

# Cloud Chamber 165

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Hazel and I continue to survive happily if reclusively in times of plague, but there's little to say about such non-adventures as going shopping, visiting the park, wandering the cemetery, and moving abandoned bottles from random street locations to the recycling banks (single-trip records: 78 in November, 137 in December). Autumn brought a great upheaval to a long-running SF project, and here is the back-story as written in June for William Brieding's lavishly produced fanzine *Portable Storage* 6:

## Marooned on Terminus

Since about 2005 or maybe even earlier, my literary career – such as it was – has been eaten by the *SF Encyclopedia*.

In the 1970s, as a then very new fan, I had nothing whatever to do with the 1979 *Encyclopedia* edited by Peter Nicholls. As a computer obsessive I provided some minor technical help with the 1993 version edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, and was one of the beta-test readers (leading to the almost unimaginable glory of being co-credited for an entry where I'd suggested an extra sentence). What probably sealed my fate was the 1995 Grolier CD-ROM of that second edition, whose design was so awful – a Windows app that didn't let you resize the window – that I was maddened into writing a front end to make it usable. The world will little note nor long remember, but it impressed John Clute and I found myself conscripted on to the editorial team for the third edition which, since the second had pushed hard against the limits of what could be crammed into a specialist printed book and no one involved now trusted the CD medium, would have to appear online.

My first exciting task was to take the CD-ROM text and restore all the accents on characters like é which, even when allowed by the Windows character set, Grolier had decided were too much trouble to include. Much effort by many people followed before the official launch in October 2011. The editors felt they needed another year, but our supreme overlord Malcolm Edwards – then a very big man indeed at Hachette/Orion – desperately wanted the *SFE* to be unveiled along with its partner site the Gollancz SF Gateway (his pet ebook operation) as a highlight of Gollancz's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. So we rushed like mad, and so did the website designers "STEEL of London", who achieved wonders at short notice. The two sites juddered down the slipway on the prescribed date with an accompaniment of much champagne.

It was about four weeks later, while the *SFE* editors were still worrying more about the gaps in our own content than any little technical problems with the website, that I heard for the first time that the contract with STEEL specified a fixed term during which reported bugs would be fixed free of charge. After that the cost would be horrendous. The period in question was four weeks. As time went by, alas, the chaps at STEEL became more grasping and at one point asked to be paid a significant sum not to fix a routine problem but to calculate the very much more significant charge for fixing it.

Meanwhile, some of the features we'd requested from the outset had been ruled out by STEEL as too much trouble, and we had to compromise with buttons or links added by our hero designers to sf-encyclopedia.com but running Langford-written

scripts at sf-encyclopedia.uk to provide such desiderata as a Wikipedia-style What Links Here report, a What's New list of the most recently added entries, the In Memoriam page of recent deaths, a Picture Gallery of book cover scans to insert some otherwise sadly lacking eye candy, and more.

In the modern clickbait manner, let's do the next bit as 11 Things You Probably Didn't Know About the *SF Encyclopedia* Site (You Really Won't Believe Number 6!!!):

- **1. What I Tell You Twice Is True.** An axiom of the STEEL web design philosophy, or maybe just whatever off-the-shelf package they used, was that no opportunity to include a pop-up tooltip should ever be missed. Thus, if you're browsing the list of author entries and allow your cursor to hover over "Asimov, Isaac", up pops a cute little box containing the strangely reassuring message "Asimov, Isaac".

- **2. Funny Foreign Letters.** These are for the most part sensibly handled in searching: typing in either Philip José or Philip Jose gives a hit list with Philip José Farmer's entry at the top. Unfortunately there are gaps in the range of arcane diacriticals understood by the search engine. Searching for Peter Hoeg failed to find Peter Høeg until we resorted to the cop-out of misspelling his name in the headword and starting the entry text with "More correctly given as ..." There are sixteen such entries and I'm looking forward to putting them all right when we switch to the (subtle foreshadowing here) replacement site.

- **3. SF Gateway Surprises.** In theory, every title in an *SFE* bibliographical checklist that was available as a Gateway ebook would link to the appropriate Gateway page. In practice, the slipshod matching procedure assumed that all titles were unique (see also Invisible Romanians below) and there was no need to check author names as well. Thus in the Langford entry, for many years, my collection *Irrational Numbers* linked to the Gateway ebook of *Irrational Numbers* by George Alec Effinger.

- **4. Invisible Romanians.** One of the secret rules of the STEEL site design is that no two entries, or maybe it's no two entries in a particular range of the alphabet, can have the same content following the headword. This came to light because heaps of Romanian authors are discussed only in the overall article about their country and have cross-reference entries pointing there: "Author Name / Referred to in the entry for Romania." The first was fine; the second and third and so on showed enigmatic blank pages because ... well, as my STEEL contact implacably confirmed, the site was working as designed. In the end I had to fudge up an elaborate macro to give all such entries – not just Romanians but Variousothercountryans and authors with many pseudonyms – a unique internal identifier that didn't show on-screen. Inches of fun, you bet.

- **5. Unknown Unknowns.** *SFE* entries have various tags like Author, Art(ist), Award, Editor and so on, allowing the generation of thematic headword lists. This works fine apart from a certain bloatedness (see What I Tell You Twice Is True above), but unfortunately STEEL never got the hang of the various introductions and front-matter pieces – Acknowledgements, Contributors and the like – which were tagged Prelim. Such entries were sternly reported as Unknown in the browser header bar, which looked sufficiently silly that we abandoned Prelim in favour of the catchall tag Community. But one day, we have sworn, it shall return!

- **6. Wheels of IF.** Some old-time sf fans may dimly remember the magazine *If*. Searching for this yields the interesting information that there is no such entry and indeed that the word appears nowhere in the *SFE* text. It seems that someone "optimized" the search engine by having it ignore common words. This insight led to a thought experiment: does a search for If This Goes On yield identical results to a search for Goes alone? Indeed it does.

- **7. No News Is Good News.** There's a news bulletin feature that lets any *SFE* editor (though somehow this is always my task) add newsy links to the home page: important deaths,

major awards, etc. Handling embargoed news is a problem because although there's a distinction between *saving* a news item – obviously a wise precaution – and *publishing* it to the *SFE* site, the mere act of saving causes the headline to appear immediately and betrayingly on the home page. Though not, small mercies, as a link to the actual news bulletin. Incidentally, the CMS (Content Management System) interface provided to edit news items and other site information pages is so slow and horrible that I'm very, very glad to have instinctively resisted the early suggestion that it should be used across the board to add and update *SFE* entries. We dodged a bullet there.

● **8. The Pillars of Eternity.** One little-known and I think innovative aspect of the *SFE* design is that entries cannot be deleted. Well, not by the mere editors. In the early days our then-friendly site designers used to remove embarrassments on request, but eventually they tired of the repeated demands. If you accidentally create a headword for Isaac Azimov or John Clute, it's preserved forever like a fly in ointment. Fortunately it proved possible to fiddle with the entry tags and laboriously make these embarrassments invisible. There is a secret search code, a non-word used to replace the content of unwanted entries, which if entered in the search box exposes 60 historic mistakes. It will not be revealed here.

● **9. Sorry, The Page You Are Looking For Does Not Exist** ... is a message which the *SFE* site proudly never shows. At some point before the launch I was shown a neat 404 error page that matched the overall site design, but apparently it was never installed. Instead there are currently two possible responses to a bad URL. If it contains /entry/ you see a more-or-less normal entry page with a blank white expanse where the entry text should be (as with Invisible Romanians above) and other bits missing because some fragment of Javascript fails to run. If it doesn't contain /entry/ you get an ugly server-default "404 - File or directory not found." Oh well.

● **10. The Hidden Peril.** At one early stage, every book title in the author bibliographies containing the word Hidden – such as good old Charlie Stross's *The Hidden Family* – was, in fact, hidden. A blank space in the checklist, followed by the place, publisher and date for this apparently untitled book. How we all laughed! Some botched coding in the automatically inserted shopping/SF Gateway links had allowed the text of each book title to sort of leak into the surrounding HTML tag, and "hidden" is indeed an HTML keyword whose effect you are now miraculously able to deduce.

● **11. If At First You Don't Succeed** ... you have to type in your search text again, because leaving it in the entry box to be edited would make things too insultingly easy. Another little pitfall is that *SFE* search results are presented in a weird order that gives priority to hits within entry headwords and after that uses some mysterious internal weighting unfathomable by the mere human intellect. For example, a search for Starship Troopers first returns the expected film and game entries followed by Powered Armour, Paul Verhoeven, Robert Buettner and Military SF (yes, the book is indeed mentioned in all four), with poor old Heinlein way down the second page of results. It would of course be foolish to expect searches for Utopia to give top priority to the relevant entry Utopias – which if it appears at all isn't in the first *twenty pages* of search results – but here and in several similar cases we cheated by inserting dummy cross-reference entries: "Utopia / See Utopias."

The utopian (see Utopias) dream of the *SFE* and Gollancz SF Gateway being "joined at the hip", each feeding referrals to the other, began to develop cracks in early 2018. By then STEEL had been fired by Hachette/Orion/Gollancz, and it emerged that their procedure for adding relevant SF Gateway links to *SFE* bibliography entries was using an old database buried somewhere in the black-box architecture of the site. Newly acquired Gateway titles weren't getting links, while many older links stayed in place despite Gateway having lost the rights to

those titles. The regular chorus from Hachette's own IT people was: "We can't do anything about sf-encyclopedia.com, we don't have the source code."

It would perhaps be unfair to compare the 2019 SF Gateway site redesign (carried out by Hachette IT) to the fate of Obama-era initiatives under the Trump administration, but John Clute and I suspected that Malcolm Edwards – who had left Hachette/Orion/Gollancz earlier that year, in search of new worlds to conquer – would have taken better care of his brain child. All the STEEL-created links from *SFE* to Gateway were broken by the introduction of new Gateway URLs that included the ISBN as well as the title. Gateway home-page blog posts promoting newly added titles no longer appeared; as I write, the latest is still dated August 2019. Perhaps the new Gollancz Digital Master didn't inherit the blog password; perhaps he just doesn't care. The randomly rotating *SFE* entry excerpt and link on the SF Gateway front page became permanently and painfully stuck at Michael Scott Rohan, an old friend who had died in 2018. [*Unchanged in December 2021.*] Meanwhile at the *SFE*, the corresponding promotional link to a random Gateway title was fixed forever as Kate Wilhelm's *The Clewiston Test*.

By devious means I managed to replace *The Clewiston Test* cover image with a copy of the *SFE* logo, and am reasonably proud of having written my own web scripts to add "buy this book" links that went to Gateway if the title (by the right author, of course) could be found there, but otherwise to our own affiliates page. What pleased me most was obfuscating all the entry checklists so – although we still had to use the STEEL import facility to update the site – the associated routine that had inserted unreliable links couldn't detect and thus didn't muck around with our bibliographies. A happy side effect was that random corrupted headwords – duplicating existing entry headwords but with bad links – stopped appearing in the entry lists at sf-encyclopedia.com.

Having warmly praised these 2019 efforts, the new management at Orion/Gollancz hardened its heart and, after menacing intimations, long silences and record-breaking delays in renewing the *SFE* contract for 2020-2021, announced in March this year that our services would no longer be required after the end of September. Now I see a golden vista of opportunities to embarrass myself with new and original bugs in the replacement or clone *SFE* site that I've been preparing against (as they say) the fall of night. Please wish me luck.

*The above is of course overly Langford-centric. It is a proud and lonely thing to be the nearest approximation to a technically competent person on the Encyclopedia team, and I don't half go on about it. As already noted, Peter Nicholls – no longer with us, alas – founded this enterprise; John Clute has written more entries than anyone else; I've written fewer than a tenth as many but am in second place on the statistics page; Graham Sleight (Managing Editor) looks after the accounts; Roger Robinson (Research Editor) maintains bibliographies and does most of the Picture Gallery scans. See "Contributors" in the *SFE* itself for many, many more. I don't know what became of STEEL, but the link to the company website built into every page at sf-encyclopedia.com now leads to one of their trademark blank screens....* (June 2021)

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That article – here slightly expanded from what appeared in *Portable Storage* – is now happily obsolete. On 6 October 2021, after several stressful days of waiting for the domain transfer to go through, sf-encyclopedia.com fell into my cruel hands and the replacement site appeared. I've been chasing bugs ever since, but at least they're *our* bugs and not STEEL's.

Other 2021 projects included further fanhistorical ebooks at taff.org.uk/ebooks.php, such as the new compilations *Creative Random Harris* by Chuck Harris; *Faan Fiction 1930-2020: an exploration*, edited by Rob Hansen; and *Bixelstrasse: The SF Fan Community of 1940s Los Angeles*, also edited by Rob Hansen.

Finally: **Merry Christmas** and a **Happy New Year** to everyone!