

## *From the Kitchen*

30 June 2010



I lie on the damp earth under a multi-hued canopy. Sunlight plays around and over me, as do the many insects. My clothing, derived from earth-sucking plants, again soaks moisture from the ground, but I can draw no physical nourishment from this.

Like other animals, humans seem relatively inefficient in gathering what they need to survive, but they have the advantage over plants in being able to go to where the nourishment is. If the soil in which a plant finds itself runs out of water or an essential mineral, the plant generally cannot move to find replacements.

While animals will range to find food and water, humans often venture abroad to fill (arguably) less essential needs – adventure, power, spiritual fulfilment... Yet there are people who seem content to live their entire lives within cooee of the place they were born. I have met people who *never* ventured more than ten kilometres from the bed where they were conceived.

Of course, we can now do our travelling in a virtual world. We can use the Internet to simulate flying over almost any part of the world and, in many places, alight and explore at street level. You can totally avoid the discomfort and expense of physical adventuring. Also through the Internet, you can read foreign newspapers, browse in foreign libraries and visit museums and art galleries, watch sports events and even images from people's gardens.

The opportunities for virtual experiences are burgeoning. We can now not only 'get a life', we can get a Second Life. For those not in the know, this latter phenomenon is an on-line facsimile of existence on Earth and in space, for which many people will pay with earth-bound money and through which some have become millionaires. Thousands of people spend the majority of their 'leisure' time in this non-place: partying, adventuring, loving, 'living'.

Is it necessary for us to experience everything in the 'real' or physical world for our experience to count towards a fulfilled life? Our current knowledge of how the brain works would suggest that it is not necessary to taste, smell, touch, see or hear physically – the brain cannot distinguish between what we experience and what we think we experience; so the scientists tell us.

I suspect that it may not be quite that cut and dried. I feel that there is a qualitative difference between on-earth and on-line experiences. My brain tells me that to pretend to trek through the wilderness mediated by a computer screen would not be the same as doing it rough in a 'real' jungle.

Mind you, I have been totally lost in places I have never been to with people I have never met while reading an excellent novel. I felt I could smell the dank forest, hear the rustling in the undergrowth as the marauding beast came ever closer to the would-be victim. My heart would beat faster as the hero galloped towards the scene to affect a rescue. I've cried while

reading a heart-wrenching passage in which someone's loss was rendered in excruciating detail.

As a writer, I attempt to take the reader into a virtual reality and make it as 'real' as I can. For writing to achieve this, it has to make the reader be willing to exclude outside stimuli that would get in the way. This is much easier to achieve with film, where vision and hearing can be immersed in a dark space where the real-world is excluded – except when the person behind you keeps unwrapping lollies.

Something that intrigues me is the ability to not only take someone into a make-believe world, but to populate that world with computer-generated, animated toys or purely make-believe characters and have adults care about an unloved doll to the extent that they will cry over its plight.

We tend to impart meaning on almost everything we think we experience. How does this help us obtain the physical and emotional nourishment we need for survival? For instance, when it comes to choosing a mate, our propensity for responding to what we imagine, makes this area of human experience fraught with mistakes, wrong beginnings, lost opportunities, difficult endings and children who imagine they are the cause. This then colours *their* imagination, to repeat the response to imagined reality. Many mystics talk of needing to wake up from the dream we call life into the *real* world. Are we dreaming that we are awake? Do we create the reality around us, or does it create us?

No wonder most of us have such a skewed and wrong-headed attitude to almost everything around us.