

Preface

There is something I have to confess about this second volume of my daily blogs. At some point along the way—you will see from the dates—‘daily’ came to no longer apply. I simply ran out of things to say on a daily basis. So the frequency of blogging became something like: When I think I have something worth saying. So these blogs are daily in only a figurative sense. Actually, that’s rubbish: after a certain point they are not daily in any sense at all. However, as ‘volume 2’ of a series that began with daily intentions, I am forever locked into this pattern. If the monthly magazine, *Women’s Weekly*, can get away with it, so can I.

One more little confession. I did leave out one or two blog posts that were not really suitable for this collection, mainly because they contained too many images; and getting images to work in an ebook file is a nightmare; at least for me.

Those of you who didn’t buy and read the first volume will no doubt enjoy not buying and reading this volume too.

Finally, judging by the way in which my rate of blogging is decreasing, Volume 3 should be available sometime in the 2050s.

1. The Fundamental Interconnectedness of All Things (18/02/2013)

If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe. – Carl Sagan.

One of my favourite books is *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, by Douglas Adams. I highly recommend it. Dirk is a detective who operates on the principle of 'the fundamental interconnectedness of all things'. He doesn't look for clues. Or, rather, everything is a clue, because of the fundamental inter... You get the idea: everything that happens is related to everything else that happens, and therefore, ultimately, points towards the precise thing-that-happened that is under investigation.

There is a kind of weirdly resonant, if also slightly silly, truth in this. Ripple effects. Butterfly effects. 'No man is an island...' Making apple pies from scratch. Even 'six degrees of separation'. All these things suggest the same idea, or variants thereof: namely that everything is interconnected. It is always possible to follow the links from here to there, be they causal links or otherwise. Unlike the Irishman whom you ask for directions, and who wisely informs you that you 'can't get there from here', I believe, like Dirk Gently, that you can always, finally, get there from here.

Carl Sagan also once said, 'We are made of starstuff.' An entire history, back to the beginning of time, leads to me, sitting here right now, right here, writing this. I won't let it go to my head, though. Because it is true of you, too; and of everyone else. It's also true of the

mosquito that just bit my ankle. It's true of the dengue virus that she could have injected into my bloodstream. We are the apple pies that the universe has made. We are not the end points, though, just links in the chain, nodes in the network. Still, it's pretty cool being a link.

It's a sobering thought: I am the current embodiment of one particular chain of causality that began with the Big Bang. That entire history finds expression in me, here and now. But I am now a cause, as well as an effect. What am I going to do with this power of causality?

2. Inexplicable, or Just Unexplained? (19/02/2013)

Anything that is easily explained isn't really worth explaining – me.

I shouldn't have to explain that, should I? But I will anyway. Or, rather, I will use it as a launching pad for today.

It is funny how people are willing to jump so quickly from 'unexplained' to 'inexplicable' (now, there's a weirdly irregular word). Yet my not having an explanation for something—and here I emphasise *my* not having an explanation—is hardly evidence that something is inexplicable. I may watch a magician perform a trick; I have no explanation for what he or she did; I am fascinated, even slightly in awe. But I don't pass from that state to thinking that it is inexplicable. I don't assume that it's, er... magic. The same is true of many things in the realm of science. The same is even true in many day to day events. I can't explain why the sock that I looked for so thoroughly in the drawer, is suddenly there on top, right before my eyes. I am unlikely, however, to resort to explaining this in terms of that mischievous sock demon that likes to mess with my mind. I happen to know that he became bored and moved onto higher technology. He now moves files around on my computer.

People often complain about human arrogance. How arrogant to think that we could explain everything! Actually, however, the arrogance is on the other foot—or perhaps I am getting that mixed up with socks. Anyway, it would be extraordinarily arrogant were I to assume that, because *I* could not explain something, it was, therefore, inherently inexplicable. I may just be stupid. I am almost certainly lacking some necessary information.

Of course, the other thing that people often mean when they say that something is inexplicable, is that it is perfectly explicable. What they really mean is that they *can* explain it in terms of some kind of supernatural intervention. Really, though, that is just the lazy path. I don't know why this occurred, so it must be something, you know, like magical? Like, you know, God or something'? This is, in the end, a pretty radical (and arrogant) claim. It needs rather more justification than: 'I can't explain it, therefore it must be...'

I prefer to take the humbler approach. Yes, I can't presently explain why my sock suddenly appeared precisely where I had looked ten times previously. I think, though, that this may be because I lack some information, something that has to do with the vagaries of human (and perhaps especially, male) perception. It is unexplained-ness that drives science; and God, demons and magic are just the lazy shortcuts that stand in the way.

3. In Defence of Mediocrity (20/02/2013)

Only a mediocre writer is always at his best – W. Somerset Maugham

Yesterday's blog proved to be rather popular. Today's follow-up 'single' is likely to be comparatively mediocre; which is probably quite appropriate as I intend to play with this pithy saying, this time by Somerset Maugham. If it is true that only a mediocre writer is always

at his best, this is also true of most other forms of human endeavour. Indeed, it is probably true of life itself. 'Only the mediocre life is always at its best.' The mediocre life is lived on a relatively level plain, with very few contours. It is safe, but uninteresting. It is at its best, but its best is not very remarkable. Those few who rise above the plain, scaling the heights, do so at great risk, because they expose themselves to falling, to failing. What can be said of a life, can be said also of an era:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

There is always a price to be paid for achieving greatness; and they are not to be despised who choose not to pay it.

I find myself, surprisingly, coming to the defence of mediocrity. The world would be an unbearable place if everyone strived for greatness. Imagine a nation in which everyone was like (or believed themselves to be like) Leonardo DaVinci or Winston Churchill. Imagine a committee with only 'high achievers' as members. I suspect that not much would be achieved, despite the talent and brainpower available.

I suppose that the distribution of 'greatness' within the human race, however we might measure it, probably follows a Normal curve. Sure, it might be nice to be one of those at the extreme right of that curve, some of the time. At other times, though, I imagine it would be hell. And yes, I would probably not want to be one of those languishing at the left extremity. But somewhere in the middle? It looks pretty good to me. And let's not forget that the word 'mediocre', although it sounds as though it means 'not very good', actually derives from the Latin words 'medius' (middle or halfway) and 'ocris' (a

broken, stony mountain). Halfway up the mountain is not a bad place to be, after all.

4. *The Dark Man's Son*, by Meg Whitlock: A Review (21/02/2013)

Today I am posting only my second ever review on this blog. This is the first book for which I have ever given a five star review. It is a shame that it is not attracting the readers that it deserves.

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The Dark Man's Son tells the story of Jason, whose life is transformed when he meets 'Alex' (female) who is the Guardian of Light, created to protect the human race from a multitude of threats, among them the Dark Guardian (her 'brother'), Lucifer and a host of demons and other creatures. Jason gradually learns his own true identity as he and Alex battle to save, well, the world.

In many ways this is the classic good against evil, cosmic scale story that has been told many times. What is particularly impressive about this telling is how incredibly accessible the characters are. I am tempted to say 'human', even though, clearly, most of them are not. Despite their awesome powers, these characters have well-defined personalities that set them apart, and make them something distinct from their mythical and cosmic personae. Their personalities are complex, and lift them above and beyond the mere good-evil dichotomy. Their motivations are understandable, even if, at times, very complicated.

This book is very well-written, lifting it well above the field. The author's use of humour is excellent—I found myself laughing out loud several times. She has constructed the scenarios brilliantly, pausing in just the right places, building carefully, then punching the reader with a surprise twist. The story is set across a broad timescape and

landscape, which all seemed well-researched. Readers living in Paris or Hamburg may have some quibbles. Readers from the twelfth century may pick fault here and there; but the author convinced me.

I have a few minor quibbles of my own. It was a shame that the back story—told in flashbacks across the centuries—faded out about halfway through the book. This introduced some imbalance into the book’s overall structure. I was also somewhat surprised by the abruptness of the ending, which left so much unresolved. Clearly the sequel is presently under construction. However, I felt that the ending was so sudden, and that so much was unresolved, that this was less a book to be followed by a sequel, and more ‘part one’ of a much larger story. I sincerely hope that the rest is coming soon.

I am always reluctant to give a book five stars. No book is perfect. However, this book is clearly on the five side of 4.5, and I have no choice but to round up to five. This is a book that really deserves to be read.

5. The Life of π (22/02/2013)

π (Pi) is odd, wouldn’t you agree? π is simply this: the circumference of a circle divided by its diameter. Hypothetically, at least, each of these has an exact value, but when you divide one by the other, there is no exact value: it can be calculated indefinitely, with an infinite number of decimal points, without any repeating pattern of numbers. Now the number $1/3$, when expressed as a decimal also extends to infinity; but the digits repeat forever: $0.33333\dots$ π does not do that; π cannot, in fact, be expressed as a ratio of integers in this way. This has always seemed very weird to me, slightly mysterious. It seems to suggest some kind of open-ended-ness in the universe that we inhabit, especially as π plays such an important role in this universe. Not surprisingly, π (together with a few similar numbers) is also known as a *transcendental* number, that is (I suggest skipping the rest

of this sentence, if you become queasy in the face of mathematics), a number that is not the root of any nonzero polynomial having rational coefficients.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that, although π plays an important part in equations of cosmology, it is not a physical constant, in the way that, say, the speed of light or the strength of the various attractive forces in the universe are physical constants. It describes no property of reality. It in fact describes the relationship between two aspects of a pure concept: the perfect circle. No such thing exists, except in our minds. That we can conceive such things, and that there is such amazing coherence to mathematical concepts, is truly astonishing. Mathematics itself is transcendent, in the sense that it is beyond any mere physical manifestation of it. The number '3', for example, 'exists' independently of any group of three objects that we might encounter. And within that transcendent system called mathematics, π is further transcendent. Mathematics exists purely as a set of logically coherent concepts. Then, surprisingly, within this very system, we encounter 'irrational' numbers such as π . Equally surprisingly, these concepts somehow 'apply' to reality in some way.

Is it any wonder that human beings have always felt that there was something mysterious or even mystical about numbers? You do not have to believe that numbers have any magical or predictive capacity for this to be true. Once again, these magical and semi- or pseudo-religious interpretations obscure what is truly mysterious about numbers; but it is easy to see how one could slip into magical thinking. I emphasise here, as I have done time and time again in these pages, that the universe is wonderful and surprising in its own right, without having to ground it in any other being or reality. I stand in awe of, but do not worship, this universe into which we have come into being.

6. Isn't it Ironic? (23/02/2013)

We had solar panels installed today and, of course, it's been raining ever since. Is that ironic? Actually, no, not according to the strictest definition of the word, according to which irony refers to a verbal statement in which the intended meaning is the opposite of the words used to express it. Now this statement is ironic: 'We had solar panels installed today, and I am *so* glad that it hasn't stopped raining since.' Poor Alanis Morissette has copped criticism for her song, *Ironic*, based on this strict definition. So, for example:

An old man turned ninety-eight
He won the lottery and died the next day
It's a black fly in your Chardonnay
It's a death row pardon two minutes too late
And isn't it ironic... don't you think...

Erm... well... no, actually, at least not according to the strict definition. But:

Mr. Play It Safe was afraid to fly
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids goodbye
He waited his whole damn life to take that flight
And as the plane crashed down he thought
'Well isn't this nice...'
And isn't it ironic... don't you think

Yes, his thought is indeed ironic, although the crash, strictly speaking, isn't.

However, language has a way of breaking out of its confines and taking us in a new direction. This we resist for as long as we can, until, eventually, we have to concede that a word has taken on a new meaning. Ironic may be such a word. There is, for example, something

referred to as ‘cosmic irony’. According to cosmic irony, fate, or ‘the gods’, brings about a result which is the complete opposite of what we might have expected from our actions or from our circumstances. So, for example, if I went for a holiday in the deserts of central Australia and were drowned in a flood, this might be considered an example of cosmic irony. This still contains the element of contrariness that is embodied in ironic speech, and it is understandable how the term ‘ironic’ may come to be applied in this situation, although it harks back to a mythical way of thinking, in which the gods toy with humankind. In this sense, many of Alanis’ examples are, indeed, ironic. So perhaps the critics should be less harsh with her.

So, about our solar panels. Perhaps this is an example of cosmic irony. However, if it isn’t ironic that it hasn’t stopped raining from the time the solar panels were installed, what is it? Bloody annoying, that’s what!

7. An Eye for an Eye (24/02/2013)

If someone hits me, I hit them back, right? This is one of the things that we learn in the schoolyard, if not at home with our siblings. It’s necessary to defend yourself; to assert your own rights. Right? The trouble with this is that if someone hits me, and I hit them back, I usually hit them back a little harder. Even if I don’t, their perception will be that I did. So now they consider themselves the injured party; and now they owe *me* one. It’s not difficult to see where this ultimately leads.

‘An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth’ doesn’t work very well, because there is no mathematical formula available for determining this equivalence in a real life situation. Therefore, the person whom I repay can always interpret my repayment as excessive; therefore, they now owe me, and so on.

The alternative to this is not necessarily to ‘turn the other cheek’. Passive acceptance of a wrong done to us can sometimes encourage more of the same. Human beings are not averse to being bullies. Nevertheless, at some point in an escalating confrontation, one party has to forego the impulse to get even. Someone has to have the common sense to realise that there is never going to be any ‘getting even’. There is no method for weighing the injuries that one party has inflicted on the other; and no formula for working out who is ‘ahead’. So someone has to call a truce and start negotiations. We can’t really expect children in the schoolyard to understand and learn this process while national and international leaders appear unable to do so.

Oscar Wilde once said (I have been unable to determine when, where and in what context): ‘Always forgive your enemies—nothing annoys them so much.’ He was really just paraphrasing Paul in *Romans*: ‘Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Forgiveness or kindness as the ultimate revenge! Actually, what this *may* do, is, first of all, surprise my enemy. This may at least initiate some new thought process and put pause to the automated revenge response. It’s always easier not to bother thinking, and just to go on responding automatically, doing what we have always done. Be the one to break that cycle. Who knows, it may actually work!

The other thing that we might want to consider is acknowledging that, as much as I have been wronged, I may have done a little wronging myself. Perhaps I did overreact just a tad. Perhaps I could have done something differently. The chances are that I have been as big a dick as the other guy. Acknowledging our own fault, not retaliating: these are not things that come naturally to human beings. Then again, neither is riding a bicycle, but most of us manage it with a bit of practice!

8. !High Importance (25/02/2013)

Have you ever received an email with this warning alongside—and therefore almost immediately assumed that it isn't? Of '!High Importance', that is. Because the chances are, it isn't. This is just one example of the hyperbole that seems to pervade internet communication. Perhaps 'hyperbole' is not the right word; or, at least, is not general enough. There is a kind of absurd, overblown intensity on the internet. Another expression of this is the 'field asterisk'—this field **MUST** be filled in. Another is password paranoia. Every web page has to have a password: it has to be this long, with some of this, some of that, and a dash of Tabasco sauce. You receive an ominous warning if the password is weak. All so that you can enter some online store that you will never waste your time on again. Yesterday, to access something, I had to provide a 'strong' password, three 'security' questions, and two email addresses.

Then there are the 'bot' checkers. Are you a real person? they ask. Just type in these 'words' in the space below. It's clear that I am not a real person, because sometimes I can barely read these words. Paranoid Twits use 'true validation' to prove that I have flesh and blood. Really, why the f... hell would I care if I am following a spammer on Twitter. Most of what is tweeted by non-spammers looks suspiciously like spam anyway; and any 'genuine' spam will soon vanish down the timeline, unread along with most of the rest.

Let's just say—to avoid further hyperbole—that it all seems just a little over the top. Some of the procedures needed to prevent spam or fraud are far more irritating and time consuming than the spam or fraud itself would be. And do some of these sites really have the right to *insist* on my home phone number, my mobile phone number, my address, my shoe size? I am inclined, if I can get away with it, to use (obviously) phony information for these questions. They usually don't need to know.

And, if you really want me to hit delete as soon as I see an email message, just mark it: !High Importance.

10. 'Do not go gentle...' (26/02/2013)

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

- Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas, who wrote this beautiful piece, died at only thirty-nine years of age. It's a nice thought that one might leave life, kicking and fighting, full of spirit. However, I suppose many of us would prefer to do precisely the opposite: to slip away quietly.

It's not so much that I would fight death. I have no fear of death. Of course, I say that now, but I might sing a different tune when it draws closer. But, then, who knows how close it is? No, it would not be fear of death that would have me burning, raving and raging. It would be the desire to fit as much in as I could in the time available. I want to leave this world with many things left undone, with many hopes and wishes unfulfilled. Does that sound odd? I would rather that than come to a point, while still living, when there was nothing left that I wanted to do, taste, hear, experience. I do not want the last years (months, weeks) of my life to be dull. In that sense, I do not want to slip away quietly. I do not want to die in (let alone *of*) boredom.

Talk of death is still pretty much taboo in our society. As a species, we rail against death, doing everything we can to prevent it, everything we can to extend the human lifespan, despite the implications of that for the future of this planet. I do not, on a personal level, want to oppose death in that way, and as a species I think we could apply our expertise and money to more useful and interesting ventures. Death is an essential and *helpful* part of life. Without death

we would not be here. Evolution is driven by death: it is the *fittest* that survive, at least in the natural world. No, that is not what ‘raging against the dying of the light’ means for me. It means holding on for that last wondrous glimpse as the light fades.

Of course, I am aware that in this day and age, this may not be possible. It is entirely possible that my mind will have left long before my body finally fails; or that I will spend my last days in a drugged stupor. And, by then, it might be what I want. Nevertheless, as I write this now I would like to think that I would savour every last drop of life.

11. ‘On’, ‘in’... er, make that ‘at’ (27/02/2013)

Prepositions are tricky little buggers. When learning another language they can be amongst the most difficult words to master, because, in many cases, their application seems quite arbitrary. When working with students for whom English is not their first language, this has been among the most difficult things to explain. Often there is no explanation, beyond ‘it just sounds right’.

For example, in English we say that we did something *on* a Monday *in* August *at* night. But why do we do something ‘on Monday’? It could just as easily be ‘in Monday’, because it takes place within the boundaries that determine the beginning and end of that day. Or ‘in night’, for the same reason. Indeed, why does there have to be a preposition at all? Why not just say ‘I did it Monday’?

We say that someone walks ‘up the street’; but ‘down the street’ means exactly the same thing. Unless, that is, we are following a rule related to the numbering of the houses. But I don’t give that a thought when saying ‘up’ or ‘down’ the street.

Some words require prepositions and some don’t. For example, we talk *about* something; but we simply discuss it.

This difficulty with prepositions is not restricted to English. I have encountered similar problems trying to cope with prepositions in French.

Of course, one of the things that has plagued the use of prepositions is the so-called rule stating that a sentence must not end with a preposition. There is the well-known protest by Winston Churchill, quoted in various forms, but which is more or less as follows: ‘This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put!’ Actually, as far as I can ascertain, there never has been such a rule, although ‘prepositional fundamentalists’ become apoplectic if this rule is broken: it signals the end of civilisation as we know it. There are clearly cases where ending the sentence with a preposition is much to be preferred over constructing convoluted sentences such as that used by Churchill to illustrate the point. ‘That’s not something we choose to talk about’ is surely preferable to, ‘That’s not something about which we choose to talk.’ It is tidier to say, ‘Which shop are you going to?’ than, ‘To which shop are you going?’ If I am about to board a ship or a plane, how could I say, ‘Shall we go aboard?’ without placing the preposition at the end of the sentence? Of course, these sentences could probably be rephrased without using a preposition: ‘Shall we board?’ This is fine, if our aim is to eliminate prepositions from the language. But as long as they have a place in the language, in many (I don’t say all) cases, prepositions can comfortably end sentences.

Before we mount our high horses, we need to remind ourselves that many (if not all) great writers have readily ended sentences with prepositions. Let us conclude with a short extract from the writings of a little known sixteenth/seventeenth century English playwright:

By a sleep to say we end
The heartaches and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to.
Who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death—
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns—puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

12. 'You, you... fustilarian!' (28/02/2013)

'You scullion! You rampallian! You fustilarian! I'll tickle your catastrophe!' (Henry IV, Part 2)

I am continuing where I left off from the last blog, with some words from the Bard. Something a little more flavoursome, this time.

Ah, language is rarely as colourful and expressive as when it is devoted to the task of hurling insults. Shakespeare was one of the greatest insult-deliverers of all time. Even though few of us would know what a 'rampallian' or 'fustillarian' might be, we suspect that these are not things with which we would care to be compared. (I am not certain whether I want my catastrophe tickled or not.) Name-calling can be entertaining, but a witty jibe can be even better. 'He had delusions of adequacy,' said Walter Kerr. Who Walter Kerr was, and towards whom he directed this remark, I have no idea. [Wikipedia informs me that Walter Kerr was a writer and theatre critic—talk about delusions of adequacy!] This is perhaps one of the shortest great insults ever. 'Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go,' wrote Oscar Wilde, thus destroying a fair proportion of the human race. 'I like long walks,' observes Noel Coward, 'especially when they are taken by people who annoy me.'

Coming up with a good insult can sometimes take time, and I am envious of those who, in the midst of a heated argument, can cut down their enemy. Most of us can come up with nothing better than, 'You,

you... dipstick!' I'm not even exactly sure why that is an insult. It's a bit like saying, 'You, you... kitchen knife!' Wow, cutting! (Sorry.)

As I write this I am experiencing a rather nostalgic flash back to my youth: idle afternoons spent watching *Lost in Space*. Do you recall Dr Zachary Smith, and the insults he would hurl at his companion, that bubble-headed booby, the Robot? Alliteration, of course, was invariably the key to these insults. 'Deplorable dunderhead!' 'Ignominious ignoramus!' 'Pusillanimous pinhead!' How *Lost in Space* improved my vocabulary! I would have to leave to look up the word 'pusillanimous' immediately. [Pusillanimous: Lacking courage, cowardly. From the Latin *pusillus* (weak), *animus* (courage—among other things).]

I think it is only fair to conclude this pestiferous post with some additional words from Will:

'Thou clay-brained guts, thou knotty-pated fool, thou whoreson obscene greasy tallow-catch!' (Henry IV, Part 1)

13. The Challenges of Manuscript Assessment (01/03/2013)

In the business side of my life I am offering three main services, although sometimes the boundaries between them can become blurred. These services are: manuscript assessment, copy editing and proofreading. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the most sensitive and difficult of these tasks (although not necessarily the most time-consuming) is manuscript assessment.

Manuscript assessment is similar to reviewing, except that it is much more in depth and provides a much more detailed critique. It is also the area into which the greatest proportion of subjectivity and opinion enters. There is a large degree of objectivity about grammar, spelling and punctuation, and although the process of proofreading is time-consuming, it is less taxing. Copy editing demands a little more

subjectivity, but it still essentially deals with the nuts and bolts of the manuscript. Manuscript assessment, on the other hand, goes to the very heart of the creative process. It examines plot, character development, writing style and story structure. These are not ‘incidentals’. These are areas of enormous sensitivity. They are at what most would consider to be the heart of the story.

It is not too difficult for a writer to accept the correction of a spelling mistake here, or of a sentence there. But to be confronted with a critique of the very story itself, of some valued character, or of a cherished passage, is much more difficult. Of course, a critique is not only about criticism; but it will inevitably involve *some* criticism, even if given constructively. As the one providing the critique or assessment I am also, of course, acutely aware that in many cases I can only offer an opinion. There is certainly some room for objectivity; but this usually occurs where assessment overlaps with editing. For example, there is little subjectivity involved when pointing out a plot inconsistency. However, if I suggest that a particular character requires further development, or that a plot element doesn’t really ‘work’, this sounds (and probably is) more in the realm of opinion than fact. Nevertheless I try to back these claims with evidence from the text; I provide suggestions for how to move on. As the author it is important not to be too ‘precious’ about this; and not to take it too personally.

It is an enormous advantage for both the author and the assessor that they do not know each other. While it is never my intention as the assessor to be unkind, sometimes it is necessary to be uncomfortably honest. I do not see the disappointment on the author’s face. I do not have to face them the next day. They can swear and curse about me as much as they desire. Hopefully, at the end of the day, what I am able to provide will help them to move forward and produce a better novel or story. Hopefully.

14. Out with the Old, in with the New (02/03/2013)

There will be only a brief comment from me today. The reason? A new notebook computer and all of the drama associated with that. I usually write my blog one day and post it the next morning. Yesterday afternoon, however, I decided to take a break and go computer shopping. My old laptop has been showing signs of age for some time, and it was time to act. Add to that that my eyes were about to fall out—I had been reading for so long.

So the first issue confronting me was my old nemesis *choice*. Actually, that wasn't so bad this time. I had a pretty fair idea of what I needed and what I didn't. I haven't purchased a computer for about four years, and one of the really nice things is how much prices have fallen during that time. If I look back over the years, each laptop I have purchased (and I am on to my fourth now) has been something like half the price of the previous one, even though several years have passed between each purchase. So far, so good. Choice made; purchase completed.

But then, arriving home, there is the inevitable hassle of transferring files from the old to the new, and installing software on the new, setting up email accounts (what seem to be identical settings on one computer don't work on the other—or maybe that *wasn't* the password for that account?). Through the rest of the afternoon and on into the evening with this. I am still realising that I don't have this or that piece of software downloaded yet.

The biggest change, though, is from Windows 7 to Windows 8. I guess I understand the reason for the changes: everything is moving towards touchscreen technology and a common platform for all devices. At least, I assume that's what it's about. But you really do have to wonder why some changes are made. Why, for instance, has the 'recent documents' feature disappeared? I used this constantly. Yes, sure, it's still accessible if you know how (do a Google search if you have any problems), but it should be there, right in front of me.

Apparently I am not supposed to turn the computer off any more either: there is no 'shut down' option, at least not in any obvious place.

Oh well. I suppose I will get used to the changes. It may even be that I will come to wonder how I ever managed with that old war horse, Windows 7. For a while though, I will probably be distracted as I continue to discover that what I once did with one click now requires that I balance on my head and spin widdershins ten times.

15. The Undiscovered Country (03/03/2013)

I have just been reading some travel writing for assessment, and I realize what an unaware, half-asleep traveler I have been during my lifetime. Perhaps, indeed, that I have spent my life half asleep.

I tend to spend a great deal of time inside my head, and, therefore, probably miss much of what goes on around me. For that reason, I probably do not dig very deeply into the people and events that I see. This is not an ideal thing for someone who claims to be a writer; least of all, one who claims to write about 'real people' in 'real life' situations.

The particular manuscript I have been reading opened my eyes to a part of the world about which I know very little, except from news reports: North Africa and the Middle East. When I travel I tend to stick to safe places, not too far beyond my own culture and comfort zone. I'll be honest and admit that I do not consider myself to be a very courageous person; and I like comfort. Having read this manuscript I am not inspired to change this aspect of my personality; rather, it has made me more aware of some things about myself. There is, in fact, a great deal more going on around me even here, where I live, than I am usually aware of. It is easy to take things at face value, to assume that what we see is what we get. In my more enlightened moments I am acutely aware that this is not the case. I am a little cynical about human beings. A little? A lot, actually. What you see is rarely, if ever,

what you get. And the more people claim this about themselves, the less I am inclined to believe it. Nevertheless, knowing or believing this does not necessarily provide me with any insights about what is actually there, below the surface.

The same is true of a culture. What shows above the surface is only a tiny part of what is actually there. There have been times when I have presumed to know what that underbelly is within Australia, without really taking the time to seriously study it. This is true of my very own culture, here, now, today. How much more difficult it is to know the ‘truth’ of another culture! I admire the person who wrote the manuscript I have been reading; not because she managed to get it all ‘right’, but because she had the courage and took the time to look and listen. And not only to look, but to expose herself to the potential hazards of living inside that culture (or those cultures—one of the things that is clear is that there is not one single culture in that part of the world), at least for a time. Sometimes I wonder whether I have even taken the time to live within my own culture.

I do not feel the urge to rush away to some hazardous overseas milieu and expose myself to danger. There remains enough here to discover, I begin to realize. I think that a haze has covered my eyes. I have become lazy, assuming that I pretty well know it all now. I therefore interpret what I see through this haze, this filter. I now fit my new experiences into the framework of my old world view. Perhaps it is time to permit my new experiences to change that worldview. It is time to take another look at this undiscovered country.