwing a rock there. Eventually the rocks formed a (very) small island. Once a year the local folk throw more rocks into the sea, but I suspect that it will take a very long time before the island gets appreciably larger.

We sailed overnight across the Adriatic to the ancient Roman seaport of Bari, whose tangled narrow streets surround the Pontifical Basilica of Saint Nicholas. (What I saw of Bari seemed to me much like a Dalmatian town, but without the cats). After lunch aboard the ship we drove to Alberobello, a sort of Italian Hobbiton full of *trulli*. These are whitewashed limestone structures with conical fieldstone roofs, built without mortar. Some accounts trace their origins to ancient Greece, but I’m fond of the hypothesis that they originated in the 15th century as a tax dodge. Many are still occupied, and others are maintained as exotic AirBnB rentals. Back aboard the ship I saw a magnificent sunset from an elevated observation platform as we recrossed the Adriatic.

The next morning found us at the island of Hvar, which for 2500 years under Greeks, Roman, Byzantine, and Venetian rule has been a nexus for commerce. It was under the Venetians that the town of Hvar established itself as an essential stopping-point on trade routes to oriental ports. It had the usual cathedral, monastery, clock tower, and city walls; but today Hvar is more a vacation resort, its trading vessels replaced by yachts and motorboats and its mediæval navigators by skimpily-clad holidaymakers.

It was too hot a day to “enjoy an active hike up to Hvar’s Fortica, called Spanjola by locals”. Instead I joined the “Gentle Walkers Group” going to the Benedictine monastery. There we saw a display of Hvar lace handcrafted by nuns from agave and aloe thread, an artform unique to this monastery. That evening, back aboard the *World Traveller*, we heard a performance of *klapa*, a local form of a capella folk music.

From Hvar we sailed overnight to Trogir, and went on to Split, where in the 4th century the Roman emperor Diocletian built a vast palace. Over the centuries most of the complex fell into ruin, but when the Venetian empire annexed Split in the early 15th century the place got a new lease on life. It is a prime example of architectural recycling: the Cathedral of St Domnius (originally the mausoleum of Diocletian), the Baptistery of St John (formerly the Temple of Jupiter), and the Papal Palace (which now houses the Museum of Split) are just three of the buildings

that can now be found in what had been Diocletian's palace.

Another overnight crossing of the Adriatic brought us to Ravenna, where a choice of attractions was offered. No doubt the "searing red architecture" of Bologna would have been worth seeing, but the historical center of Ravenna and the world-renowned mosaics of its Basilica of San Vitale and the Galla Placidia Mausoleum had first call on my attention. I had never seen anything like those mosaics; it's not just their beauty, but the overwhelming extent of them, that captures the imagination of the viewer. Should I ever return to Italy I shall want to revisit Ravenna, and see some of its other mosaic sites.

The last full day of the tour was spent in the Dalmatian town of Pula. It's the administrative center of Istria, but that's of little account. What drew our attention was the Pula Amphitheatre, one of the best-preserved Roman arenas. Originally home to gladiatorial combats, it's used today for operas, concerts, and other musical events. We got to clamber around the seats and explore the network of underground passages where captive animals and gladiators awaited their sanguinary performances.

That night after the Captain's Farewell Reception and Dinner we sailed to Venice, where the cruise officially ended. But an optional two-day extension in Venice was offered, and it had seemed silly to turn down what might well be my only possibility of visiting that legendary city.

"Arrived Venice. Streets all flooded. Please advise."

The *New Yorker* writer Robert Benchley allegedly sent this cable to his editor a century ago. Nothing seems to have been done to correct the situation he reported: the streets of Venice are still flooded. Not just with water, but also with tourists – so many that one must make a *contributo di accesso* to enter. It's the first city I've ever encountered that charged an admission fee.

Our tour of Venice began at the Piazza San Marco, one of the largest open spaces in the city. (Napoleon called it "the drawing room of Europe".) We entered the Palazzo Ducale, the Doge's Palace, which in the day was the capitol of the Republic of Venice. That "day" lasted a thousand years, and apparently much of that time was spent filling it with artistic treasures intended to overawe anyone who entered it. These included paintings by Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto, and many others. There wasn't time on a brief tour to give any of these its proper attention, even if the crowds permitted it, but that wasn't the point of our visit. It was meant to leave visitors with a sense of the overwhelming grandeur of the Republic, and it certainly had that effect on this visitor.

The adjoining St Mark's Basilica, we are told, is a masterpiece of Byzantine architecture. I am used to seeing that adjective employed to describe unnecessary organisational complexity, but I shall no longer be able to use it as a pejorative. Its gilded mosaics recalled those of Ravenna – and made me want to learn much more about mosaics.

After that came the gondola ride. Although this was merely a token acknowledgement of an obsolete Venetian tradition, it was a pleasant way to see something of the city from water level. I didn't feel bad that mine was a stereotypical tourist experience. (Anyone who really needs to get somewhere across the city will take a water taxi if he can afford it, or a water bus if he can't.) If one can't do stereotypical tourist things in Venice, where can one do them?

Back at the Hotel Splendide I joined some of my fellow-travellers in becoming acquainted with a favorite Venetian artform, the Aperol spritz. This apricot liqueur-based drink is an ideal remedy for the aftereffects of traipsing around a hot, confusing city.

Venice is in my experience the easiest city in the world to get lost in. I had wanted to withdraw some money from an ATM, and I knew there was one nearby. Obtaining directions from the hotel receptionist, and a couple of maps to be on the safe side, I set off for the UniCredit Bank. Despite the care that I took to follow the instructions I had been given, fifteen minutes later I found myself at the entrance to the Hotel Splendide. A second try, in which I headed in a different direction, produced the same result. After the third attempt left me once more at the hotel entrance I gave up on the project and decided to rely on my credit cards for any financial transactions.

As bedtime approached I sought my hotel room. It soon became evident that whoever designed it had never stayed in a hotel. The bed was comfortable enough, I will admit, but other creature comforts were lacking. There was no comfortable chair, and no good reading light. There was no place to set out my suitcase. And the function of the myriad of switches and buttons meant to control the room's lighting and temperature was left as a puzzle for the occupant to work out. I managed a comfortable night's sleep, and I had a fine breakfast the next morning, but I was left with the firm conviction that at the Hotel Splendide form had triumphed over function.

The next morning we were taken to Burano, a cluster of four bridge-linked islands that make up a pleasant suburb of Venice. Beyond a street of small shops and restaurants it's full of brightly-colored small houses. I wondered how their residents make their living, unless the majority of them commute by boat to the city. (I didn't see any of

the lacemakers who “often sit working in front of their houses”, but I suppose that they take Sundays off.) Burano was too small a place to get really lost, though I did my best. Upon our return to the city proper we had a vaporetto ride through the city. This “scenic cruise” along the Grand Canal took us under the Rialto Bridge and past many of the museums that we wouldn’t have time to see.

On Monday morning I had a few hours to explore the narrow streets and alleyways surrounding the hotel before boarding a speedboat that took me to Marco Polo Airport. There I boarded a Swissair flight to Zurich, where after an interminable hike through Flughafen Zürich I settled into

a seat on the Swissair flight to Boston. This was surprisingly comfortable for economy class (Swissair doesn’t offer premium economy), the food was better than I would have expected, and the Swiss chocolate was a welcome extra.

Back at Logan Airport I passed through Customs, stayed overnight at a nearby Hampton Inn, and got the Dartmouth Coach back home. Now I’ll have to find time to reread *The Malacia Tapestry*, which is set in an imaginary city resembling Renaissance Venice (or so say Wikipedia and many other commentators). It will be pleasant to revisit that complex and confusing city.



TOPICS

This morning (July 19) I attended a memorial service for Betty Lauer, a fellow member of the Upper Valley Jewish Community. She died last week at the age of 100, though at the service it came out that she was actually a year older. Born in Germany, she recounted her experience as a Holocaust survivor in her memoir *Hiding in Plain Sight* (Smith and Kraus, 2004). After the war she emigrated to the United States, eventually coming to Vermont, where she lived a mile up the road from me.

Betty was active not only in the Jewish community but also in the Upper Valley’s educational and cultural scene. I had the pleasure of accompanying her on some of her walks around Occom Pond in Hanover. At the service today one of the speakers quoted Betty’s assertion that “the only bad trip is the trip you didn’t take”. I shall keep that in mind in thinking about my travels.

Three years ago when my naturalist neighbor helped me plan a wildflower garden he warned me to be patient once I’d scattered the seeds. “The first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps, and the third year it leaps.” It’s leaping this year all right, with a scanty but ebullient crop of bee balm, black-eyed susans, and mallow, and an abundance of small unidentified white, yellow, and pink flowers. It has attracted the attention of Scooter, my woodchuck-in-residence, who seems to consider it his personal salad bar. But so far he has done no irrevocable damage.

Other fur-bearing neighbors include a grey fox who lives down the street. I see him sauntering across Worcester Avenue most evenings a few minutes before sunset. Since his arrival I’ve noticed a sharp diminution in the local squirrel population. (The chipmunks seem to be

recovering their numbers, presumably because they can more easily retreat to inaccessible places.) I’ve never seen a rabbit in my forty-odd years here; presumably that environmental niche is filled by Scooter and his compatriots.

Last time around I wrote in praise of “The Lady with the Gun”, the late Australian writer Kerry Greenwood whose novels feature “lady detective” Phryne Fisher. I’ve now read all these save for *Murder in the Cathedral* (2025), which I’ve asked the Howe Library to order to complete the series. In the meantime I’ve been reading the seven volumes of Greenwood’s Corinna Chapman series, which to my surprise I like even more.

Miss Fisher is a delightful heroine, living a delightful (if sometimes rather dangerous) life in Melbourne at the end of the 1920s. She drives fast cars and flies fast airplanes, eats and drinks like the millionaire her creator has made her, and enjoys a fantastic sex life that’s a century ahead of its time.

Corinna Chapman is more of a working-class woman, a baker who gets up at four o’clock in the morning to prepare the day’s pastries. Instead of a house in a fashionable suburb she lives in an apartment over her downtown bakery. Insula is not an ordinary apartment building, and its residents are not everyday people. Its idyllic character contrasts with the shabby underbelly of Melbourne – which doesn’t seem to have changed that much since Miss Fisher’s day.

Corinna’s story, which is told in the first person, is as much about her relationship with her found family as about the Melbourne miscreants that keep disturbing her. It’s my favorite type of detective story: the sort of tale in

which the problem to be solved arises from the circumstances of ordinary life. It's a good example of the modern detective story as comedy of manners.

Kerry Greenwood has apparently written science fiction, though I haven't yet been able to identify any titles. (She's not mentioned in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*.) She seems to have some familiarity with the SF community – and has no illusions about it: “Eggs?” asked Jason hungrily, having polished off more junk food than a science fiction convention in a little under twenty minutes”. (Kerry Greenwood, *Trick or Treat*, 179). I wonder what my Australian readers think of her work.

Diana Thayer writes, “I always enjoy your trip reports in *Lofgeornost*, but “The Lady With The Gun” hit a personal chord with me. Teddy said I needed to write a few lines of comment to you about it, but he should know me well enough by now to know that I really can't write just a few lines about anything. That being said, this note is really just for you to do with as you please.

“I was first introduced to Miss Fisher in the TV series in 2012 and after that, read through all the novels. The TV series gave me rich visuals to carry through into my reading, but the ensemble of characters in the books works much better. My favorite things to read are long, well written series where I can get immersed in a different time and place, and Kerry Greenwood did that very well.

“About a year ago, I read through all the Miss Fisher books again. Then I shifted to the Australian outback and read through all 29 of Arthur Upfield's Detective Napoleon Bonapart novels, and also his fascinating autobiography. I have just finished reading all 32 of New Zealander Ngaio Marsh's Detective Roderick Allen novels, many of which reflect her theatre background, and was wondering where to go from there.

“So I reread Barbara Hambly's delightful silver screen era mystery *Bride of the Rat God* and have now started into her new Silver Screen Historical Mystery series. There are only 4 books at this point, but they should keep me occupied for a couple of weeks.

“After that ... Hmm ... I may have to go back to science fiction.”

[I was introduced to Ngaio Marsh many years ago by a librarian in Hackensack, New Jersey, to whom I was lamenting that I had just finished all of Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey novels. I suspect that my acquaintance with Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn is incomplete, a situation that I shall someday have to remedy.]

Cy Chauvin writes, “Thank you for sending *Lofgeornost* #163. I used to read *The Economist* quite regularly, and I noticed their familiarity with written science fiction

long ago, and as you point out, it's not just the obvious either. I mentioned in my last letter that the March-April *MIT Technology Review* had a short story by Micahiah Johnson, and now the May-June issue has one by Jeff Vandermeer! Otherwise, the magazine is all non-fiction, of course. So this ‘descent’ into respectability is complete, certainly, complete with the use and inversion of the term ‘sci-fi’.

“I quite like your comment at the beginning of ‘The Lady with the Gun’: ‘Genre fiction is about people who solve problems, while “literary” fiction is about people who *are* problems.’ I thought about it often and on, and it seems true, except for the romance genre. There are a few classic science fiction stories where the people are the problems perhaps (I'm thinking of *Flowers for Algernon*) but I still think your axiom holds.

“I generally don't care for science fiction movies either. So many of the ideas and science in good hard SF has to be presented through characters discussing it, hard enough to get away with written SF, much worse or impossible on film.”

Ruth Berman writes, “Dale Nelson's quotations on what makes for ‘strangeness’ are an interesting set. I wonder if C.S. Lewis was really right in thinking that folks who got to the Moon would stop feeling it as wondrous/strange. I think children born there and growing up there would feel it was heimisch and not at all unheimlich – but I suspect it would retain its wonder for adults who managed to get there. (Incidentally, I wonder if it would be difficult to get kids born on the Moon at all – you'd think the difference in gravity, if nothing else, would affect the fetal development.) After all, the cities of say, Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, and Rome all retain a lot of attraction for adults who go there, if they don't wind up eventually feeling totally disillusioned. Some of Lewis's descriptions of Oxford suggest that it had an element of lasting wonder for him. By the time Cambridge lured him away from Oxford, though, he was feeling less perhaps the wonder of the city ‘of dreaming spires’, as Matthew Arnold had called Oxford in his ‘Thyrsis’. I recall that somewhere (in *Surprised by Joy*?) Lewis describes his first arrival in Oxford as disappointing him, because he didn't see any of those dreaming spires – until he realized that he'd been walking the wrong way from the railroad station and turned around to see those dreaming spires in the distance behind him. But I think there are other descriptions where on longer and closer-up acquaintance it continued to have that Arnoldian charm for him.

“Tolkien, in ‘Leaf by Niggle’, has a description of how Niggle feels when after dying he at last gets into the landscape he'd imagined for many years, that is perhaps

relevant to this topic: 'As he walked away, he discovered an odd thing: the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest, yet he could approach it, even enter it, without its losing that particular charm. He had never before been able to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings. It really added a considerable attraction to walking in the country, because, as you walked, new distances opened out; so that you now had double, treble, and quadruple distances, doubly, trebly, and quadruply enchanting.' (Tolkien evidently would have agreed that no place in this world could have such a property, but imagined that Heaven might.)"

[I've long wondered what effect different gravity and other alien environmental factors might have on human reproduction. I can't recall any science fiction stories in which such problems are considered.]

Andy Sawyer writes, "I've finally got round to reading *Lofgeornost* #163 — the last couple of months have been taken up by last-minute seeing a book through press (Terry Pratchett, for the Liverpool University Press Writers and Their Work series), writing an essay for *Foundation*, and a couple of book reviews. I am hoping to spend the second half of this year doing a bit less.

"I missed the film of 'Project Hail Mary', partly because I hadn't read the book and wanted to before I saw the film. Your reaction interested me — several people from the SF book group I belong to went to see the film and loved it, also enthusing about the book, so I have loaded it on my Kindle for my forthcoming holiday and will read it. It will be interesting to see what it's like. The book group has recently been picking books which seem to have interesting stories and certainly have attracted good reviews, and reaction has been mixed. I've been finding myself very much in a minority, liking books which others loathed and loathing books which others liked. So which way will I jump for *Project Hail Mary*? Who knows. I quite liked *The Martian*, although I am not sure that it showed me much that was new.

"You say in *Lof* #162 that you never read *Swallows and Amazons* when a child, and various people comment upon this. I did — and it was one of the things that turned me on to fantasy. Or rather... One of the S&A books was read to the class when I was in Primary School in the late 50s. I was living in Malaya (now Malaysia) and my understanding of where it was *set* was limited — I heard the references to 'natives' and 'the inland sea' as something literal — the teacher certainly did not explain that it was a story about English children set in the Lake District (not that I would have known the Lake District) and we are seeing it through their imaginations. Later, when I read it for myself, I understood a bit of this, and even later, when

I had read a lot of fantasy and SF I realised that each child was inventing their imaginary world through a different aspect of fantasy.

"This is what I wrote about the series for an essay in *Vector*:

Because each child's personality is different, each brings a different imaginative filter to the raw material of the holiday. John and Susan are practical, doers rather than thinkers, but whereas John is the 'adventurer' and (as eldest) leader, Susan is the domestic organiser, the one who remembers about meals and bed-time and who occasionally almost 'goes native'. Titty is the imaginative, sensitive one: she becomes Robinson Crusoe while guarding Wild Cat Island when the others are off warring against the Amazons (the Blackett sisters) and discovers an unnerving talent for dowsing. Roger as the youngest is the nearest to conventional 'pretend' games: he is first seen zig-zagging across a field like the Cutty Sark tacking against the wind. Nancy and Peggy Blackett are the wildest and most unconventional. They are the 'Amazon pirates' with Nancy the leader and Peggy the devoted follower. Dick and Dorothea Calum, (the 'D's') later additions to the saga who also share in the related Coot Club books set in Norfolk, offer their own slants to the Swallows and Amazons world. Both are observers, whose contributions to the stories are based upon analysis of the facts they see, but whereas Dick is a scientist, observing the natural world, his sister is an artist, who brings her reading (and writing) to bear on events. While the Walkers and Blacketts are role-playing, entering into a sub-creation and Dick is studying the concrete reality of their world — birds, rocks, stars — Dorothea perceives the world as a book. Part of the joke, of course, is that Dorothea's models for this perceptions are stereotyped melodramas, but they act as commentaries on events in the same way as the direct shift from 'real' to 'imagined' world.

"What I had discovered by then was that Ransome was a childhood friend of E.R. Eddison, and he wrote in his *Autobiography* this, of reading Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*:

The language, the place-names and the names of the heroes were for me an echo of those ancient days when Ric and I produced plays in a toy theatre with cardboard actors carrying just such names and eloquent with just such

rhetoric. Gorice, Lord Goldry Bluszco, Corinius, Brandoch Daha seemed old friends when I met them nearly forty years later. Ric throughout his life had a foot in each of two worlds, and the staid official of the Board of Trade was for ever turning from his statistics to look out from the towers of Koshtra Belorn.”

Sue Thomason writes, “I continue to be deeply grateful for my inclusion in the *Lofgeornost* community. Every issue encourages me to think, and introduces me to themes, topics, places, and books that I would never otherwise have considered. This is a blessing.

“And thank you thank you for maintaining the Printed Fanzine! It interests me that I have different responses to text-on-paper and text-on-screen. I would never read fiction on Kindle, and I am currently trying to persuade a Financial Institution to send me documents on paper rather than emailing me a link to a secure website, because I *understand* paper documents better. I know this is crazy.

“Please don’t give up entirely on new science fiction! It is likely that there is a great deal of non-wonderful science fiction being published, and it was ever thus. But I continue to hope that there may also be diamonds, rare and wonderful. Recently I have enjoyed *Katabasis* by R. F. Kuang, a biting fantasy about what happens when you might be responsible for murdering your PhD supervisor and then discover that you need to retrieve them from Hell in order to get your doctoral dissertation approved...

“Phryne Fisher sounds wonderful, and I will investigate further.

“Uh, I have read *Project Hail Mary* the book and I do not remember it being a comedy.

“Islands. The most lovely thing is to canoe or kayak out to a small (Scottish) island and camp on it overnight. A worldlet to discover; we are the only people here...

“So, what is currently filling my thoughts is Cats. We have lost 2 cats to cancer in less than a year, and last week I discovered that elderly Cat 3 (whom I always thought would be the first to go) has A Lump. So we came home from the local wildlife rescue centre (which runs the local rescue cattery) yesterday with sisters Honey and Autumn, who are currently living in the base of my bed. They emerge to eat, use the litter tray, and (in Autumn’s case) cautiously explore the upper floor of the house. We have a 2-week adoption period to see if they settle with us. I hope they do.”

Mark Nelson writes, “Mention of ‘any body large enough to contain islands’ reminds me of the following facts that I learnt from an episode of the British comedy panel game ‘QI’ (highly recommended). (I already relayed these facts through *The Obdurate Eye*, so apologies to anyone who is now reading them for the second time...)”

“The first, and least interesting, fact is that Lake Manitou is the deepest lake in Canada. The second fact is more interesting, at least to me. What is it? It’s that Lake Manitou contains the largest lake island in the world. But wait there’s more. The largest lake island in the world itself contains a lake. That lake has the distinction of being the largest lake in the world that is contained within an island that is contained within a lake. The largest lake within an island that is within a lake does itself contain an island...”

[I think there’s some confusion here. Lake Manitou is located in Manitoulin Island, which itself is located in Lake Superior. Once you’re at Lake Manitou it’s islands and lakes all the way down...]

“Last year I borrowed two SF ‘novels’ from our local library. These were *Ghost of the Neon God* by T.R. Napier and *The Tusks of Extinction* by Ray Nayler. The former clocks in at 128 pages and the latter at 101 pages. With regard to borrowing more SF from the library this year I have resolved to scour the shelves, not that many for SF, for works of a similar size to the two I read last year. Failing in that task I will enforce a maximum page count on the books that I borrow. I am also likely to reject all books that are the first in a series (*). Should the library have *The Mercy of Gods* then I have three reasons not to borrow it: it’s too long, it’s the first book in a series, and you didn’t like it.

“PS (*) I may be guilty of a genre double-standard as last year I had no compulsion about buying *On the Calculation of Volume I* by Solvej Balle. This is the first of a *seven* volume series. Given the title I could hardly walk past it without picking it up and taking a peek. Having taken a peek... Still, at 179 pages the first volume is slim.

“At this point some of the correspondence contained in your last issue prompts me to recall that whilst *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* came in at 223 pages the final volume came in at... 607 pages according to Wikipedia – I don’t have my own copy. Here’s hoping that the novels in the sequence *On the Calculation of Volume* don’t increase in a similar manner. (And I also remember that *Harry Potter* is also a seven volume series).”

[I’ve never read any of the Harry Potter books. I did see the first of the movies, on a transatlantic flight while sitting in a middle seat whose reading light wasn’t working.]



