



Novacon 45 Progress Report 2



Guests of Honour: Stan and Anne Nicholls

As I type the text on this page, we're having a week in which we're blasted alternately by heatwaves and thunderstorms, spending our time being either burnt or drenched. One day hot, one day wet, we don't know what to pawn.

Therefore I've taken refuge in front of the keyboard in order to bring you the delightful small handful of pages which is **Novacon 45 Progress Report 2**, wherein we establish that the committee are still firmly committed, the hotel is still hot, the guests are still guesting, and a referendum has enabled us to consolidate all our unpayable debt into one manageable European country.

If you got this PR in the post from us it means that you're on the membership list for the convention it describes. By studying your address label you should be able to determine if your hotel is booked and, if not, you should find a hotel booking form in your envelope. Fill it in, send it to Steve. He'll like that.

If by some mischance you're not yet a member (maybe you found this slim volume discarded in a bar somewhere) then visit the website and you can find membership and hotel forms together with downloadable versions of the other convention publications. If you are already a member and you want to amaze and baffle your friends, then talk to them about coming to Novacon. Point them at the website. Remember, the more of your friends you can persuade to attend, the more likely it is that one of them will buy you a beer.

In this PR, as well as news from the committee and the hotel, we have some book reviews, a list of the members so far and the return of the Fun Page.

As you may have remembered, we have two guests of honour this year. Two! Back in PR1 (available on the website) Anne Nicholls provided an introduction to Stan Nicholls and his work; here in PR2, he returns the favour. Go and read.

Douglas Spencer

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to our contributors, as listed in the Table of Contents above.

Front cover illustration and caption by Dave Hicks.

Colouring-in image on back cover from <http://www.coloring.ws/>

Chairman's Bit and Hotel Paragraph

Hello and welcome to PR2. Things have been a whirl of activity recently with my committee getting into the spirit of things by painting themselves yellow and talking incomprehensibly about bananas. More about the programme later, but we do have the usual science talks from Real Scientists and book launches from both our guests of honour, which gives us an excuse for the usual booze-up on Friday evening. There may be a quiz. There will be book and art auctions – well it wouldn't be Novacon without, would it? There will be beer.

The hotel is still in one piece despite our best efforts and you have your room booking forms. I must nag you again about filling these in and getting them to Steve as soon as possible. The hotel will start releasing rooms to all and sundry 30 days before the con, so sort it now! No deposit is needed, but if you intend to arrive after 4pm on Friday you need to ring the hotel direct and reserve your room with a credit card. The number is 0115-935-9988. If you want space in the dealers' room, put it on your membership form or contact me or Steve. Tables are £20 per 6ft for the weekend. You have to be a member of the con to book a table, but if you want space in the artshow, just tell us. Same for con tables; they are free, but let us know.

And now...

Tony Berry

Programme Bit

Well, it's that time of the year when planning is coming together for Novacon, we've had a number of proactive meetings led by our illustrious leader Tony Berry and at the last meeting we were pleased to receive our Guests of Honour, Stann and Anne Nicholls.

Stan and Ann are really looking forward to being involved in Novacon 45, and as such, I can tell you that as part of the Off Piste programme Stan will run a creative workshop on world building, whilst Anne will tackle character building. They will of course be on panels too!

So what are some of the panels you can look forward to this year?

Firstly, Helena Bowles will be exploring the tradition of transformative fandom (fan fiction) in a couple of items. We're also discussing other mediums such as film in a panel called 'Boot the Reboot?' and the comic book, which Stan will be involved in. We'll have our usual panels focusing on literature and SF, of which more will follow in PR3. However, to really whet your appetite, both Anne and Stan have new titles coming out from Alchemy Press and Newcon

Introduction to Anne Nicholls, by Stan

If you're a writer, marry a writer. At least, that's what I did. They understand, you see. You don't have to explain when you spend ten hours in your garret communing with people you've made up. They get it when you ask if they can think of another word for bathtub, or you have them playact the best way to plunge a dagger into the small of someone's back. They comprehend your attempt at inventing character names that bear no relation to names in the real world but still sound plausible, and sympathise when you struggle to move your story from point A to point B when it seemed so simple in your outline but is proving bloody impossible now you're writing it. They don't blink an eye when you wake up in the middle of the night to scribble lines of dialogue that invariably make no sense in the morning. Because the chances are they're doing something similar. That's not the only reason I married Anne, of course. But it's a definite plus.

As it happens, we met at a Novacon. Two decades ago I fetched up in Birmingham when I was touring with David Gemmell and Chris Baker, promoting the graphic novel version of Dave's *Legend*, which Chris illustrated and I adapted. Dave already knew Anne, and had been urging me to contact her for some time, ostensibly to interview her, but I think he knew on some level that we'd connect... an unlikely Cupid. I'd read some of Anne's books and stories before we met, partly with that possible interview in mind but mostly because they were science fiction, which I've always eagerly devoured. I was impressed.

She was Anne Gay in those days, and her debut sf story, 'Wishbone', was a winner in a competition run by *The Sunday Times* and Gollancz, and appeared in the resulting *Sunday Times Book of SF Stories*. A torrent of other shorts followed, and her first novel, *Mindsail*. That made the *Sunday Times* bestseller list, placed above one of her literary heroes, Dick Francis. With typical modesty, Anne pointed out that *Mindsail* was in the lower part of the list and Francis' book was on its way down, having spent many weeks in top position. Her subsequent novels were *The Brooch of Azure Midnight*, *Dancing on the Volcano* and *To Bathe in Lightning*, all of which displayed both an active speculative imagination and, one of her major strengths, a depth of characterisation. A collection of Anne's stories, old and new, entitled *Music From The Fifth Planet*, published by Alchemy Press, is going to be launched at this year's Novacon.

So we met, and clicked. I was struck by her sense of humour, her intelligence and her left-field way of looking at life. I sometimes wonder what it was that struck her about me - she can't have been drunk all the time. We attended 1995's Worldcon, Intersection, in Glasgow together, where we developed an entire mythology based on voles. (Which is too involved, not to mention silly, to go into here.) That con was characterised by our laughter, a condition that we've shared ever since.

We married in 1996, with matchmaker Dave Gemmell as my best man. As a bonus I gained a stepdaughter, Marianne, who's since gifted us with two beautiful grandchildren. We also saddled each other with the Anne/Stan alliteration, something people point out with glee, as though we've never heard it before. I'm thinking of changing my name to Snowflake.

During our time together I've seen Anne write four young adult novels, and a steady stream of short stories and journalism. People ask if we've ever collaborated on a piece of fiction. We did, once, but it was a secret project we can't talk about. Sorry. But I can relate a near miss, a classic example of defeat snatched from the jaws of victory. Early in our marriage I wrote a number of novels for children and young adults. My editor at that time invited the pair of us to lunch, and asked us to pitch an idea. We related something we'd been mulling over: a humorous science fiction concept we thought fertile enough that it might, just maybe, warrant a series. The editor was sufficiently taken with it to verbally commission six books on the spot. We floated home. Shortly after, said editor took maternity leave and we waited for the contract. Her successor, in the manner of new brooms, decided she didn't like the idea and cancelled. Oh, well. All writers have their tales of what might have been. Maybe we'll resurrect it some day.

I like to think that we've learned from each other, not least in terms of writing. Anne is a better writer than me. By which I mean a better natural writer. The craft seems to come easier to some people, and the words flow. Anne's one of those. Whereas I sweat, constantly rewrite, fret, grumble and bleed from the ears. I'm not saying she doesn't work hard, or agonise, but the cost appears less injurious in her case. She certainly has a facility for naturalistic dialogue and plot.

Then there are the less obvious lessons. It was Anne who pointed out to me, for example, that if three books constitute a trilogy, then two books must be a biology. Perfectly reasonable when you think about it.

When the Internet started to grow, Anne took to it with her usual aptitude. Internet service provider LineOne invited her to edit a monthly sf magazine as part of their members' content. The result was a four year stint with what they called The Sci-Fi Zone (I know, I know) which at its height attracted 140,000 hits per "issue". Later, when LineOne morphed into Tiscali, Anne was employed as their online agony aunt, a role she also undertook for the website of the Department for Education, Schools and Families. Wearing her psychotherapist's hat, for which she has degree level training, she also penned two self-help books, *Make Love Work For You* and *Is Your Family Driving You Mad?* By happenstance her publisher, Piatkus, is supplementing the print versions with e-book editions released this very month. As a counsellor, which is her main occupation these days, she welcomes clients to her consultancy here at our home. I watch in admiration as many broken people go away mended. In recent times Anne has undertaken in excess of 150 radio and TV appearances, speaking on aspects of counselling.

She collects languages. Eight, at the last count. Or is it 9? Currently she's learning Chinese. For someone like me, still wrestling with English, that's jaw-dropping. Then there's her painting, taken up in the last couple of years, which has been exhibited several times. Not to mention the work she's put in on the David Gemmell Awards For Fantasy these past seven years. Sometimes I think I married Renaissance Woman.

As we age we've detected a slight internal shift. It seems our mental ages have risen to about 15. We continue to be kids together. And laugh, of course.

Stan Nicholls

Review: *The Brooch of Azure Midnight* by Anne Gay

Two sisters grow up in the small town environment of Witwaterstrand: a linkage of artificially grown, hollowed out coral polyp asteroids in Earth orbit. Chesarynth, the elder, is conforming and academically able whereas Jezrael, the younger, is rebellious and more street wise. Unknown to either of them their adolescent lives are overshadowed by the social engineering and manipulations of Karel Tjerssen, youngest member of the family controlling the powerful Spiderglass Corporation. Karel is slowly building a power base founded on his skill at the creation and manipulation of “towers” – Spiderglass implants that enhance senses and communication while providing a third party with varying levels of control over the behaviour and emotions of subjects who have undergone implantation. At its most basic level tower implanted workers are mindless drones viewed with horror by ordinary workers. Karel’s subjects are far more subtly controlled.

It is an era when nation states have disappeared to be replaced by corporations run by families. “Corporates” – members of the families that control the companies – are the new aristocracy, like the members of the Spiderglass Corporation. Within the Spiderglass Board itself Karel is distrusted by some of his influential older relatives, with some justification, as Karel holds them responsible for the assassination of his grandmother and mentor. In order to counter his relatives’ attempts to either neutralise his power on the board or kill him, Karel is creating a weapon: a weapon that can be turned on Spiderglass itself. He sees that weapon in the shape of Chesarynth and Jezrael. Chesarynth is shipped off to attend Mars University having failed to achieve a scholarship to the more prestigious Earth Institutions. The Corporations recruit strongly from Mars U and there is a hint that Karel may have fixed Chesarynth’s results in order to isolate her on Mars.

Mars has an ecological fundamentalist political system where students repay their tuition by growing crops. They have quotas to meet that are held against their grants but may not farm with machinery. All equipment, fertiliser and seeds must be bought from the “Garden Master” – a figure designed to be an emotionally meaningful one for each student. It’s a situation that is rigged against the students from the start. The farming takes up time and energy leading to less time to study, poorer results and students spiralling deeper and deeper into debt. Eventually, for many, there are only two options: suicide or selling out to the Corporations and getting a tower implant. Chesarynth struggles and works but finally, after another inexplicably poor exam result, she too must face that decision.

Meanwhile, Jezrael has been funnelled into a low level lab job. Her escape is in dance: she has a talent for Laser Dancing and the chance to leave with a troupe she has been performing with. They've been very enthusiastic about her talent but at the eleventh hour she is told she is not good enough and they leave without her. Jezrael's disaffection grows and she finally runs away to Mars to find her sister. Mars, however, is not a friendly place and Karel Tjerssen's people are watching her.

The pull quote on the book jacket mentions Frank Herbert's *Dune* and I can see why. The Borgia-esque family-run corporations are reminiscent of the Houses in *Dune*, as is the placing of the story firmly within a political system. However, Anne Gay's vision is more down to earth than Herbert's and this is a real strength. Her world building concentrates on the ordinary people – like Jezrael and Chesarynth – and how the prevailing political climate affects those who are not the blessed and anointed of society. Chesarynth's experience of studying on Mars showcases how the power of the corporations works to support the utterly unfair and inhumane conditions at Mars U so that the best and brightest can be siphoned off into the Corporate system. The focus of the book is *domestic* and that is a huge compliment. It means it is utterly believable that people live in this way, are oppressed in this way, that society could allow these things to happen. So often SF neglects that sense of making society work by concentrating on one small stratum, usually the movers and shakers. Gay shows us the inequalities and oppressions by placing us at the bottom of the pile with the moved and shaken. Chesarynth and Jezrael may have someone manipulating their lives to their detriment but that manipulation is done via the social systems that affect the other ordinary people who are not of interest to the high and mighty: people like Chesarynth's friend, Loretta, who disappears into the system simply through the hardships of that system.

Jezrael, Chesarynth and Karel are all well drawn characters. The two young women are at odds with their parents but have a deep loyalty to each other. This loyalty is put to the test when Chesarynth disappears from Mars U and Jezrael abandons everything to go and find her. Both women struggle with issues of responsibility, sexuality and, particularly, self-esteem and self-expression. All are attractive characters and even Karel's privilege and self-absorption is not painted as evil and irredeemable. In fact, he's an intelligent and interesting antagonist. The minor characters are fully rounded, from Chesarynth's roommate, Loretta, to Jezrael's employer and lover, Maggie, with their own agency, failings and virtues.

There is another plot strand to the story which, sadly, feels a little shoehorned in. There is an urban legend amongst the space faring folk of the “Heaven’s Gate”. This is a worm hole or a time warp that spits ships from the main runs in the solar system to the further colonies. Karel considers it just a bit of nonsense until the ship he is on is thrown out to a far colony. This incident and part of the conclusion of the book sits uncomfortably with the rest of the story, as though it has been transplanted from another novel. It would have made far more sense to drop this subplot completely and continue to concentrate on the Spiderglass politics and the parts that Jezrael and Chesarynth play in Karel’s plans – which turn out to be very different than the reader may have expected. The whole space “gate” idea is so large and significant, especially in a solar system where travel is Einsteinian, that it seems almost thrown away and that is a great shame.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and would highly recommend it. It has the feel of classic SF whilst being in some ways ahead of its time in its social and political concerns and outlook. What I want to know is *why* is Anne Gay not a better known author? In preparation for this review I looked up *The Brooch of Azure Midnight* on the internet and was shocked to find almost no reviews or discussions of her work. OK, so the book was published in 1991 but other works from that era have a much larger presence. Even Amazon has only one customer review (I will be correcting this, believe me). Anne Gay deserves to be recognised as a skilled, fascinating and entertaining SF writer. If you like good characters, serious world building and “proper” SF ideas then I suggest you go out and get Anne’s books now.

Helena Bowles

Review: *Bodyguard of Lightning* by Stan Nicholls

Published in 1999, the first of the *Orcs: First Blood* trilogy has become an international best seller and British Fantasy Award nominee. It picks up the fantasy trope that has recently become a bit of trend of flipping the perspective and casting assumed villains in a more sympathetic light. In this clearly *Lord of the Rings* inspired tale, humans have overrun the land of Maras Dantia and are slowly draining it of magic whilst religious conflict has split them into two hostile sides: “*unis*” and “*manis*”. The orcs (still creatures of war but with a far greater sense of justice and comradeship) have been enslaved and forced to fight for one faction in a war they want no part in, answerable to the humans that they despise. When a troupe of orcs – the Wolverines – mess up on a recovery mission they find themselves caught between certain death at the hands of their tyrannical Queen, and willingly outlawing themselves for a quest that could spell either disaster or the ultimate victory for the elder races.

Overall, I found *Bodyguard of Lightning* a very entertaining read. It wastes no time, leaping straight into spilling blood and maintaining an even pace between the action sequences and the quieter moments. Once the opening battle is done and we get to meet the orcs properly they turn out to be a surprisingly likeable bunch. Stryke, Haskeer, Alfray, Coilla and Jup all bounce off each other, loyal but quarrelsome relationships adding heart to an otherwise plot-driven novel.

Belligerent orc natures are still present, but far from the savage cut-throats we've come to recognise, their concerns are far more interpersonal – Haskeer spoiling for a fight with pretty much anything he sees or hears and refusing to reel in his prejudices regarding Jup, the only dwarf (a species known for their uncertain loyalties) in the Wolverines; Coilla, the newest recruit and the least willing to hold her tongue about their undesirable situation; Stryke unafraid to captain his warband with violent discipline. In fact, all the lives taken by orcs throughout the book are either under order or by necessity. However, that doesn't mean that they've been made at all soft. Not one of the Wolverines ever spares any emotion for the creatures, human or otherwise, they cut down, and all of them enjoy the rush of a good battle immensely. Swimming in a sea of squeaky clean heroes and Honour Before Reason, it's surprisingly refreshing to follow a group of protagonists who prioritise their own interests and want to save themselves as much as the world. At no point in the book do their motivations become unclear or require any suspension of disbelief and it makes for all the more engaging a story.

There are plenty of obstacles and antagonists for the Wolverines to face down but the most consistent (and most deadly) is Queen Jenesta, half human mani supporter and controller of the Wolverines. An utterly detestable character, Jenesta could very easily be a pantomime villain, but Nicholls manages to walk the line of utter (almost impractical) mercilessness without ever falling over it. While given no reason to root for her, she's still an entertaining character, if something of a stock femme fatale and – given her method of restoring her own magic – teetering dangerously on the precipice of the highly annoying Depraved Bisexual trope. The rest of the Wolverine's enemies only get brief appearances in this book, clearly set to play more important roles in the rest of the trilogy. I do look forward to seeing more of them, especially the bounty hunters – their cut to black in the middle of chapter 22 is the most chilling moment in the entire book and instantly establishes them as second only to Jenesta in their ruthlessness.

If there's one major pit-fall of this book, then it's the lack of any real sense of peril. Despite the numerous clashes that the Wolverine's get into, no major character is ever seriously harmed. In this universe orcs are still born soldiers but the number of total victories they score soon strays from superior skill into blind luck and it wasn't far into the story that I found any potential for real trouble lost. There *are* fatalities on the orc's side but from their introductions these characters are evident Red Shirts, named only to be killed off when the ante needed upping. However, this does make the final pages, where everything falls apart on the Wolverines simultaneously and catastrophically, all the more gripping. They go through around 220 pages of lucky break after lucky break only to lose it all, including one development I can't pretend I saw coming. It's fast and brutal and had me itching to turn the page in my Omnibus edition and find out how they all escape (not that I have any doubt they will).

All in all, this is a very enjoyable start to the trilogy. It's probably better appreciated knowing the classic fantasy epics that it springs from (I've never read *Lord of the Rings*, please don't judge me) but stands perfectly well on its own. The battle taking place between almost anti-heroes and outright villains adds grit and the story is solid, if a little reliant on exposition in places, and it leaves no room for doubt about continuing on to book two.

Maggie Standage-Bowles

Novacon 45 Members as at 15th July 2015 (138)

1 Stan Nicholls	38 Steve
2 Anne Nicholls	54 Roger Earnshaw
28 ½r	105 Martin Easterbrook
66 Michael Abbott	87 Sue Edwards
5 Brian Aldiss	119 Jan Edwards
63 Brian Ameringen	58 Flick
64 Emjay	74 Gwen Funnell
92 William Armitage	50 Ron Gemmell
104 Margaret Austin	133 Josh Gemmell
69 Barbara-Jane	132 Daniel Godfrey
27 Minnow	43 Angela Goodfellow
81 Austin	41 Niall Gordon
6 Tony	129 Helen Claire Gould
7 Helena	130 Mike Gould
23 Claire Brialey	96 Steve Green
78 Pat Brown	93 Dave Hardy
79 Vernon Brown	110 Mr. Peter Harrow
121 Peter Buck	11 Eve
122 Alison Buck	12 John
60 Steven Cain	25 Julian Headlong
61 Jonathan Cain	97 Julian
117 DC	10 Dave
8 Cat	113 Penny Hicks
95 Eddie Cochrane	20 Martin Hoare
118 Peter Coleborn	109 Dave Holmes
18 Serena	124 Terry Jackman
17 Julia Daly	99 Rob Jackson
82 Christine	21 Al
83 Michael	71 Steve Jones
85 Steve Davies	86 Sue Jones
115 Martyn Dawe	40 Tim Kirk
84 Giulia DeCesare	111 Dave Langford
9 Theresa Derwin	13 Alice
55 Paul Dormer	14 Steve

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----|------------------|
| 134 | Ann Looker | 22 | Harpal Singh |
| 39 | Peter Mabey | 102 | Martin |
| 100 | Sue Mason | 103 | Melica |
| 116 | Incognito | 112 | Luke Smith |
| 52 | Pat McMurray | 65 | Adrian Snowdon |
| 53 | Julie McMurray | 15 | Doug S |
| 37 | Mali Perera | 3 | Kari |
| 123 | Deirdre Montanaro | 16 | Richard |
| 90 | Pauline E Dungate | 44 | Tim Stannard |
| 91 | Chris Morgan | 131 | Chris Stocks |
| 101 | Johnny M | 125 | Alex Storer |
| 62 | Caroline Mullan | 73 | Neil Summerfield |
| 4 | Phil | 31 | George Ternent |
| 127 | Christopher Nuttall | 32 | Linda Ternent |
| 128 | Aisha Nuttall | 33 | Calvin Ternent |
| 51 | James | 70 | Markus |
| 46 | Omega | 68 | Dave Tompkins |
| 126 | Morag | 89 | Tobes Valois |
| 138 | Charles Partington | 56 | Jim Walker |
| 47 | Murphy's Lawyer | 75 | Peter Wareham |
| 48 | Hal Payne | 34 | Gerry Webb |
| 49 | Jodie Payne | 35 | Alan Webb |
| 36 | Mali Perera | 114 | Ian Whates |
| 106 | Rog Peyton | 120 | Laura Wheatly |
| 107 | Catherine Pickersgill | 88 | Gary S Wilkinson |
| 108 | Greg Pickersgill | 19 | John Wilson |
| 24 | Mark Plummer | 67 | Anne Wilson |
| 45 | Roger Robinson | 80 | Caro |
| 98 | Tony Rogers | 29 | Alan Woodford |
| 94 | Steve Rogerson | 30 | Anne Woodford |
| 72 | Marcus Rowland | | |
| 76 | Sally Rowse | | |
| 77 | Yvonne Rowse | | |
| 42 | Jamie Scott | | |
| 57 | Mike Scott | | |
| 59 | Alison Scott | | |

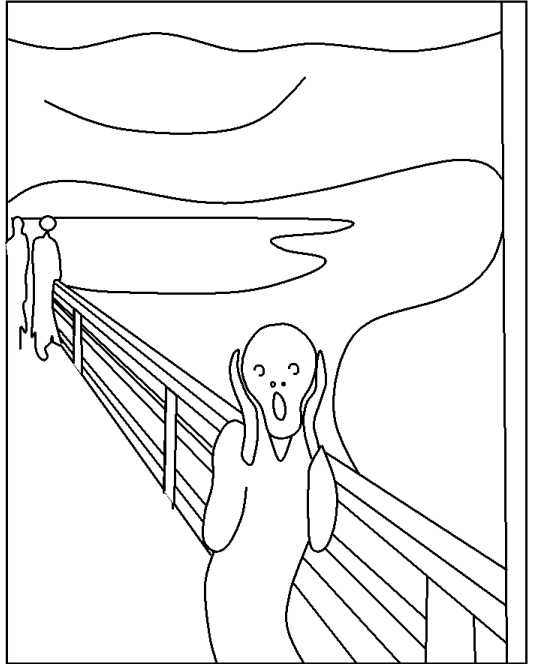
Look, there's still some space available on this page. We could still list a few more members. Tell your friends to join.

Doug S's Fun Page

As you can see in the picture,
This Norwegian fan has just
realised that they completely
forgot to get their Novacon
hotel form returned to Steve.

Oh no!

Why not cheer them up by
colouring in the picture?



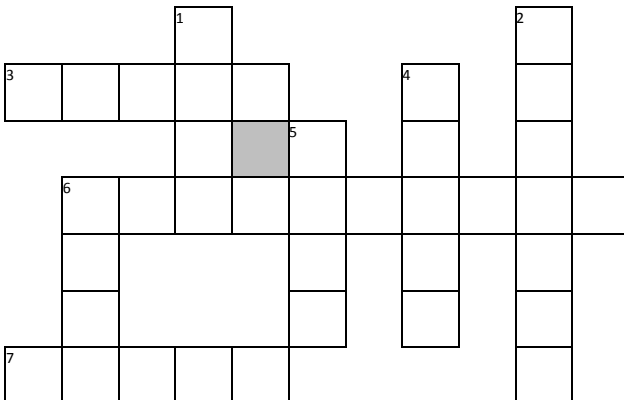
Anagram Hunt

Rearrange the following letters to
make a well-known phrase or saying.

ALLEWNWONKESARHPROGNIYAS

Crossword

Just answer the clues on the right,
and fill them in on the grid below.



Across:

3. Fruit-based 7a
6. Large midlands city
7. 1d, 3a, 4d, 5d, or 6d,
for example

Down:

1. See 6d
2. You can go here to enjoy
1d, 3a, 4d, 5d, or 6d
4. 7a this if you must, but
try 1d or 6d instead
5. Fruit-based 7a
6. See 1d