

Saturday 24th of April 2010

Ban about town

I flew to Mudgee, NSW, on Aeropelican, a Newcastle-based airline that also services a place I had never heard of, called Narrabri. According to Aeropelican's website, Narrabri is in the Namoi Valley, which I have never heard of, and is convenient for the surrounding towns of Boggabri, Bellata, Wee Waa*, Pilliga and Gwabegar, which I have never heard of.

The guy at the Aeropelican check-in desk was very friendly and, once he had checked in all seven passengers, he announced the flight was boarding, then sprinted downstairs to the gate lounge and scanned all our boarding passes.

I fully expected to see him flying the plane, too.

I was going to Mudgee to talk about my novel** to a gathering of local writers. There was no in-flight magazine on Aeropelican, just a free newspaper entitled Discover. I was distressed to find that my appearance coincided with the 22nd annual mouse races at Bylong, a place I had never heard of. What kind of lunatic would go to watch a writer when there are mice racing in "10 heats followed by the prestigious Bylong Cup" only 77 kilometres up the road?

About 25 people turned up on the day, and nine bought my book. This was a record sale, both in proportionate and numerical terms, and made me think I should spend more time in Aeropelican destinations, including, perhaps, Narrabri.

At a newsagency in Mudgee, I was surprised to notice the wide variety of pig-hunting magazines on sale (as opposed to the sad dearth of mouse-racing publications). There was Bacon Busters, of course, with its famous "Babes and Boars" centrefold, but also Wild Boar Australia, Aussie Boar Hunters and the brilliantly titled Boar It Up Ya, "the only pig-hunting magazine with 'grunt'".

Sadly, I was unable to track down the latest copy of Whingeing POM, a West Australian-based magazine for British ex-pats, a previous issue of which featured the telling observation, "You know you're Australian if ... you've made a bong out of your garden hose rather than use it for something illegal such as watering the garden."

But my favourite Australian mag is The Tradie, distributed to tradespeople at work sites, often by "Tradie Ladies" in bikinis. The Tradie's advertisers include F.A.T. P.I.G., the "Fasteners, Adhesives, Tools, Product Information Guide", and its "Tradie of the Month" at Christmas was Jesus Christ.

As well as an eclectic newsagent, Mudgee boasts a fantastic censored with a red-brick clocktower at its centre. The clocktower also serves as a cenotaph for the town's World War II dead, just as the censored additionally functions as a gyratory traffic-control system.

However, since I am banned from writing about censored, I will take this opportunity to correct a recent mistake. In a previous column, I stated that the match was a Swedish invention. I received an email from Jerry Bell, author of *Lighting Up Australia: The Story of the Australian Match Manufacturing Industry 1843-2003: Also Includes a Section on New Zealand****, who tells me the match was the brainchild of a (possibly whingeing) Pom in 1827. It was the safety match that was actually developed by a Swedish professor in 1844-45.

It's a small point, but a telling one. The match without "safety" was a step forward for humanity - particularly smokers - just as the road without censored undeniably

improved the lives of many. But it wasn't until the development of the censored that drivers could approach a busy intersection knowing their risk of injury had been minimised by careful urban planning. And it wasn't until the white-phosphorous match was replaced by its red-phosphorous cousin that people could confidently strike a light without fear of burning to death.

Although what all that's got to do with Mudgee is anybody's guess. _

* Actually, I might've heard of Wee Waa.

** The title of which I am no longer allowed to mention in this column.

*** Lighting Up Australia..., by Jerry Bell, is available from its publisher, Jerry Bell.

Saturday 10th of April 2010

Excess Baggage

I went to the beach with my cyst. I used to go everywhere with my cyst, because it grew out of my lower back. It was about the width of a 10-cent piece and the thickness of my thumb. I imagine it looked quite strange, but it didn't bother me as I never saw it, because it was on my back.

My cyst and I had been together for about two years when my partner, Claire, suggested I should have it removed because it made me look deformed. I dutifully took myself off to the doctor and explained the situation, expecting to be told, as usual, that cysts are caused by drinking beer, and the only thing I could do to prevent myself being smothered to death by giants cysts was give up alcohol, caffeine, fatty foods, spices, sex, smiling, etc.

Instead, she gave me a referral to a surgeon who specialised in cutting out cysts. The letter referred to me as a patient "with a large sebaceous cyst on his back that his wife would like removed".

Back home, I took off my shirt and pointed out to my five-year-old son, Ben, that I had grown a cyst. He examined it briefly and declared, "When I grow up, I'm not going to grow anything except hair."

The cyst-removing surgeon turned out to be a jolly bloke who noticed that I was a journalist and asked if he should've heard of me. I told him I wrote this column and he said he thought it was "as funny as a fucking fit", although he only read it when he found it too difficult to complete the Sudoku puzzle below.

I wouldn't have thought doctors found fits particularly funny, but I guess everyone has to maintain a sense of humour about their job. The surgeon then quoted a line from a column that he particularly enjoyed. This happens to me quite a lot, but is not as satisfying as it might seem, since usually the person is actually remembering something written by Danny Katz, Maggie Alderson or the bloke who used to have this page before I did.

In this case, however, the surgeon remembered correctly, which gave me great confidence in his ability to cut off my cyst and not, for instance, my leg - which I understand is the kind of thing that happens in hospitals.

He told me sebaceous cysts were caused by a build-up of the stuff that makes skin oily. I asked him why that build-up might happen, and he replied, "God".

So God's got it in for me, then?

With great insight, the surgeon suggested God probably wasn't the only one.

The procedure lasted about 10 minutes and was so painless that I almost fell asleep. But nine hours later, when I got to the pub, I felt as though I had been attacked by a particularly literal-minded backstabbing colleague.*

I took a picture of my cyst in a jar, but I haven't been able to drum up much interest among other people in looking at it.

I'm always surprised I've got so many readers in the medical profession. (In fact, I'm surprised I've got any readers at all.) I asked the surgeon why this was, and he said, "We've got nothing else to do." But surely if I were read by people with nothing to do, I'd be getting letters from Peter Garrett, the federal minister for nothing; Joe Hockey's personal trainer; the scientist responsible for Senator Steve Fielding's continued education; or the stylist who musses up Stephen Smith's hair.

Mark Dapin



Anyway, a fool and his cyst are soon parted, and my back feels strangely naked without it. I showed the scar to Ben. He said, "It's a big zigzag, but it doesn't look like a monster", so obviously it does. I've exchanged one deformity for another, but at least I've lost a bit of weight.

* I mention no names here.