

matrix



January/February 2005 No. 171

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The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

Coming around again

Tony Ballantyne talks to Tom Hunter
about his first novel, *Recursion*.

Tamlyn Francis

Claire Weaver discovers the difference
an artist's agent can make

Stephen Baxter

On gods of the past, present and
future

Martin Sketchley

Learns lessons from the creation of his
own website

Mark Plummer

Are we getting older? Fandom,
greying, and all that.

Plus

News, reviews, features and much,
much, more...

matrix

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Welcome



This is what Dominic Harman's beautiful artwork looked like before we ruined it by putting titles and straphines all over it. We'd like to thank him for his kind permission to use his work in this issue of *Matrix*.

Also, an apology. This BSFA mailing was delayed by a last minute computer crash that meant we had to start this issue of *Matrix* again from scratch. I will make safer back ups in future.

Martin McGrath

DEADLINES

If you wish to contribute to future issues of *Matrix*, the deadlines are:

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BSFA

NEWSBITS

Fantastic convention

Claire Weaver has an epiphany (and a wet ear) in the lift at The World Fantasy Convention 2004 in Arizona.

World Fantasy Convention 2004: I'm trapped in a lift with an author (to remain unnamed) who is getting entirely too close for comfort and trying to lure me to a publishing party that I'm on my way to anyway. It's hardly the time to have a genre epiphany, but still my mind chooses this moment to recognise that key something that makes a US Con different to a UK convention. I think about asking *Unnamed Author* for a pen to write it down, but he's too busy trying to stick his tongue in my ear and I figure with this kind of help I'm going to remember the moment with no problems anyway.

The co-joined city of Phoenix-Tempe is a vast, sprawling metropolis that stretches twenty-five miles in every direction from its centre point; a huge grid of three-lane roads shot through with fast interstate traffic. Chryslers are ten to the dollar; souped-up Cameros and Toyotas are driven by nineteen year old students from Arizona State University. At ten in the evening the campus sports field is packed with jocks playing American football, athletic girls in ASU t-shirts on their fifth lap of the track and groups of kids tossing a baseball back and forth. It's a far cry from Blackpool and Hinkley, where all the teenagers are hanging outside pubs, the boys in Nike uniform and the girls in gaudy eye-shadow with eyeliner airbrushed onto their false nails.

Arriving at the Con, the feeling is the same as always – you find yourself muttering the familiar questions about where the registration desk is, what are you supposed to do with the free books you know you'll never read, and how do you find the handful of people you actually know? The only sense of displacement is the shock and confusion over the fact the bar is closed at four in the afternoon and that the Guests of Honour – Gwyneth Jones, Ellen Datlow and Janny Wurts – are nowhere in sight, probably still hiding in their hotel suites recovering from jet-lag.

Skimming over the program, the items seem fewer but much the same as usual – a proportioned mix of feminism-in-SF, Buffy deconstruction and bleary-eyed authors who have no



Claire discovers that big-name authors can react badly if their advances are rejected.

idea why they let themselves be talked into appearing on the panel in the first place.

The program items never quite live up to the advertisements – during the discussion on 'Cross-Pollinating Genres', two authors went head-to-head when one claimed that nothing ever happens in all mainstream literature novels (but could provide not a single example to back up her belief). In the discussion 'The Books That Influenced Us', one audience member was invited up to join the panel because she was talking so much she might as well have been a part of it and – without realising (or acknowledging) the joke – she accepted the invitation and duly pulled up a chair.

After the World Fantasy Award ceremony was done, the crowd gathered in the quad (the hotel's only smoking area) to talk over who would/should have won instead. There was a strong sense that, despite being individually worthy winners, the victors still had something of the same old about them. Anything sporting a new, updated or vaguely interesting idea did not even get a look in. One of the judges confirmed the general suspicion (off the record) – the rest of the judging panel wouldn't even sniff at, say, Jeff

VanderMeer's *Venus Underground* because it was too 'way-out', or *The Tangent Online* in the non-pro category, because a website is 'improper' by their classical standards.

The publishing parties were packed to the air-con-gills with anyone and everyone who thought they could blag their way in only to realise they didn't have to – just knowing the room number gave you instant Welcome Status. Nibbles and booze were devoured by crowds too closely packed to allow moving on to the next social circle and a change of conversational topic.

And meanwhile, back in the slowly, slowly ascending lift with just me and our overly-flirtatious *Unnamed Author* inside, the difference between World Fantasy Con and UK conventions finally hit home. WFC had all the usual attributes – it looked, tasted, and smelled the same – but it had a certain edge that gave an extra dimension to the norm. It was more socially aware, fun, and subversive – despite being ashamedly subtle in displaying these differences. In other words all the ingredients you'd hope to find in modern Fantasy these days and definitely something worth recommending.

Well, except for that bit in the lift anyway.

Following the success of recent years, the BSFA will again join forces with the Science Fiction Foundation to hold a free one-day event incorporating both organisations' AGMs. This year's event will be held on Saturday 16 April 2005 at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London. There will be guests, including author Ian McDonald, and discussions. The BSFA AGM takes place at 2pm.

The BSFA will not have a desk in the dealers' room at the 2005 Eastercon. Anyone wishing to join or to renew membership at the convention will be able to do so at the Cold Tonnage bookstall in the dealers' room, staffed by Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer. Anyone not sufficiently organised to send in their BSFA Award ballot ahead of time will also be able to hand it in at the same place.

Matrix's own Martin Sketchley has announced a deal that will see his first three novels published in the US and Canada by Pyr, part of Prometheus Books. His debut novel, *The Affinity Trap*, should appear in hardcover as part of Pyr's autumn/winter season in 2005/6. The second part of his Structure trilogy, *The Destiny Mask*, is scheduled for publication in the UK in April 2005. More info at www.martinsketchley.com

The Speculative Literature Foundation is accepting nominations for the second annual Foundation Award – a \$1000 prize for a short story published in 2004 containing some speculative element and of outstanding literary merit. The prize is chosen by a select jury and nominations can be made by magazine and anthology editors. Further details on the award and the SLF can be found at www.speculativefiction.org

NEWSBITS

Friendly Novacon

Planning for EasterCon 2006, better known as *Concussion*, is already well underway with a stellar line-up of guests including authors M. John Harrison, Justina Robson and Elizabeth Hand, legendary fantasy artist Brian Froud and fan G&H Ian Sorenson. For more details visit: www.eastercon2006.org

Supernovae are good for posture according to researchers from the Technical University of Munich. Scientists believe that ancient star dust found beneath the Pacific Ocean may hold a vital clue to our own evolution. The dust is likely debris from a supernova explosion over 3 million years ago that would have affected Earth's climate, causing drier conditions in Africa and forcing our ancestors to abandon the shrinking forests in favour of the Savannah, where they eventually began to walk upright.

It's good news for any parents in fandom still suffering Christmas fatigue as a new psychiatric report argues that believing in Santa is good for children's development and improving social skills.

And its good news for Potter fans as JK Rowling announces that the sixth book in the series is finished and with her publishing house. No news on whether an editor is going to look at this instalment or how large a van might be needed to get her latest work home. We're mocking, but you know we're going to buy it.

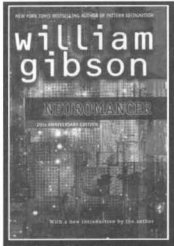
However it's bad news for anyone who received *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* edited by Dave Eggers in their stocking this year, as Lloyd Evans in *The Spectator* has labeled it the "overrated publishing effort of the year" and "an insufferably boring exercise." *Matrix* advises anyone still believing in Santa to contact the North Pole to see if he kept the receipt.

Despite talk of low attendance in some quarters, Novacon 04 proved to be a popular weekend event for everyone venturing to the Quality Hotel in Walsall, and it certainly seemed crowded enough to *Matrix*. Guest of Honour Ian Watson appeared as both himself and Bertie Wells – a transformation that required an impromptu dash to a joke shop to replace Ian's own recently shaved moustache – with authors Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Gwyneth Jones and Charles Stross also present alongside a strong contingent from Imannion Press.

Novacon's smaller size has long made it popular with fans as the most social convention and a welcome opportunity to catch up with old friends rather than wander endless identical corridors in search of elusive programme items. This ethos is continued to the end, with the weekend being well rounded off by a final banquet themed to the works of the Guest of Honour, in this case a fine Finnish spread inspired by Ian's *Books of Mana* novels.



Novacon G&H Ian Watson dressed as HG Wells, while (left) something small and furry surprises Gwyneth Jones.



William Gibson's *Neuromancer* has been reissued in a twentieth anniversary hardback edition with a new forward by Gibson and an afterword by Jack Womack. One of the many authors inspired by the book, Cory Doctorow, said on boingboing.net: "Neuromancer didn't predict the future. Neuromancer created the future. If you would understand the past twenty years' of technological advance and retreat, this book is required reading. I re-read it every year, just to get an edge on the year that's coming, and to glory in Gibson's prose and cunning artifice."

Over the top?

Word has reached *Matrix* that award-winning author Jeffrey Ford has fast-tracked himself to the undisputed position of King-of-the-Genre-World via the unconventional approach of arm-wrestling all challengers at the recent World Fantasy Con in Arizona.

In his victory speech Jeff 'The Daddy' Ford declared:

"Mark Roberts and his marshmallow arm were easily dispatched – then it was on to those Nightshade guys. Beat them all with my right hand, and I'm left handed! Claire Weaver was the most formidable opponent, but her tactics are illicit, as she was kicking me under the table the entire time I was trying to beat her.

"Having beaten representatives of the US and UK, and invoking the present pin-headed hegemonic world view currently in ascendancy here in the States, I ended by considering myself no less than champion of the world and then promptly retired."

Separated at birth?

Science fiction author Jeffrey "the Daddy" Ford?



World arm-wrestling champion John Brzenk?



Facing the future

Future Face is the latest Wellcome Trust exhibition to be held at the Science Museum, London. Featuring a wide-range of cross-disciplinary art forms alongside more traditional museum-style exhibits, *Future Face* explores the rich territory of our primary interface with the world: our own appearance. Combining displays of ancient tribal masks and world war one facial prosthetics with the latest virtual actor technology and video from the likes of top promo director Chris Cunningham (Apex Twin, Björk and, almost, *Neuromancer*), the exhibition is as informative as it is challenging. Examining the links between the face the individual and collective identity in a rare exhibition that combines historical and scientific research with real artistic vision.

Future Face can be visited at the Science Museum until 13 February, 2005.



Operation book launch



Forgoing the more usual bookshop or private club venues, the launch of the UK edition of *The Thackeray T. Lamshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases* opted for the more suitable environs of the oldest operating theatre in Britain. Located in the roof space of an English Baroque Church on St Thomas's Street (near London Bridge). Contributors to the Guide were invited to deliver their findings to a select audience of journalists and peers in a unique setting that made up in atmosphere what it lacked in heating. *Matrix* is happy to report that plenty of complimentary anaesthetics were available and that no fatalities occurred.

The Old Operating Theatre is open to the public and can be found at www.thegarret.org.uk

Dark Materials goes on

The sell-out stage-adaptation of Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* Trilogy has returned to London's National Theatre for a second run, currently booking until April 2005. Adapted by Nicholas Wright for the stage, the epic trilogy has been condensed down into two three hour long performances that have gained both critical and popular acclaim.

Staying true to the source material while unlocking a stunning visual world, the play utilises a vivid combination of old-fashioned stagecraft and modern theatrical magic, creating a spellbinding experience that more than matches the more literal, and CGI dependent, adaptations of other popular novels that have recently dominated cinema multiplexes.

As Philip Pullman says: "Where theatre scores over the cinema is in the power of metaphor and its engagement with the audience's own imagination... the thing that theatre does best and most potentially is to tell stories in a way that partakes of magic, of ritual, of enchantment."



Courtesy of the National Theatre

Interactivity



The third progress report from the organisers of Interaction, the 2005 Worldcon, includes information on the opening of nominations for the 2005 Hugo Awards.

All members who join the convention before 31 January 2005 (and members of Noreascon 4) will be eligible to nominate works for this year's Hugos with the closing date for nominations set for 11 March 2005.

The report also includes details of Interaction's activities at Worldcon 2004, held in Boston in September and a number of articles on travel and tourism in Scotland, including a special feature by Interaction Guest of Honour Jane Yolen. The progress report is the third of four to be published before the convention gets underway on 4 August 2005.

Further details at www.interaction.worldcon.co.uk

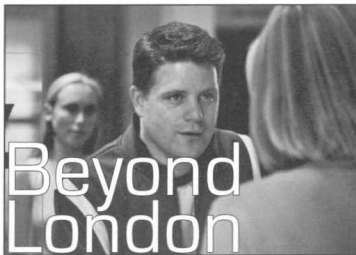


Free Jupiter



If you haven't already sampled the delights of Ian Redman's *Jupiter* magazine, now's your chance to catch up. Ian is offering readers the chance to download issue five of the magazine free from the website as an Adobe PDF file.

In addition, to celebrate the magazine's first full year of quarterly production (every issue on schedule!) Ian is offering the first four issues for just £5.99 – separate price £10 – including postage.



Sean Astin's *Slipstream* leads Sci-Fi-London 2005 and the festival plans a nationwide tour.

The line-up for this year's Sci-Fi-London – the fourth London International Festival of Science Fiction and Fantastic Film – is taking shape. Organisers have now announced the line-up of films for the festival, which will take place between 2-6 February 2005

This year's festival will host the world premiere of *Slipstream*, a tale of time travel and bank robbery starring former hobbit Sean Astin and former football hard-man Vinnie Jones. A scientist creates a time machine that allows him to go ten minutes into the past, only to turn up at a bank in the middle of being robbed by a vicious gang of professional bank robbers.

In addition to the series of Shaw Brother cinema premieres mentioned last issue, this year's festival will also see UK Premieres for a number of interesting films. *Cube Zero*, the third (and apparently final) instalment of the *Cube* story is more gory than its predecessors but not necessarily better. *Able Edwards* is an ultra low budget entry in the growing list of films featuring real actors shot against a green screen and with actors inserted into an entirely computer generated world. *Able Edwards* is the story of the clone of a media mogul created to restore the companies failing fortunes.

Saving *Star Wars* is the tale of two fans attempts to deliver a letter to George Lucas in an attempt to get him to "save" *Star Wars* and is reportedly very funny. Also receiving a UK premier is low-budget Canadian action flick, *Recon 2020* (aka *Power Corps*) – the story of an elite band of Galactic Marine Infantry's

suicide mission behind enemy lines. Scottish martial arts adventure, *The Purifiers*, will get its first London screening during the festival.

Not premieres, but films worth your while that have not yet received a wide UK release, Sci-Fi London will also be screening the excellent *Primer* (reviewed on page 18), Christian Bale in the highly rated *The Machinist* and *Steamboy*, the latest film from Akira director Katsuhiro Otomo.

This year the Festival will also be running a documentary stream – "stranger than fiction" – including the UK Premiere of *Trekies 2*, the follow up to 1997's study of Star Trek Fans. The similarly themed, but somewhat darker *Auto Destruct* will also feature.

Though the Festival's traditional allnighter screenings now go on well past *Matrix*'s bedtime, they also offer some interesting films. The Anime Allnighter will feature ambitious South Korean animated film *Sky Blue* (aka *Wonder Days*) while those not unimpressed by the idea could try and make it through a whole night of *Matrix* movies, including *Animatrix*.

Another first for Sci-Fi-London 2005 is the effort to reach out to genre fans beyond the capital. For the first time films from Sci-Fi-London will be going on tour taking festival features to cinemas in four major cities around the country – Edinburgh Cameo (18-20 Feb), Liverpool FACT (25-27 Feb), York Picturehouse (4-6 Mar) and Exeter Picturehouse (11-13 Mar). Tickets go on sale in Jan 2005.

Further details about Sci-Fi-London 4 can be found on their website: www.sci-fi-london.com

ROGERICK GLADWISH'S WORLD OF SCIENCE New frontiers

Beagle 2 may have bitten the dust early but its US cousins have rolled on through their 90 day design life and have reached over 300 days. Wheels are sticking, winter is coming and more risky zones are being explored, but Opportunity and Spirit have found exciting geology and evidence of water, though lacking Beagle's chemical analyser they cannot prove if life is there or not. Somewhat overshadowed by Beagle's failure, Mars Express continues to orbit around the red planet and has also been a success. Not only has Mars Express produced superb 3D images but its own analysers have picked up traces of methane in Mars' thin atmosphere, a clue to the possible presence of life.

In November SMART-1 became the first European spacecraft to orbit the Moon. Many of its experiments, including its ion-engine drive system are to demonstrate technologies for future missions, but science will also be done.

India is planning an unmanned lunar mission, Chandrayaan (Moon Journey), in 2008. Already they have a geostationary orbit capability and this would be the next step. The greater step of a manned launch is yet to be sanctioned, however, Madhavan Nair, chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation, says now is the time for the government to decide on whether to do it or not.

Source: NASA, ESA and AFP

India launch space exploration programme



EU funded scientists at Budapest University have looked at methods of using waste biomass such as corn stubble to create ethanol, a petrol alternative. Europe is dependant on oil imports but, by diluting petrol with ethanol, imports could be significantly reduced.

Brazil makes 150,000 million litres of fuel a year by fermenting sugar cane. Getting ethanol from European crops is much harder because most contain cellulose which is tough to breakdown. Certain fungi produce enzymes which can do the job and with gene splicing their effectiveness can be boosted. Further digestion using genetically modified yeast also increases production rates.

The EU annually creates 75 million tonnes of stubble which could be converted into 250,000 million litres of ethanol a year – doubling the world production of ethanol.

Source: *The Observer*

A combined team of Oxford and Nottingham university researchers have made the world's smallest test tubes – 300 billion can be fitted on a full stop. Created by folding sheets of carbon atoms their use is in controlling chemical reactions by guiding single molecules to meet single molecules. It could lead to cheaper and environmentally safer chemical production.

Source: BBC news

Imperial peril

matrix:171
Foundation
favourites
Number twelve: Hong Kong Invaded:
a '97 Nightmare ed. Gillian Bickley

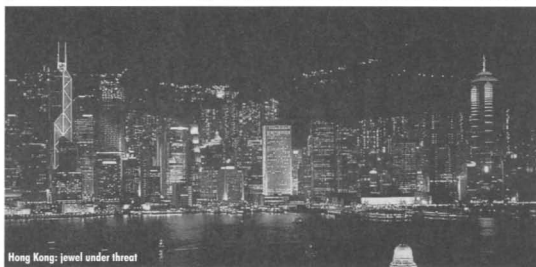
Andy Sawyer looks at a modern study of *The Back Door*, an early example of a future-war story (or alternate history) about the threat to Hong Kong from Britain's imperial adversaries.

In 1997 Great Britain hauled down the flag in the "jewel in the crown" of its Far Eastern Colonies. The island of Hong Kong, together with the mainland peninsula of Kowloon and the associated New Territories, was handed back to China. Thus ended over 150 years of colonial rule.

But a hundred years earlier, fears about losing control of the colony were strong enough for an anonymous writer to publish, in the Hong Kong newspaper *The China Mail*, a series of episodes entitled *The Back Door*, warning the paper's readers about the precarious nature of Hong Kong's defenses. Technically – but see later – *The Back Door* belongs to the genre of "future-war" stories that begin with George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* in 1871 and run through H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and beyond to modern paranoid fears about Cold Wars and shadowy Terrorist networks. Whether this is science fiction or not is something for critical debate, but it's certainly related to many stories that are *sf*, and as a former resident of Hong Kong it's of significant interest to me.

The narrative purports to be a manuscript found among the papers of an English gentleman after his death in South America. The owner lived in Hong Kong, and the account it presents is of the successful invasion of the island by a Franco-Russian alliance. The alliance invades via strategically weak spots in the island's defenses, including Deep Water Bay near the south coastal town of Aberdeen and through what were (on the lease of the area in 1898) to be the New Territories. Part of the reason for the story's publication seems to be (as was the case with *The Battle of Dorking* and many of its successors) to stress weakness and complacency among those responsible for the island's defence.

The Back Door considers the shape of the defenses of Hong Kong in 1897, and the text was



issued as a pamphlet straight after its serialisation and sent to the Colonial Office. Gillian Bickley argues the pamphlet may have influenced reality. In 1941, the successful Japanese invasion of the island was also by means of a surprise attack via Kowloon and the New Territories. The Japanese seriously considered attacking via the vulnerable south, and made a few feints to suggest that this was exactly what they were planning to do. Could the Japanese strategists have read a copy of *The Back Door*?

Bickley has done a remarkable job in resurrecting this fiction, clearly taken seriously at the time as a warning of something that *might* happen. This is not the only future-war from a colonial viewpoint (there were Australian examples), but Bickley rightly stresses that *The Back Door* is a rarity. There is an inference that the invasion is part of the downfall of the British Empire. The papers are found in South America because the British colonists are lost and scattered.

The rather slim text of *The Back Door* is presented with a detailed apparatus of notes and maps, identifying characters

and place-names, summarising the relationships between these fictional events and those of 1941, and contextualising the story in the history of Hong Kong. This rather overwhelms it for readers without a background in Hong Kong culture and politics. Still, such depth and detail allows Bickley to re-create what such a fiction meant to its audience. More even than most British examples, this work is aimed not so much to entertain but to stimulate discussion. In a sense, what we have here is a kind of case study of what such a text does as a means of communication.

In his introduction, IF Clarke suggests that narrative patterns echo *The Battle of Dorking* and wonders if the author had read William Le Queux's *The Great War in England*, published earlier that year. The author of *The Back Door*, who may have been a military

officer or member of the Hong Kong Police force, certainly knew the colony intimately. Most of the characters are lightly-disguised versions of real people, and there are other detailed contemporary references, some of which may provide clues to two of the

main puzzles Bickley leaves unsolved. First, a somewhat intrusive reference in the last few sentences to "Poor Blobs" might be the author offering a key to his identity: "Blobs" is identified as A. P. Nobbs of the Hong Kong Volunteer Company who is mentioned as contributing to the 1897 Volunteers' Training Camp Gazette. Bickley points out that "those participating in the camp already knew under what disguised name they featured in *The Back Door*", which completed serialisation the day before the camp began. It could be that "Blobs" was Nobbs's usual nickname, and that either he wrote *The Back Door* or he was well-known to the author.

Secondly, *The Back Door* (subtitled "a sketch of what might happen") must be the oddest of "future war" stories, for although the invasion "begins" on 23 September 1897, the serial was not begun until a week later. It could be, of course, as Bickley suggests that it was written earlier; but it might also be that it was deliberately set by its author in the past because of its real characters, for otherwise many of its readers (presumably including friends and acquaintances) would be reading about their own deaths in the near future.

Given this... could it be even an early example of alternate history?



The Science Fiction Foundation Collection is the largest collection of English-language science fiction and material about it in Europe. Administered by the University of Liverpool, it is a resource for anyone with a research interest in *sf*. It has been developed thanks to the generosity of publishers, writers, and fans who have donated books, magazines, and money to buy them. For new purchases, and for the preservation and conservation of the existing collection, it depends entirely on such generosity.

If you would like to support the collection in any way, contact Andy Sawyer at The Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, P.O. Box 123, Liverpool L69 3DA (asawyer@liv.ac.uk). Science Fiction Foundation Collection: www.liv.ac.uk/~asawyer/sffhome.html

Science Fiction Foundation: http://www.sf-foundation.org

We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding the "Science Fiction Hub" project, which will develop and enhance our catalogue.

CRYSTAL BALLS

2005

Matrix asked some of the great and the good of British sf what they predicted for 2005. Sorry, but this is what they said.

DOCTOR MARK ROBERTS



Saurian flu: symptoms include dry skin and big tongues

makes people feel like lizards). Badgers will start suffering chapped lips instead of tuberculosis. Medicine will finally recognize the existence of ribs throughout the body. Everyone will panic; it'll all turn out just fine. Trust me. I'm not actually a Doctor.



STEVE COCKAYNE

2005 will surely be the year, long-awaited by all of the Jungian persuasion, in which the collective unconscious finally takes on tangible form and becomes manifest.

2005 will surely be the year in which our innermost dreams, fears, longings and aspirations take on physical shape and walk for the first time among us.

2005 will surely be the year in which the hatred and the jealousy and the lust and the anger acquire legs and bodies and free will and step out from their secret places of concealment to wreak havoc upon the everyday world.

2005 will surely be the year in which we confront, at last, the secret aspects of our being, the unacknowledged forces that drive us through our days, the unspoken whatsits.....sorry, what's that? Multi-channel television? Well, yes, I suppose if you put it like that, all that stuff has already happened. Well, I was right, wasn't I? Just ten years too late as usual. Never mind, I suppose I'd better make an early start on my predictions for 2006...

* Steve is the author of the excellent *Legends of the Land* series. A fantasy world with the unique virtue of originally being inspired by puppets, rather than most modern fantasy which simply reads like it's been written by one.



Jung versus Sky

NEAL ASHER

Costs at Virgin Galactic spiral out of control as the company tries to comply with HSE guidelines for interplanetary spacecraft. However, the killer blow comes from the new Equalities quango with its demand for wheelchair access and toilets for the disabled on SpaceShipTwo. Rumours that the same quango will ban zebra crossings as racially insensitive are much exaggerated, ministers say, they only intend to change the colours.

According to detractors, the 100% pass rate in A levels this year is due to social engineering and manipulation of the figures. The education minister replied, "The idea that pupils might fail these exams is old-fashioned. Everyone is equal ... oink."

Since the bombing of the Iranian nuclear facilities petrol prices have passed £1 a litre. Since their marginal electoral victory, Labour have introduced twenty new initiatives that have achieved nothing and twenty new taxes to pay for them. Meanwhile, it has come as no surprise to anyone that Tony and Cherie Blair are co-directors of ASBO(tm) – the new 'street accessories' retail outlet.

• Support Neal's political career by donating royalties to the Cowl, *Gridlinked* or *Line of Policy* campaigns now!

Virgin Galactic: spiral



STEVE AYLETT

The Zeroes (or 'the Eighties: the Return') will continue apace, confounding the laws of physics by becoming even more sterile than the vacuum which exists at present. For anyone with any awareness it'll be like being awake during surgery. Toward the middle of 2005 the media will finally mention the upsurge in suicides that occurred after the US Election and is still mounting, but the story will be framed almost beyond meaning in the usual 'determined to be baffled' approach taken by the media and everyone else in regard to suicide. Toward the end of 2005 there'll be an embarrassing amateur attempt on GW Bush's life, which will be used to his advantage.

In the world of SF the 'alternative history' idea will for the seven-millionth time be hailed as a new and innovative idea, the previous occasions having presumably occurred in an alternative history.

Mediocrity will continue to be loudly rewarded and everyone will skitter shrieking from genuine originality as if from a spider in the bathroom. I will rip my own face off in absolute fucking despair.

* Visit www.steveaylett.com before it's too late.



Suicide: upturn baffles media

DAVE LANGFORD

As in most years, a novel of genre interest will be listed for a major "literary" award but -- to the relief of the usual mainstream suspects -- won't win. Stephen Baxter will maintain his unlucky tradition of not winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

The 75th anniversary of the first known SF fanzine, Ray Palmer's *The Comet* -- (May 1930), will attract slightly more interest than the following month's tenth anniversary of *SEX* magazine -- and, God help me, of my column in it.


Still more established SF authors will resort to small presses and print-on-demand to get their new books published and their old ones reissued.

Some blatantly science-fictional work will be praised or defended on the basis that it's not really SF, since it contains (a) characters, (b) emotions, and (c) no death-rays or talking squids in outer space. The pundit in question will be quoted in *Anisble*, to a reader response of prolonged and hearty yawns.

Aliens, probably talking squids from outer space, will celebrate the centenary of Jules Verne's death by abducting Tony Blair and George W. Bush, whom they will fail to return. (Well, maybe not, but we need one upbeat prediction.)

- Matrix in no way condones any alleged movement planning to change the name of the Hugo's to the Dave's and be done with it. You didn't read this here, right.

COLIN BRUSH



In 2005 Apple's total dominance in the field of personal media players will be sealed with the launch of the final generation of iPods. With a hard drive holding 40 brontobytes, the new iPod will allow you to upload entire lives into a piece of plastic, metal and silicon no bigger than a matchbox. Launched with the tag line '10,000 lives in your pocket', it will become the number-one must-have item for amateur-genealogists, stalkers, megalomaniacs and Jewish mothers. Offering unbridled interference in the downloaded lives as well as a backlit display, it promises to be the market leader. It will also put the makers of *Sims* out of business. However, battery life will remain a problem, as will file or 'life'-sharing, with Apple refusing to allow users to share people for fear of copyright infringements. This will not be a problem for the more sophisticated of PC users, who, after stealing software, music, films and games off the internet for years, think nothing of robbing a few lives. Look out for that beta version of yourself on *ThinkNova*.

- Colin works for an unnamed (because they are large enough to afford lawyers) publishing company. You can read his fiction at www.sfsite.com/singularity/fiction/printable.php?fictionID=13

MYSTIC KAREN



Canada:
Eurovision

1. New legislation is rushed through the Lords to ensure that nobody is responsible for any crap that happens to them as a result of their own stupidity. It's now also an offence to have an IQ in three figures.
2. More Serious Writers edge closer to artistic implosion, lifting SF&F ideas everyone else has already done (and done, and done...) and declaring it Important New Literature. The first implosion makes the front page of the *BMJ*, the *JAMA*, and the *Journal of Proctology*, having involved a hitherto anatomically impossible act.
3. Canada bids to join the EU, but says politely that it'll settle for Eurovision status if that's too much to ask.
4. A cure is found for girl cooties.
5. Neal Asher and I form our own political party and storm the barricades at Number 10. A purge of lawyers and Neocon hypocrites follows, and much hilarity ensues until we discover we're at odds over environmental policies and a schism forms. (Sorry, I was accidentally reading from my business plan there...)

- Mystic Karen can also be consulted at www.karentwiviss.com

BEN JEAPES

The so-called New Weird will go the way of punk, fragmenting into a number of different streams that to later generations will look as mutually incompatible as the Sex Pistols and Duran Duran. People will ask in bafflement how they ever had a common ancestor, and historians of the field will nod wisely and say that, ah, you see, the New Weird was in fact a term for a paradigm shift covering a number of fields, rather than a movement in itself.

- Warning: Ben's latest novel, *The New World Order*, contains no clues to the next Labour manifesto, even when read backwards.

Duran Duran = New Weird?

PAUL & LIZBETH BILLINGER

January: A new step in reality TV -- the Clarke Award shortlist meeting happens live on TV

February: Life discovered on Mars; it's diminutive, viridescent and humanoid with a penchant for cookery books

March: Government introduces compulsory Identity Cards; BSFA follows suit

April: Vector reviews editor seriously injured in Traditional Heroic Fantasy Slushpile Incident

May: Following January's success, the Clarke Award discussion and announcement also happen live on TV, and include an interactive audience vote

June: ID cards must now be presented when purchasing genre fiction. The Home Secretary explains that this dangerous and subversive material must be controlled

July: Filming commences of the judges reading the submissions for next year's Clarke Award

August: BSFA recognises that all life is now on Live Journal and votes itself out of existence

September: Waterstones introduce a New Weird section in its flagship bookshops

October: The Interstitial Movement demands a shelf of its own

November: A book about wizards finally wins the Mann Booker prize

December: Third Row Fandom, a new political party, intent on world domination executes the first steps of its master plan

- Not only can the Billinger's see the future, they also know where all of us live...

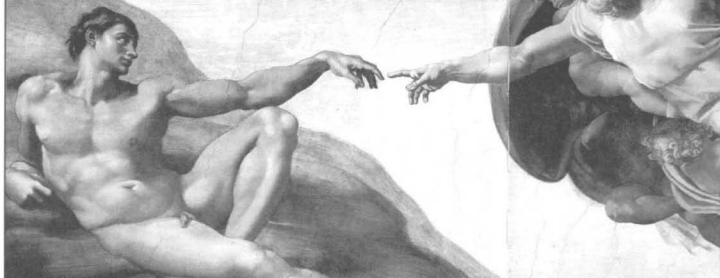
STEPHEN BAXTER

I think 2005 may turn out to be another retro year. Once again lots of TwenCen franchises will re-emerge: we will have the latest *Star Wars* movie, the *Hitchhiker's* movie, *Doctor Who*, a *Captain Scarlet* remake, and others. The space shuttle, the last (western) survivor of the Cold War space programme, will fly again. And the year's most significant anniversary will surely be the 60th of VE-Day in May. But this will probably be the last 'great' World War II commemoration. The shuttle is only back for a while before it's grounded to (hopefully) free up funds for a new wave of space exploration. And this *Star Wars* may be the last. Then we can all move on! Maybe, just as 'the Sixties' didn't really start swinging until 1963 or so, we will finally enter the 21st century in 2006.

Steve is the vice-president of the BSFA, a regular *Matrix* columnist and has also published the occasional work of genre interest.

Dr Who: re-emerging TwenCen franchise

Faces of God



Stephen Baxter starts with the familiar face of a Catholic god and begins to speculate about who and what we might worship in the distant future.

Adam Roberts perceptively told me that he believed *Coalescent* (2003), the first book of my *Destiny's Children* series, was an argument with Catholicism. Well, I was brought up in a strictly Catholic background in Liverpool. I was taught that the universe has a purpose, a secret history; and even if I now reject the Catholic answer that sense of a narrative has stayed. I think that's why I responded as a kid to books like Clarke's *Childhood's End*; here was another cosmogony, another story.

I've drawn on Catholic motifs in the past. My *Xeelee Sequence*, of which my *Destiny's Children* series is a subset, is about a war in heaven. In *Manifest: Space* my hero Reid Malenfant has to submit to being 'crucified' to save life in the Galaxy; I built the narrative around the Stations of the Cross, complete with Malenfant having doubts, ranting at the 'Father' about betrayal, and treachery by his friends. In *Coalescent*, which was all about human hives, there is some serious sociological speculation that religions work so well because they have hive-like aspects! – even if the 'queen' is a set of ideas, not a breeder. There are certainly a lot of skewed reproductive strategies in the Church...

In *Exultant* (Gollancz, September 2004), the second *Destiny* book, I speculate about future human religions. And if and when we meet ET, what will he/she/it worship – if at all?

Perhaps something like religious

concepts must arise in any sentient form. Any intelligence capable of planning for the future must be aware of life's finitude, and will need a philosophy to cushion the shock of personal death: a belief in survival to an afterlife, or a purpose beyond one's own life, is very comforting. Also, religion provides a rationale for existence in a universe which may otherwise seem chaotic – perhaps an illusory rationale, but a way to cope. And any tool-making creature must surely have an understanding of causality. From there it is only a small step to wonder about the first causes of everything.

Then again, religious beliefs may have survival value (see 'What's God got to do with it?' by Robin Dunbar, *New Scientist*, 14 June 2003). We humans squabble a lot, but by the standards of other animals our level of altruism is actually very high: we are willing to accept the will of the community and even to die for it. This altruism underlies our ability to cooperate, which is the key to our

success. A shared religious belief gives an incentive to altruism and conformity through an appeal to an authority beyond anybody's control, and so beyond question. So perhaps we can expect to find religion evolving as social cement among any intelligent species – or at least among species where identity is individually held and not pooled; the religious beliefs of a compound mind would be fascinating indeed...

Whether religions have a biological purpose or not, certainly we *H Saps* seem to have been in their thrall as long as we've been humans, and for better or worse there seems no reason why that should change. But our religions of the future may be quite different to those of the past.

Religions are built on certain archetypes (see for instance the discussion in Arnold Toynbee's *Mankind and Mother Earth*, OUP 1976). But in all the ages before Apollo 11 they have been archetypes derived from planetary living: the sun rises and sets, seasons come and go, living things

die back but are renewed. So you find a worship of the sun, and of water; you find a fascination with the figures of the mother and of the child, and with the seed which, once planted in the earth, rides out the winter and lives again. Many messiahs defeat death itself, from Christ to King Arthur, a mixture of 'child' and 'seed' motifs.

But suppose a religion emerges among a spacegoing people? In that case new archetypes must be found. For example, in an artificial environment you can't rely on the world to fix itself; there are no renewing seasons. The devil of the future may be deified entropy, with gremlins as his attendants.

If we demonise entropy, who should we worship? Out in the Galaxy we are very unlikely, sadly, ever to find a world where we will be able to throw open our spacecraft's doors and walk out without facemasks. We will have to build everything – and build well, for the sake of our descendants. So creator gods, like the Christian God, won't be relevant, for we will be doing the creating.

Perhaps our descendants will become a subject of veneration. They, after all, are who we will be doing all this work for. Indeed they may be worthy of worship for they will be far greater than us. To quote Sir Arthur C Clarke (from 'Credo', reprinted in *Greetings, Carbon-based Biped!*, Voyager 1999): '[Our distant descendants] will be like gods, because no gods imagined by our minds have ever possessed the



“On a practical level
descendent worship is not
a terribly irrational belief... it would
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that politically correct: it would be a
moral mandate.”

Stephen Baxter

powers they will command.'

On a practical level descendant worship is not a terribly irrational belief if you think about it, for it would guide behaviour in an unselfish way. You would be encouraged to treat the world as a treasure, given into your charge only for a while, which you should leave improved or at least undamaged for the benefit of the future. Being green would be more than politically correct: it would be a moral mandate. SF writers have a bad history of inventing dubious religions, and perhaps I should stop there! But we could surely do a lot worse...

Certainly we may still need religions. In the claustrophobic spaces of starships and domed colonies, religions will serve their essential role as a social cement. And religions may enable us to manage the very long term projects we encounter out there. For example a terraformed Mars, lacking Earth's renewing tectonic cycles, would have to be sustained against entropic decline over many millennia. We don't know of any human institution which is likely to survive with continuity of purpose over such periods *except* religions. Perhaps Mars will be preserved by generations of engineer-monks – and if their faith does not exist it may be necessary to invent it.

All this speculation is narrow. Even when we are advanced enough to be mucking about in the solar system or among the nearest stars, we may still know too little to make a stab at asking the Big Questions, let alone answering them. Perhaps we should wait for wisdom before pronouncing on God.

"Strong imagination and a capacity for raw talent in the work of Stephen Baxter & John Woodcock create the finest literary imagination."

STEPHEN BAXTER



Exultant by Stephen Baxter, published by Gollancz, is on sale now from all good bookshops (and a few rubbish ones).

New 'zones

Roderick Gladwish goes back to *Interzone* after a decade away.

I gave up on *Interzone* 10 years ago but with Andy Cox of TTA Press (The Third Alternative) taking over the venerable magazine I had an excuse to see what a decade and the TTA have done.

What I remember was lots of Eric Brown, Ian Miller's cover for the *Difference Engine*, too many stories about gender wars, a woman keeping the brain of her soon to be cloned husband in her womb and Greg Egan's 'Axiomatic', still one of my favourites. There was an all female edition, an exchange with an American magazine and lots of stories I couldn't finish. The literary style of the old *Interzone* didn't fit with my tastes. In the guidelines for fiction submissions to *Hotolates*, the *Sfworld* editor uses the 'arty' style of *Interzone* as an example of what they don't want. I wonder if they stopped reading it when I did. They should look again because it's changed.

As the most popular UK SF magazine most of you will have read *Interzone* before you get this, making a straight review somewhat redundant, but for those who haven't read it here's a quick overview. 'Ambisive' Luke Langford's quirky SF news section has given me a goal: the literary award I want to win. The *Wodehouse Prize*, in honour of P G Wodehouse, is a case of Bolly, the complete works of P G Wodehouse and a large fibreglass pig – what else does a chap need?

'Mutant Popcorn' does a fair review of film. A TTA Press innovation is 'If...then...else' on videogames, Martin Hughes looks at latest releases and how sf&f tends to dominate the titles. Also new is 'The Funny Pages' on comic books and graphic novels, a recovery of a review page in *Million*, *Interzone's* short-lived sister publications. I like Peter Crowther's attitude of not wasting space on things he doesn't like and praising what's good.

Then there's Mike O'Driscoll's comment column, 'Night's Plutonian Shore'. He thinks fantasy is creeping into mainstream media citing *Six Feet Under*, though Channel 4 and mainstream may be a contradiction in terms. It does explain why the BBC keeps rejecting my idea of introducing an unstoppable polymorphic alien killer into *Eastenders* – it's science fiction not fantasy.

Finally there is an interview/review of David Pringle and his great work. Keeping *Interzone*



going must have been like painting the Forth Bridge except with someone following on behind pointing out where you've missed a spot. When I was reading *Interzone* I was also reading *New Moon* (aka *Dream SF*), *Nexus SF* and some American mag that lasted two issues. Ten years on they are all gone. Whether I liked the version a decade ago or now doesn't matter, in an era when most magazines have the lifespan of mayflies, Pringle is a hero of SF.

TTA's *Interzone* struck me in two ways. First, it looked fantastic. The Third Alternative team have an eye for striking imagery and layout.

They hit the mark with every page. Second, was that there were only five stories. Recently I've been reading magazines where tales are shoehorned in with all other parts shrunk or jettisoned. *Interzone* is going for the complete SF package which it does well, but that limits the quantity of fiction per issue.

'Song of the Earth' by Steve Mohr proposes human-forming rather than terraforming to allow us to colonise other worlds.

'Enlightenment' is a familiar story from Douglas Smith. Ruthless exploitative humans meet a gentle alien race. There is carnage and hope. Jay Lake's 'Dreams of the White City' had 'great machines' as servants now the masters and a sentient planet. In 'Someone Else' (Karen D Fisher) a prostitute's life is spiralling into destruction and the alternative made flesh is still as hopeless. Anthony Mann seems to be everywhere. I'm expecting my next gas bill to have been penned by him. 'Air Cube' was simple yet clever and different to everything else I've read by him.

Andy Cox is trying to establish distinct identities for *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative*. I think he will succeed. Will it lure me back to *Interzone* permanently? I'll let you

know when they hit 200 next year.

RevolutionSF (www.revolutionis.com) has the coolest animated graphic I have ever seen: a rotating galaxy. This is not why it came third in the Wooden Rocket Awards (online only magazine category) this year. I can only guess that it didn't win because readers were mesmerised by that graphic and lost the focus to vote. Very comprehensive, it has reviews of books, music, events, TV, anime, games, user forums to discuss all that stuff and, finally, a small fiction section.

Three new pieces of short fiction appear each month and mixed with current fiction is 'classic' work. In its archive are *Breakfast in the Ruins*, a Michael Moorcock novel originally published in 1972, and *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book* by Don Webb, a collection first seen in 1988. Publishing one a week they are over half way through the 97 stories. Other old stuff includes 'Boys Will Be Boys' by Joe R. Lansdale, 'Fellow Americans' by Eileen Gunn and Herman Melville's 'The Bell-Tower'.

New fiction is present and I enjoyed them more than the classics. 'Fido is a Loving Beast' by Ardath Mayhar was a light fantasy of a princess protecting a dragon from knights trying to make a name for themselves. Identity confusion in 'My Evil Twin' from Steven Utley didn't have a twin or any evil. 'Angelorum Orbis' seemed to be another reprint. Scott Nicholson describes ruthless imperial exploiters finding a world paved with gold and at peace with itself. As always, there's a catch.

In 'King of the Fescue' Odesa Cole put alien neighbours in Middle America. I liked it, so many stories are violent in one way or another, and this was about the compromises we make to have a little peace. 'Destitution' (Derek Smith) has vagrancy as an alternative punishment to jail.

RevolutionSF is packed with stuff for any sort of fan with an upbeat style with some humour. It's good, but not fibreglass pig good.

• Correction to the review of *Premotions* in *Matrix* 169: 'A Brush of Mammoth Wings' is by Chad Hensley not Wade Robertson.

Interzone

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs, CB6 2LB www.itapress.com

RevolutionSF

www.revolutionis.com

Covering up

Dominic Harman creates beautiful images (like the one on this page) but he credits the flourishing of his career to his new agent, Tamlyn Francis. Claire Weaver finds out what an artist's agent actually does.

You may think it unwise to risk judging a book by its cover, especially within SF Fandom where lengthy experience has taught that the content and the cover are, at best, often only loosely linked. However compelling this argument may sound, apart from a recommendation from a trusted source or perhaps a favourable review, the cover image of a novel remains one of the most critical factors in urging us to try out new writers.

I've been interested in the art and illustration side of the SF business ever since I interviewed BSFA award-winning artist Dominic Harman at the NewCon2 Convention in Northampton where he was Artist Guest of Honour.

It's been great to see Dominic's career continuing to flourish, something he attributes to being taken on by a new agent. On hearing this I decided to find out more about the modern world of illustration and decided to talk to Dominic's agent myself.

Author interviews follow a familiar pattern, you talk about the last book and avoid the 'where do you get your ideas from?' at all costs. However the world of illustration is somewhat new to me,

even with Dominic as a guide, so having arranged an interview with Tamlyn Francis I started by finding out a bit about the company...

"Arena was started by John Spencer over 30 years ago, it was then called Young Artists and its reputation was built on painters for book jackets. We still represent some of the original artists from those days: Tony Roberts used to be a science fiction artist painting lovely starcapes of distant galaxies – he now paints loose landscapes of idyllic English countryside for romantic fiction. Philip Hood is also still with us – he is our realistic painter, very good at animals and buildings and he hasn't really changed that much over the years. He does lots of varied commissions now including painting trompe l'oeil effects for interiors.

"Alison Eldred took over the business from John in the late 70's,

expanded the list of artists and changed the name to Arena in 1991 feeling that the artists were not that young any more. Our base has always been publishing not only science fiction but period sagas, historical fiction and more recently children's publishing, an area we have developed over the past seven years which now includes some of the top children's book illustrators in the country. I took over running the agency in January 2001 and Alison is still part of our team, although she now works from home.

"Illustration agencies are by their nature small companies, our main office is in Shorehatched and we have two full time and two part time staff based here. Alan Lynch represents our artists in America and as I've said Alison works for us on a freelance basis. We represent 35 artists and we have to appeal

to a wide variety of clients, so we might find ourselves working on a financial report for a large corporation through a design group or on a black & white newspaper illustration which has a turnaround time of two days. But our mainstay is always publishing and we work for most of the publishers here and in the States."

Having established some background I then moved on to ask Tamlyn how she became an agent?

"I worked for Arena for a week doing work experience in 1991 and loved it. I set my mind to getting a job within the industry when I left college – I did my degree in Graphic Design, specialising in Illustration at Norwich School of Art. I've always loved illustration, from the old children's favourites like EH Shepherd through to Gerald Scarfe later on (that must have something to do with Pink

Dominic Harman

Dominic Harman is a British artist whose work has appeared around the world on such magazines as *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales* (all US), *Altair* (Australia), *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, (UK), and *Tenebres* (France). He has designed book jackets for novels by Robert Silverberg, Tony Ballantyne, Jon George and many more. His website, with many samples of his work, is at www.dominic-harman.com.

Floyd). I increased my awareness of illustrators and printmakers through my college years.

"Although I no longer draw and paint myself, my art training helps enormously when I am dealing with a job. The brief will come in from the client and I will usually talk to the artist about how they're going to approach it, when roughs come in I can offer an opinion about composition and when problems occur I can often help with other solutions.

"The greatest joy in my work is waiting the postman to come and opening an artwork – I love real artwork, looking at the texture and quality of the paint. I also love receiving proofs and finished books of digital artwork."

I wanted to know more about the artist/agent relationship and also asked how many types of client specifications they were used to?

"How long is a piece of string? It really varies from client to client and job to job. The most rewarding jobs are the ones with a more open and creative brief, but we often have to follow an already approved visual – we are supplied with a sketch and the brief says, 'Can we have this please in your style?' which sometimes can be a bit soul destroying.

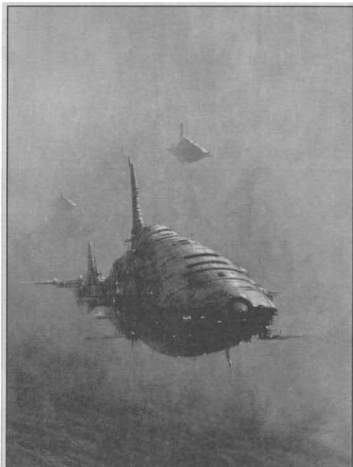
"Artists are able to work as freelancers, and many do, but it's quite a lonely profession. Many artists thrive on having someone to talk to who can be consistent and will develop a friendship with over years of working together.

"Aren't's main aim is to always work in the best interests of the artists. We are very careful to protect their rights – the contracts and agreements that we have are based on the licences sold. We don't have a contract with our artists – our relationship is based on mutual trust, although we do follow a strict code of ethics and are members of the two trade associations for our industry, the AOI and the SAA."

So did Tamlyn have any words of advice for budding artists, and do different markets/genres require specific artistic techniques?

"Present your work in a professional way. Do your research into the clients or agents that you approach. Always be polite, and on time. If your work is not right for someone, ask them if there's anyone they can recommend who might like it instead.

"It's generally the case that children's books usually require traditional methods, or the SF market requires computer aided design. But things are moving



Les Edwards/Ed Miller

Les Edwards has illustrated two graphic novels based on stories by Clive Barker – *Son of Celluloid*, about an ambulatory cancer, and *Rawhead Rex*, which tells of the adventures of a baby-eating monster and has absolutely no connection to his own views on children. Other work includes movie posters for films including John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*, and he has worked in film production and gaming. In recent years he has taken to painting under the pseudonym "Edward Miller" in order to do a different kind of work and use a different, more romantic style. His website is www.lesedwards.com.

forward – in the market of children's books, digital artwork is becoming more acceptable. There is a lot more digital imagery in SF, fantasy and horror now, and a mixture of photo manipulation and type. Photoshop has really changed the way that an artwork can look, many designers are able to comp together a reasonable jacket – but

the ones that really stand out are the truly creative compositions where the computer has been used as a tool in the same way that an air brush or paintbrushes can be used. It is the person using them that's the important factor."

What about the differences between the UK and US markets? "Tastes vary enormously



The greatest joy in my work is waiting for the postman to come and opening an artwork – I love real artwork, looking at the texture and quality of the paint. Tamlyn Francis

between the two markets, and different artists have different appeal to each. A recent trend here is to steer away from the figurative cover giving too much of the narrative content of the book away – things have become more atmospheric and iconographic. These trends seem to be led by sales figures and bookshops and many designers and art directors can be quite frustrated by the lack of imagination in their industry."

As *Matrix* has recently run features on the future of the novel I asked Tamlyn whether she thought the increase in e-novels would adversely affect book jackets?

"Trends are cyclical – photography and illustration are always jostling for position in the market, and digital artwork also has its fans and enemies. I don't think that ebooks are too much of a threat to publishing – I feel that it's just another publication method. People will always want books to read and they will always have covers. You can't read a computer screen for long and it won't ever replace the tactile pleasure of reading from a bound paper book."

Finally, and still on the subject of trends and trend-spotting, I wanted to know whether Tamlyn had any top-tips for artists to watch?

"Our children's book work is award winning, and our artists have a very good reputation – Simon Bartam just won the Blue Peter Book of the Year award for *Man on the Moon*. Next month is the Smarties Prize, which Neal Layton has been nominated for with his book *Bartholomew and the Bear*.

"I still have a passion for Fantasy, SF and Horror artwork, and I have noticed more of an interest from the publishers in those areas. We've just taken on Christain McGrath, an excellent new artist from New York. Home-grown talent Christopher Gibbs is another one to watch out for. We work with Dominic Harman, who is one of the best young digital artists around today in that field, and we continue to work for John Howe who is at the top of his profession. Both of these will be in the fantasy show being held in Blackburn next year."

This exhibition will be held in Blackburn City Art Gallery and Museum from April 23rd 2005, with work on show from artists including Ian Miller, Dave McKean, Jim Burns and Dominic Harman. Full details will appear in the next issue of *Matrix*.

More info at:
www.arenaworks.com
www.alisoneldred.com

Making himself @ home

AN IRONING BOARD ON A DUCK POOL

Martin Sketchley reflects on the process of creating his own website.

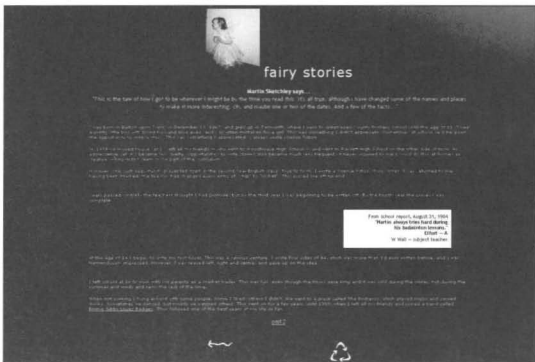
I've been writing the Ironing Board column for a while now, and Tom Hunter, one of *Matrix's* editorial team, suggested I dedicate a column to my own site and how I've developed it over the years. I've avoided talking about my own site, as articles that are full of "I" and "me" can be quite irritating. However, as I've been asked, and as my own site has seen something of a transformation of late, and evolved over the years, it seemed a good time to take stock and look at what I've learned.

I "designed" – and I use that term loosely – my first website using Microsoft FrontPage about five years ago, when I first became a freelance writer and copy editor. I started the templates in FrontPage as starting points, then changed them to suit my own needs. (That's what templates are for, isn't it....?) With the average monitor size and screen resolution increasing, I've always designed the site on the assumption that people will be viewing it at 1024x768.

Initially, the site's primary aim was to solicit work from companies that might be looking for freelancers. Every Saturday I'd plough through the creative and media classifieds in the *Guardian* looking for leads. If I found any I had a template e-mail I could send out on a Tuesday (Monday isn't good because immediately after the weekend people have more important stuff to do than look at unsolicited e-mails from freelance idiots seeking work). I'd alter this template e-mail slightly for each target, then send the messages out and wait for the replies to come in. And wait. And wait. (Of several hundred attempts, two major companies supplied me with regular work for a period of around two years.)

The website was intended to be the first calling point for interested parties. By visiting my website they could learn a bit about me, and what experience I had that might be relevant to their reports on toilet paper sales in Ukraine, or other similar topics. There was some mention of the fiction credits I had gained, but these weren't too prominent.

Over the next few years I updated the site occasionally, but it was mainly the design that changed



rather than the content, both of which were pretty basic. However, as time passed and I gained an agent and then signed a deal with Simon & Schuster, it was time to change the website's slant. The site no longer needed to be an online CV. I also felt the site wasn't exactly, well, *stylish*.

Addressing the first of these issues was fairly simple. All I had to do was bring to greater prominence the content about my fiction. I looked at a few author sites and found that there was a basic format: maybe an intro page with the authors' name, a brief biography, and links to pages covering published material, offering contact information, news, links to other sites and so on.

I decided I wanted my site to be broadly in keeping with the generally accepted format but which also reflected my sense of humour, and my inherent tendency to be different.

One of the ways it seemed easy to do this would be to avoid giving my pages names such as "biog," "news" or "about." That just seemed so unimaginative. As a result I called my "about" page "psychobabble", the links page "chain gang" (yes it really is that funny), my publication history page "one

hand clapping" (yes, it really is that sarcastic), etc. Therein my basic site format was set, and largely remains.

To improve the design I Googled on keywords such as "web design award" to try and pick up some useful tips by visiting attractive sites. Many of the links took me to particularly flashy, um, Flash-laden sites with fancy animations, lines appearing from all directions, images fading in from nowhere and sliding across the screen...you know the sort of thing. This was beyond my level of skill, and I particularly wanted to maintain my site myself.

However, I did pick up a couple of things. Colours I found I liked were black, shades of grey with lighter grey or white text, and simple but stylish images. Not so good were sites with all the content on one page and which had red text on a bright blue background.

I set about scanning various old family photographs – images that had a certain iconic quality, but which were simple and could be reduced in size. For a long time there were five images across the bottom of the psychobabble page, which were links to other pages. There were no text labels, and visitors learned what these pages contained either by clicking through

or resting their cursor over the image to reveal a pop-up label. At the time I thought this was quite cool, and stirred a visitor's curiosity. The page backgrounds were mid-grey, the text a darker shade of grey, while page headings and links were dark blue. I assumed that the majority of visitors would be familiar with websites, and so tried to avoid tedious instructions such as "click the thumbnail to enlarge the image".

To avoid having boring "back" and "home" text buttons I created my own. For the former I drew a ragged arrow in Coral Print House and added text: "escape route". Didn't I tell you I had a sense of humour? As for the home link, I got a recycle image off the web. Then I coloured the backgrounds of both images the same shade of grey as the page background, so they weren't set in boxes that looked as though they'd been plonked on top, but just appeared to be part of the page.

I then decided the site needed some extra content. It was starting to get a few hits and recognised the importance of ensuring that people returned. I wrote an account of my journey to becoming an author – fairy stories – and also scanned in loads of stuff I had from my time in Tamworth pop group, Emma

Gibbs Loves Badges. My year with the Gibbers was phenomenally important to me, changed my life, led to me meeting the woman who became the current Mrs Sketchley and, probably set me writing in the first place. I scanned photographs of gigs, blurred images from the back of vans, sound checks, set lists, reviews – nostalgia galore – and uploaded them to the website.

Then I looked at a friend's site and saw that he had animated GIFs for page headings, which appeared to vibrate gently. *Oooh! I thought, I like those.* They made the site more interesting than the usual static pages, and so I asked who'd made the GIFs for him and got in touch. The guy in question made me some similar headings and a Flash intro page that featured an alien-like face peering into a camera, with sounds like poor reception on a radio. Some idea of incoming message, was the idea. Great stuff.

When creating the GIFs he'd asked me if I'd keep the background grey, or whether it was likely to change at any point? I told him it'd stay grey. I wasn't about to change all the pages again.

So what did I decide to do a few months later?

I decided the grey just wasn't quite right, just a bit too wishy-washy, not quite stylish enough. I changed all the page backgrounds to black, fiddled around with the text colour, got rid of the icon images and replaced them with text links – boring but functional, and reducing page load time. I'd also considered that perhaps people might not want to play detective to find out what



“Then I looked at a friends site and saw that he had animated GIFs for page headings, which appeared to vibrate gently. *Oooh! I thought, I like those.*”

Martin Sketchley

they wanted to know, and so made the content of the pages behind the text links obvious (or, alternatively, just so unimaginative...). And, although it pained me having paid Good Money for them, I also got rid of the animated GIFs and Flash intro page. Excellent though they were, they didn't fit in with the site's new look. I retouched my escape route and recycle images to black so they could remain in use. Great.

Then one day my wife told me she'd looked at the site at work, and it seemed very dark and difficult to read, what with the black background and small text and everything. (The text size has always been small, as large text looks garish to me, and the site's aesthetic quality is important.) As a result I sent out an e-mail to those on my mailing list, asking them to pay the site a visit and reply telling me whether they thought the site was ugly, dark, difficult to read or gorgeous and sexy – all true reflections of myself in different circumstances, truth be known. (No, really.)

The responses I got were mostly positive. Particularly interesting was that one person said it was all of these things. Sandy Auden, demon interviewer and stalwart of The Alien Online, suggested I get rid of the intro page: “You need to reduce your number of clicks,” she said. “Compare how many people visit the home page to those who click through to the rest of the content.”

This was something I had thought about as I realised that I tend to bookmark past such intro pages myself. So, although I'd replaced the incoming alien message with a simple JPEG saying “Martin Sketchley,” I got rid of it, made the psychobabble page redundant, and moved its content to the index page. This is now the first thing anyone sees when visiting my site.

The most recent improvement is the site background, which was produced for me by d8abyte, who's part of the skinning community – a bunch of people who design “skins” that can transform the appearance of your PC's operating system. This

is grey in the top right corner, fading to black down the page, and much softer than the previous plain black. I set this image as a watermark to appear on all pages, but found that while it looked great in Internet Explorer, on longer pages the background “tiled” in Firefox and Netscape. To combat this I've split the content over more pages where necessary, or where this isn't possible just set the background as black. The blog page is one particular example.

The site text is now slightly off-white, the hyperlinks bright white, with a turquoise rollover effect that, to my eyes, makes the links appear to become illuminated. While the text may still be slightly small, I like it.

I can't see the site changing much from its current form as I think there's now a good balance. There's basic information, a touch of humour, and a recently added page offering advice to new writers. There's also music to download and brief reviews of films, books and CDs. I'm particularly pleased with the page behind the “do not click” link (so called because I know people won't be able to resist doing so). I've recently added a blog, which also includes a link to the view from my office window broadcast live via webcam. Honest. As a finishing touch, I've finally given my website an exciting and professional URL.

Hopefully if you've been thinking of producing a website of your own this has whetted your appetite somewhat. All the resources are either out there, or already in your possession. All you've got to do is apply them.

Spinnerets



Keeping up with small press magazines can be tricky – first you have to find out who is publishing them, not always easy. Then there is the question of sending money to people you don't know. Subscribing to small magazines is sometimes risky – few survive for long and you may not get a refund on outstanding subscriptions. As with gambling,

never bet more than you're willing to lose.

Back Brain Recluse (www.bbr-online.com) has long sought to link up publishers with potential purchasers, but there is also Project Pulp (www.projectpulp.com). Project Pulp acts like a clearing house between buyers and editors, it offers a very wide range of materials and its straightforward shopping cart system and online payment system (via PayPal) scores over Back Brain Recluse – though as the number of title on offer at Project Pulp has grown the site is in serious need of an overhaul to make surfing simpler.

Go on, support a small press magazine today. (MMCg)



The BBC Cult website is to fall victim to the latest round of cost-cutting/sucking up to the government at Aunty. The site which

has recently offered special sections on vampires and British comics – including especially commissioned work – will be trimmed back to concentrate only on forthcoming BBC events and shows. www.bbc.co.uk/cult



Barry the Demon Hunter, currently in pre-production, is a British attempt to fill the gaps left in the lives of Buffy fans. Featuring a demon hunting Templar the show

will be internet broadcast only. See more at www.barrythedemonhunter.co.uk



Stephen Hunt's SF Crowsnest – billed as the second most visited sf&t site on the web – has had a facelift. Join the

throngs at www.sf.crowsnest.co.uk

URLs of relevance to this issue

Martin Sketchley's website can be found at: www.martinsketchley.co.uk

This Ironing Board was written to the sound of Internet radio station 97X – The Future of Rock & Roll.

If you have any specifically web-related news that might be of interest to Matrix readers, or ideas for future articles, please send me an e-mail at the address below with the relevant URLs.

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Let me get back to you on that

Tom Hunter talks to Tony Ballantyne about moving from writing short stories to his first novel, *Recursion*, his status as "the last *Interzone* alumni" and the benefits of a sleeping partner.

Q *Recursion* adapts or combines ideas (and characters?) from your earlier short work. How did you start working these out again at novel length?

A The idea originally came as an answer to the short story *The Sixth VNM* that appeared in *Interzone* 138. It seemed too easy to leave the Earth to be destroyed by self-replicating machines, as that story suggested, and so I wanted to find a way to save it. I had a go in the short *Single-Minded* but I always felt that I tried to compress too much into that piece. Every time I came up with an answer to problems posed by the story, I found it simply threw up more questions. That's when I realised that maybe a novel was the right approach.

It quickly became obvious that MTPH (a consciousness and possibly plot altering drug) should be included from the *Restoring the Balance* stories; an old idea I had kicking around became the Constantine strand.

When I first began to write the novel I wanted each chapter to answer a question posed in the previous one; so for example, the disappearance of Eva's boyfriend is explained in the next chapter, even though that story is totally unrelated (at first, at least). Once I began planning like that, the recursive nature of the stories became apparent and I started to play games with the plot.

Q In your book, and also novels like Mike Harrison's *Light*, there seems to be an increasing idea that anything exciting happening in space is going to be over and done with by the time humans get around to realising they've been death-rayed/eaten by space-squid etc. For instance Herb barely has time to spill his whiskey before one battle's done. Do you think this presents any particular challenges both as a writer, and also for readers

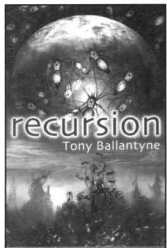
who may like their space battles in human time?

A I don't think the battles on their own present a problem, as they're still written (and read) in human time. It does become interesting when you try to tie together action on two different time scales. I've had a go at that in *Capacity*, the follow up to *Recursion*.

Q You and your book certainly seem to have picked up some positive word of mouth in genre circles. How have you found this positive response?

A Gosh! Has it? That's nice to know. I had heard some nice comments, but I wasn't aware that it was more widespread: I tend to read reviews once and then try to forget them. I'm the sort of person who having read four good reviews will only remember the fifth bad one. I stay sane by just focussing on the next story.

Q I've heard you described as the 'last alumni of *Interzone*'. Certainly your exposure in that magazine seems have had positive results for you.



Could you tell us a bit about this period of your writing life and that all important first sale?

A Well, *Interzone* is still alive and kicking: I've just received issue 195. I'd hate to think that I was the last. I owe a great debt to *Interzone*; the feedback that I received from people like Andy Robertson was invaluable. I hope the new editorial team continues the tradition of providing advice in order to build new writers. But getting back to the question: I'd had some success elsewhere before selling to *Interzone*, but getting SF stories published had always been my real goal. My wife was pregnant in the run up to my first sale, and spent most of the first trimester sleeping. I did a lot of writing then, in between making things like salmon and banana sandwiches.

Gorillagram, my first SF sale, was written during that time.

Q These days, with a child and a partner who is awake more often, how do you go about your organising your writing day?

When I first began to write the novel I wanted each chapter to answer a question posed in the previous one... Once I began planning like that, the recursive nature of the stories became apparent.

Mark Roberts

A I write every night between eight and nine. I play around a lot with stories in my head before putting pen to paper (or fingers to keys) so what I write tends to be pretty much what finishes up on the page.

Saying that, I rely heavily on feedback. My wife is invaluable in this regard: she has a keen eye for where the pace is flagging, or ideas are not clear. I'm never happy with a story until it has an audience.

Q Your novel has virtual worlds, rampant artificial intelligences and even implants (depending on how you interpret Constantine's extra voices) but none of the usual mean streets that Cyberpunk has taught us to expect.

A I enjoyed (and still enjoy!) William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's stuff, but I must admit it's not my favourite sort of SF. When reading about mean streets I much prefer the Irvine Welsh sort of thing.

Q The mean streets angle is almost entirely inverted in your novel, although the resultant world is hardly any more desirable, with Eva's section of the story being far darker than the other two. Did locating it closer to our own time make it easier to add elements of social commentary?

A Ah. The Eva section. Eva was put in originally as a chance to develop a character, away from the big space battles. The trouble was, she got out of control and ended up writing herself. I think it's true that putting her closer to our times did make her society more identifiable. The mean streets are frightening, but people with good intentions for others sometimes need watching just as closely as people who carry guns.

• *Recursion*, by Tony Ballantyne, is published by Tor Books. His next novel, *Capacity*, is due in late 2005.

meditations

The most beautiful film reviewed in this issue of *Matrix* has not won a "Must See" award. Impressive though both actual winners are, *The Incredibles* and *The House of Flying Daggers*, can't match Wong Kar Wai's 2046. A stunning visual feast.

Yet many will find Wong Kar Wai's film tedious to the point that it becomes unwatchable. It is as though the director has set out deliberately to exclude potential viewers by making it obtuse, remote and difficult.

Arguing that 2046 would be better if it was more accessible is not the same as asking for it to be "dumbed-down" – indeed it requires just the opposite. Creating narratives, in any medium, that deal with complex and important issues in terms that reach out across social, cultural and class boundaries is not achieved through gross simplification.

I once had the privilege to spend some time in the archives of *The Daily Mirror*, a much declined institution. In the fifties and early sixties *The Mirror* regularly tackled big issues in complex ways, but it did so in a language that reached out to readers, drawing them in, encouraging them to engage with the matter at hand. That was difficult. Broadsheet journalists, with plenty of space and free to make assumptions about their reader's prior knowledge of complex subjects, have it easy. *The Mirror* writers' skill was to pack everything in without obscuring meaning or falling back on cliché.

In a sense, there is something fundamental at stake here. Great storytellers – from Homer to Hitchcock – reach out to the audience rather than shrinking away from them.

As a work of art, 2046 is behaving anti-democratically – it is excluding some of the audience to boost the ego of the director and an elite who can communicate in the same language. Wong Kar Wai has confused cleverness with intelligence and 2046 suffers because of that.

Flicker

Howling success

Howl's Moving Castle set box office records when the Hayao Miyazaki adaptation of Diana Wynne-Jones' novel opened in Japan. Over 1.1 million people saw the film during the opening weekend of release (almost doubling the box office take of the director's last feature, *Spirited Away*) and in the first month of release it made \$90 million – setting it on course to be among the most successful films in Japanese cinema history.

Although the film takes considerable liberties with the Wynne-Jones original, the author has stated that she has every confidence in Miyazaki's story-telling abilities. In September she told *The Guardian*: "I have been an admirer of Miyazaki for many years. He has an ability to make beautiful, meticulous images, without ever losing the rhythm and impetus of his story. It isn't really my place to have fears and reservations."

The film, which Miyazaki has hinted may be his last (although the 64-year-old director has announced his "retirement" before) will be released in over 50 countries – more than *Spirited Away*. There is no news yet of a date for the UK release or an English language version, but *Howl's Moving Castle* opened in France on 12 January.



Wet behind the ears

Another Marvel character is heading for the big screen with *Variety* reporting that Universal Studios has taken on Chris Columbus, director of the first two *Harry Potter* films, to helm a big-screen version of Marvel's oldest and oddest property – Namor: The Sub-Mariner. Columbus will work from a screenplay by *Road to Perdition* writer David Self. This is a high-powered team behind an unlikely adaptation – Namor is at best an ambiguous hero and unlikely big-money franchise.

Cage for PKD

Nicholas Cage (*National Treasure*) will produce and star while Lee Tamahori (*Die Another Day*) will direct the latest adaptation of a Philip K Dick short story. Next is based on the Dick story "The Golden Man" and has been adapted by Gary Goldman – who previously wrote *Total Recall*, based on the Dick story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale".

Buy Riddick!

Although it disappointed at the box-office and was slated by critics (except *Matrix*'s Martin McGrath) a sequel to *The Chronicles of Riddick* may still happen if sales of the director's-cut DVD are high

enough, director David Twohy has said. Martin has already bought two.

Robots in disguise

Dreamworks and Paramount are teaming up to create a live-action movie based on the popular 1980s toys, *Transformers*. Slated for a summer 2006 release, and intended to launch a major franchise the *Transformers* movie has Stephen Spielberg as an executive producer and Don Murphy and Tom DeSanto (both *X-Men* veterans) as producers. *Transformers*, for those who don't know, are robots who can change shape – "transforming" into cars, trucks, planes, boom-boxes and guns.

Flash David

DC Comics were caught napping by Marvel's superhero movie explosion, but they're catching up fast. Big-hitters *Batman* and *Superman* are already in production and the more leftfield *Constantine* will be out soon. Next in the pipeline is *The Flash* with David Goyer (*Blade Trinity*) and possibly *Wonder Woman* from Joss Whedon (*Buffy, Serenity*).

Island life

In *Armageddon*, *The Rock* and *Bad Boys* Michael Bay established a reputation for blowing things up in big, stupid but mostly entertaining

movies. Then came the *Pearl Harbour* and the hardly superior *Bad Boys II*. But Flickers likes it when things go bang and zoom on the cinema screen so we're hoping Bay can deliver with *The Island* – starring Ewan McGregor, Scarlett Johansson and Steve Buscemi. McGregor plays Lincoln Six-Echo, a clone who discovers his idyllic existence is a sham, he is merely being kept in reserve until his "original" version needs spare parts.

D for Dodgy

Part alternative history (what if Germany won the war?), mostly anti-Thatcherite rant – Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* seems entirely unsuited for a big-budget work over. Apparently, however, first time director John McTeigue (assistant director on *The Matrix* trilogy and *Star Wars* episodes 2 and 3) will direct an adaptation produced by the Wachowski brothers (who had their own plans for a version of the film before making *The Matrix*) and funded by Warner Brothers... *The Fantastic Four* had almost wrapped production when studio Fox saw *The Incredibles*. Now its third act has been rewritten and reshot and \$20 million has been added to the budget for special effects... Zaphod's second head is up his nose in *HHGTTG*?

Daggers Drawn

MUST SEE!

It was inevitable, in the wake of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, that the historic epic would dominate Chinese cinema for the next few years. What is surprising, however, is the quality of some of the films that have followed. Last issue (*Matrix* 170) we reviewed the magnificent *Hero* and now, from the same director, comes *House of Flying Daggers*.

The really refreshing thing about both *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* is the way that director Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*, *To Live*) has sought to build artistically on Lee's film and, in many ways, to surpass it. The quality of the images on screen, the smooth camera movement, the meticulous attention to detail and the stunning framing of each shot, distinguishes Yimou as a director of the very first class.

For my money, good as *Crouching Tiger* and *Hero* undoubtedly are, *House of Flying Daggers* is the best of the three, at least in part because it contains



a more direct and emotionally effective love story at its heart than *Crouching Tiger* while also tying the thrilling fight sequences more artfully to the plot than *Hero*.

It is the action sequences that will stay longest in the memory with *House of Flying Daggers*. There are now two distinct species of movie action – the one that dominates Western cinema is angular, frenetic, hard to follow and though flashy, it is ultimately insubstantial and frustrating. *House of Flying Daggers* belongs to the other species, where action is smooth, almost lyrical, and the

emphasis is on fluidity. The fights are thrilling and beautiful to look at, but unlike their frenetic Western counterparts they advance the story rather than punctuate it. There is excitement in the fighting but each battle also contains a revelation of what the characters have at stake..

The male leads – Kaneshiro and Lau – are likeable even as circumstances and shifting allegiances force them to betray each other but it is Ziyi (*Crouching Tiger*, *Hero*, 2046 – see page 20) who steals the show. She is the passionate heart of the movie – beautiful, dangerous and utterly

convincing, she has developed into a consummate action film star.

The final sequences of *House of Flying Daggers*, tottering on the edge of melodrama and almost overwhelmed by a score that over-emphasises Yimou's operatic inspirations, will be too much for some. The final showdown in the snowy field, with dead and dying lovers struggling against each other is overblown but I didn't care – by then I was completely absorbed by the lover's story.

House of Flying Daggers is a beautifully made piece of art, a fantastic action flick and a grand love story all in one package. It has something for all but the most adrenaline-addled film viewer. (MMcG)

House of Flying Daggers

Director: Zhang Yimou
Screenplay: Li Feng, Wang Bin, Zhang Yimou
Cinematographer: Zhao Xiaoding
Starring: Takeshi Kaneshiro, Andy Lau, Zhang Ziyi, Dandan Song
119 minutes

Ready for Primer time

Primer is at once an old-fashioned science fiction story and a particularly modern type of film.

It is old-fashioned in that the plot involves that staple of hard sf, the talented small-time tinkerers working in their garage to create a device of extraordinary complexity and unforeseen power. These engineers, talking obliquely about extraordinary technologies that they can't quite explain, are surprisingly old-fashioned heroes for a modern science fiction film.

Essentially an updated time-travel movie with stylistic nods to *Donnie Darko* and *Memento*, discussions of the plot of *Primer* can only spoil the viewer's pleasure but the story was surely influenced by the circumstances of its production. Like the film's "heroes" this is a production



by small-time outsiders. Cheaply shot on digital cameras with a minimal crew and a tiny budget, *Primer* is a very modern endeavour. It could never have got made in the studio system – there'd have been too many producers burying the script with demands for clarification, simplification and explanation.

First time writer, director, actor, cinematographer,

producer, editor and composer Shane Carruth was able to put this film together with his friends for just \$7000 and delivers a film that demonstrates that it is possible to put together a complex film that can draw in the audience. His persistence and vision were rewarded with the prize for best drama at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival.

There are, of course,

problems with a micro-budgeted production like this. Not all the acting on display is of a standard that one might expect from a more professional production and sometimes the limited production values become a little too obvious. But *Primer* is full of clever ideas, it demands the attention of its audience and in return it delivers an intelligent and satisfying experience.

Primer will be showing at Sci-Fi London at the beginning of February. (MMcG)

Primer

Director: Shane Carruth
Screenplay: Shane Carruth
Cinematographer: Shane Carruth
Starring: Shane Carruth, Casey Gooden, Anand Upadhyaya, Carrie Crawford
78 minutes

Superfilm



Brad Bird has produced a contender for the title of best ever superhero film, says Martin McGrath

MUST SEE! For my money the best superhero movie ever made is M Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*, a film that is intimately familiar with the genre's tropes – the relationships between heroes and villains, between heroes and their teen sidekicks, the balance of power necessary to keep the heroes vulnerable and the way in which heroes must face their responsibilities – but which takes them only as a starting point. With its foundations thus firmly rooted it goes on to transcend the often juvenile nature of the superhero story and create a genuinely adult and suspenseful blue-collar drama.

Despite the explosion of superhero movies since *Unbreakable* only *Spider-Man 2* has really come close to combining spandex-clad thrills with a human story that really matters. Now both have a challenger for the title of best ever superhero movie – a film that understands its roots just as well and which succeeds in applying them to themes of the adult world while preserving the essential shape of the genre.

And if it seems unlikely that the most adult analysis of the "reality" of heroism in a modern world should be found in an animated comedy film aimed at, you know, kids, then the credit belongs to writer/director Brad Bird.

Bird cut his animation teeth with two classic Krusty the Clown episodes of *The Simpsons* then went on to direct one of the most

criminally overlooked movies of all time – *The Iron Giant* – a loose, but brilliant in its own way, adaptation of the Ted Hughes story.

Snapped up by Pixar, *The Incredibles* is Bird's first project since *The Iron Giant* and had a lot of work to do to meet my expectations. That it not only met them, but flew far beyond them has been one of the genuine delights of the cinematic year.

The Incredibles is perfectly pitched on a whole host of levels. As with *The Iron Giant*, it works beautifully as a kids movie, full of slapstick, action and obvious suspense. In addition *The Incredibles* has, thanks to gorgeous design and Pixar's peerless animation technology, more than enough eye candy to keep even the shortest of attention spans fixed to the screen despite a surprisingly long (two hour) running time.

Unlike the *Shrek* films, *The Incredibles* never forgets

that children form the core of its audience but, within the framework of a children's movie, *The Incredibles* offers far more than just childish entertainment.

At the heart of the film is a precise and hard-edged dissection of the frustrations of suburban living and the soul-crushing banality of corporate working life as Mr Incredible (Nelson) – powerful enough to leap tall buildings in a single bound (and hefty enough to flatten the building if he lands on it) – is forced to try and fit in with the normal world of office cubicles and petty rules made by petty minds.

An animated kids movie might not be the first place one would look for a devastating critique of what modern capitalism does to the aspirations and talents of its people – in its own, gentler, way *The Incredibles* is far more damning of the American way of life than anything produced by

Michael Moore. Mr Incredible is forced to stop saving lives and doing great deeds by the litigation culture of modern America. Ambulance-chasing lawyers have replaced Kryptonite and insurance companies have out-done masked supervillains.

And, under this, is the sense that the overwhelming forces of conformity and mediocrity have conspired to crush meritocracy. "Everyone is special," Elastigirl (Hunter), Mr Incredible's wife tells their son Dash. "Which is another way of saying no one is," grumbles Dash. The most heartfelt line in the movie is surely when, after we've watched his characters dumb themselves down to fit in, Mr Incredible sighs: "They keep finding new ways of celebrating mediocrity."

And Bird achieves all this while creating a film with the best joke about superhero capes ever and introducing E, the superhero seamstress – the insane result of mixing the genes of Anne Wedcombe and Vivienne Westwood.

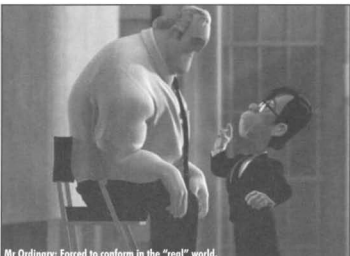
The Incredibles is a film that works on every level. It is as impressive technologically as it is as a piece of storytelling. The best animated film of the year, another huge success for Pixar and a great piece of entertainment.

The Incredibles

Writer/Director: Brad Bird

Starring: Craig T Nelson, Holly Hunter, Samuel L Jackson, Jason Lee, Spencer Fox, Sarah Vowell

121 mins.



Mr Ordinary: Forced to conform in the "real" world.

Train wreck

Robert Zemeckis and Tom Hanks get together to rob **Martin McGrath** of any sense of seasonal goodwill and Christmas cheer.

One of my favourite films of all time is Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*. I tell you this as evidence of the fact that I am not a curmudgeon when it comes to Christmas. Warm-hearted tales of good acts spurred by the seasonal spirit can bring a lump to my throat as quickly as the next person. So when I tell you that *The Polar Express* is an exploitative and tacky piece of film-making, please understand that my response is based not on an aversion to sentimental Christmas films in general but to the misplaced efforts of director Robert Zemeckis and this film in particular.

Zemeckis, with a career that includes genre highpoints such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Contact*, is a seriously powerful Hollywood director who adopted this project early in its conception, co-wrote the script and drove through the production based on new computer-generated forms of animation employing motion capture technology to reproduce the actors' expressions. Add to that package Tom Hanks (in his third collaboration with Zemeckis) as Hollywood's most reliable family-friendly superstar and its easy to see why the



studio said yes to *Polar Express*.

But someone, somewhere, should have stopped this train-wreck. I don't know what comes over Robert Zemeckis when he works with Tom Hanks but the gross sentimentality of their two previous outings together – *Forrest Gump* and *Cast Away* – should have sent alarm bells ringing when they floated a Christmas movie.

Once again Zemeckis and Hanks shovel doe-eyed mawkishness into the fire with wild abandon. From the very opening frames with the soured boy trying to discover whether Father Christmas is a fake, we have it hammered home that this is a film that wants to "teach us a lesson" about the

season of goodwill.

But what is the lesson of *The Polar Express*? The "hero boy" is rewarded for affirming his "belief" in Father Christmas when faced with evidence (polar city, elves, presents, reindeer, glimpses of the man himself) that denies "faith" by offering proof beyond reasonable doubt. What is admirable about the continued "belief" in something we have had proven to be true? Any other stance would be perverse.

Not that the children's audience need care about the theology of the story. But as a film, *The Polar Express* has a number of weaknesses. It is too formulaic, there are too many instances when it feels as though scenes have been added to

facilitate the theme park ride or the computer game. And worse the "revolutionary" animation technique has the rather horrible result of giving the characters oddly swollen heads and weirdly misshapen mouths – making the moments between action set-pieces disturbingly unpleasant to watch.

The Polar Express

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Screenplay: William Broyles Jr., Robert Zemeckis

Cinematographer: Ron Burgess, Robert Presley

Starring: Tom Hanks, Leslie Harter Zemeckis, Eddie Deezen, Nona Gaye, Peter Scolari.

99 minutes

Slightly unfortunate

There is a lot that is good about *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* – beautiful sets, stunning photography, excellent acting and a brilliant idea at the heart of the story. But the parts that don't add up to a great movie.

The best children's fiction balances the joy of childhood with the sense that this period of happiness is ineffably fragile. *Lemony Snicket* has that quality of fragility in abundance. At times it is almost savagely harsh. What the film lacks are compensating moments of warmth.

Mysteriously orphaned the Baudelaire children are placed into the care of the wicked Count Olaf (Carrey), who immediately sets about trying to kill them and claim their inheritance. There is

Carrey: Both villain and clown.



an exciting sequence when the resourceful kids free themselves from the Count's trap but then the film gets lost.

First the script introduces too many characters and locations, diluting the dramatic tension. Montgomery the hapless herpetologist (Connolly) is allowed

too little time to bring a sense of new, but doomed, security to the orphan's cold world. The film would have worked better had agoraphobic Aunt Josephine (Streep) been left until the sequel.

More serious, though is the treatment of Count Olaf. Carrey is asked to play both villain and

clown and this dilutes his menace – robbing the story of momentum and threat – while also failing to offer genuinely light moments to contrast with the darkness.

Neither weakness disguises the enormous potential in this material. A sequel seems likely and would certainly be welcome. Director Sberling deserves another chance to get it right in the starkly beautiful world he has created. (MMcG)

Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events

Director: Brad Sberling

Screenplay: Robert Gordon

Cinematographer: Kazuaki Kiriya

Starring: Jim Carrey, Meryl Streep, Jude Law, Emily Browning, Liam Aiken, Kara & Shelby Hoffman, Timothy Spall, Billy Connolly, Catherine O'Hara

103 minutes

Moody



A work of staggering genius or an enormous con? Martin McGrath can't make up his mind about 2046.

How does one start to review a film like 2046? Wong Kar Wai's kind-of sequel to *In the Mood for Love* (2000) almost entirely denies categorisation or explanation.

It is not an entertaining film, in the sense that it does not set out to provide the viewer with thrills or diversions, and yet there is something quite compelling about the images on the screen. It is hardly a character study because the characters do so little to reveal themselves to the viewer. Every action (especially those moments, such as the "love scenes" that should resonate with emotion) is clipped and restrained and infuriatingly inconclusive. It is either an extraordinary work of intense feeling or a con – having marvelled at Wai's *In the Mood for Love* I am tempted to allow the director the benefit of the doubt, but I'm not entirely sure that I haven't just caught a peak through the emperor's new clothes.

2046 is set in Hong Kong and Singapore during a troubled period in the 1960s. Following the break up of his relationship with Mrs Chan (Chung) from *In the Mood for Love*, Mr Chow (Leung) moves into room 2047 of a hotel. He begins an affair with Bai Ling (Ziyi), the girl in room 2046 (also the room number of Chow's encounter with Mrs Chan in *In the Mood for Love*) but, though she comes to love him, Chow refuses to allow the relationship to develop. He then embarks on a series of shallow encounters with women who are obviously in some way broken – one wears a mask, another's gloved hand appears to be hiding a prosthesis. Finally he finds

himself becoming obsessed with his landlord's daughter Jing Wen (Faye Wong) only to discover that he is unable to break her from her devotion from her exiled Japanese boyfriend.

And through all this Mr Chow tries to work out his attitude to love and his place in these relationships through the writing of two science fiction short stories – "2046" and "2047" – set in a distant, futuristic city – or more precisely on the train that journeys, apparently forever, between this city and the present.

The story within a story of "2047" seems to reveal most. This tale, "written" while Mr Chow is obsessed with Jing Wen, tells the of a Japanese traveller who makes the unprecedented decision to leave the utopia of the futuristic city. On the return journey he falls in love with one of the train's android attendants but she does not respond to his advances. At first the traveller believes that the android is malfunctioning then he realises that she will not respond when he asks her to run away with him because she does not love him.

Chow comes to understand that in romance, timing is everything. The synchronicity of emotion, direction and need is crucial. The absence of a confluence of desires renders all other struggles pointless. So Chow comes to some sort of reconciliation with himself and the women in his life – not a happy ending, as such, but a resigned one.

It is a rather slight insight around which to build a long and sometimes infuriatingly slow-moving film. Chow's epiphany, such as it is, isn't enough compensation for the agonies Wai inflicts on his

audience. In setting out my reading of the film above I have given no indication of the frustratingly indirect and imprecise way in which Wai allows 2046 to develop. The film flicks back and forth between time frames, it misdirects and prevaricates and, if there is a structure at all, it is indecipherably elliptical and deliberately obtuse.

Wai remains a master of painting beautiful scenes with the camera but his indulgences – the lazy movement through scenes, the endless repetition of certain images (slow-motion shots of people smoking, the strange vagina-like object into which people are whispering) smack not of genius but of self-indulgence. In truth only the capital the director has earned in the past ensures that this film gets a serious assessment – had 2046 come from any other director, or had it lacked Wai's undeniable power in the construction of image – it might have been dismissed out of hand as an exercise in pomposity.

No one should seriously doubt Wai's qualities as a film-maker but they are not enough to allow me to recommend this film to all but the most devoted cineastes. 2046 is beautiful but, sadly, it is also unnecessarily difficult and, in the end I suspect, it is somewhat inconsequential.

2046

Writer/Director: Wong Kar Wai
Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle, Kwan Pung-Leung & Lai Yu-Fai

Starring: Tony Leung, Li Gong, Takuya Kimura, Faye Wong, Zhang Ziyi, Carina Lau

129 mins

Wild goose chase



If *National Treasure*, a silly story about Knights Templar, masons and a vast hidden treasure under the streets of New York and protected by a series of complex riddles, ever paused or, for a moment took itself seriously, the whole thing would fall apart.

Fortunately the momentum of this daft but likeable adventure, never slackens for long enough to allow reality to intrude. Yes, it can be stupid, even by the standards of a Jerry Bruckheimer production, but it is never offensively so.

Nicholas Cage's good-old-boy charm provides a strong centre to the story and he is supported by some good performances in smaller roles. Special mention should go to Jon Voight who is excellent as Cage's disapproving, know-it-all father.

No doubt this film will spawn a whole new branch of Templar/Masonic conspiracy theories claiming that its story is all true – but *National Treasure* can't be blamed for the stupidity of conspiracy theorists.

Big, dumb and mostly fun, *National Treasure* would make a good Friday night with pizza and beer movie. (MMCG)

National Treasure

Director: John Turteltaub
Screenplay: Jim Kouf, Cormac & Marianne Wibberley
Cinematographer: Caleb Deschanel

Starring: Nicholas Cage, Diane Kruger, Justin Bartha, Sean Bean, Jon Voight, Harvey Keitel

131 minutes (American)

Blunt Blade



No third time lucky for **Martin McGrath** with *Blade: Trinity*

Stephen Norrington's first *Blade* was as close to modern "B" movie perfection as any film is likely to get. Slick fight scenes, smart dialogue and real imagination in the face of a relatively small budget delivered a film that caught me completely by surprise. In terms of entertainment value and the superb use it made of its "B-list" Marvel hero, it never seemed likely that subsequent instalments of the franchise could match it.

Guillermo del Toro recognised that in *Blade II* when he turned away from the hero to introduce a wider cast of characters against a darker, broader canvas.

Now comes *Blade: Trinity* – written and directed by David S Goyer, the scriptwriter behind the first two movies – which completes the process of making *Blade* (Snipes) a minor character in his own film.

There is still pleasure to be had in watching Snipes (probably Hollywood's only credible male action hero) kicking vampire ass, but that it happens so infrequently in this film and is dealt with in such a cursory way that you come to wonder why he's in the film at all.

Goyer as both writer and director is far more interested in the secondary characters he introduces here – The Nightstalkers. If *Blade* was from Marvel's "B-list" then *The Nightstalkers* – principally Abigail Whistler (Biel) and Hannibal King (Reynolds) – require a letter somewhere below "Q" to describe their status, but they save this film. Goyer gives them the best lines and the most interesting relationships. They also get the most interesting villain, Danica Talos (Posey). By contrast *Blade* is rather dull and his struggle with Drake (Purcell) – the "original" vampire – is predictable and flat.

Blade: Trinity isn't a patch on the original – it has none of those moments when the viewer catches their breath at the audacity the film-maker – but there is enough here to keep fans of the earlier films reasonably happy. However, this must surely be the end of the road for the franchise that launched Marvel's cinema revolution.

Blade: Trinity

Writer/Director: David S Goyer

Cinematography: Gabriel Beristain

Starring: Wesley Snipes, Kris Kristofferson, Dominic Purcell, Jessica Biel, Ryan Reynolds, Parker Posey, 113 mins

Mindless



Simon Gilmartin wonders whether the new *Manchurian Candidate* is part of a conspiracy.

So they remake another classic – time to wring our hands? Gnash our teeth? Well, in terms of remake standards Jonathon Demme's *Manchurian Candidate* is no *Ocean's 11* – which is a shame, but then it's no *Planet of the Apes* either – which is a good thing.

Cold War conspiracy paranoia, retooled for a War on Terror generation. Old school brain washing with yellow peril behaviourist psychotherapists and mind control psychotropic drugs swapped for gene therapy, shiny nanotech, and a creepy Truth and Reconciliation Afrikaans neuroscientist with the bedside manner of a slightly sinister orthodontist I once knew.

It's true this new *Manchurian Candidate* has some nice touches, the brainwash sequences are effective and disturbing. Demme's direction has some of the style and intelligence that made *Silence of the Lambs* stand out, and the performances are strong – quite a feat considering some of the plot hoops the actors have to contort through. So why isn't this a better film? The answer is that both direction and performances are severely hobbled by a script that on the surface looked pretty smart, but scratch beneath the shiny New World Order veneer and you realise the mundanity of its dumbness.

At first I just presumed it was the usual modern Hollywood story of auteur's vision watered down by venal producers and brain dead test audiences, blending the film into a inoffensive mush of mental comfort food. But then the more I thought about the original the more I realised just how close to it this new film was trying to be and how in doing this it had hobbled itself.

For in 1962 *The Manchurian Candidate* invented the sub-genre of paranoid political thriller. It was innovative and frightening, resonating

with the real world events that were to take place on Dealey Plaza just one year later. Yet the original still seems to retain a quaint pre-Warren Commission faith in the establishment's ability to right itself in the end.

The films that followed in that sub-genre, reflected the darkening image America had of itself, as it shuffled through the decades – another Kennedy shot, King and X adding to the tally, a deepening war in Vietnam, the airing of the CIA's human rights abuses with its own MKUltra mind control experiments, the Company's involvement with the Pinochet regime, the Iran Contra Affair. Film's like *Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Conversation*, lacked both versions of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s comforting belief that the good guys wore the white hats and the bad guys wore the black.

The film's central conspiracy seems overly complicated when compared to its real world analogue – The Halliburton Candidate. Why is this cabal of elite capitalists taking risks with dodgy mind control shenanigans? Just buy a couple of TV channels, pump its funds into the right campaign and smear any opponent as a flip-flopping surrender monkey.

The original's excuse was that it was from a more innocent time. The more I think about it the more I begin to fear that the new one is like that because that's the message it's spinning, because that's what They want you to think.

The Manchurian Candidate

Director: Jonathon Demme

Scriptwriter: Daniel Fyfe & Dean Georgias

Cinematography: Tak Fujimoto

Starring: Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep, Liev Schreiber

102 mins

Madness & mayhem

Marlin Lewis takes a look at *Versus*, the two hours of non-stop carnage in **rewind** the Japanese style.

Two escaped convicts stumble through a forest. They reach their rendezvous point only to find half their yakuza pick-up is late and they will have to wait. Unfortunately Prisoner KSC2-303 (Tak Sakaguchi) is not very good at waiting and is also displeased that the group (several of whom, in the best gangster tradition, are mentally unstable to the point of psychopathy) have brought a kidnapped girl with them. Tempers flare, guns are drawn and before too long the leader of the yakuza is shot dead. Since a brief prologue has informed us that this is the Forest of Resurrection, a portal between worlds, we are not entirely surprised when he promptly gets up again, hungry for brains. Everyone takes this in their stride and from then on it's zombie killing mayhem.

Versus is a very apt title; as the film's director, Ryuhei Kitamura, puts it gleefully: "it's a film about fighting." It certainly is but it's debatable whether this on its own is enough to sustain a film. More than anything the title evokes computer

games and this comparison highlights the film's problem. The joy of beat 'em ups is the ability to knock the stuffing out of your friends, by proxy, preferably whilst consuming soft drugs and shouting.

Versus, by its nature, removes this interactivity leaving the experience as repetitive and blankly compelling as staring at the "insert coin" screen of an arcade machine.

People are punched, kicked, slashed and shot until the viewer's attention is bludgeoned into submission and wanders off. The nameless anti-hero Sakaguchi exudes the softly spoken menace of the young Clint Eastwood but he's so laconic that he looks in constant danger of nodding off. He occasionally wakes up enough to battle a seemingly invincible sorcerer (Hideo Sakaki), who claims to have a timeless bond between him and the girl. Attempts at an actual plot beyond this 'good versus evil across the ages' bare bones outline fall flat on their face. This is illustrated by a bizarre subplot involving two



policemen who are attempting to apprehend the escaped prisoners. These two cops, as maniacally unhinged as the yakuza, appear from nowhere, provide some sub-par comic relief and are quickly dispatched. Sakaguchi jokes that he didn't read the script but there is ample evidence he didn't need to; choreography stands in for both acting and writing.

The pre-Hollywood films of

Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi are clearly an influence: there is inventive low budget gore everywhere and it has the same gonzo feel. It's a very silly film but, unlike *Braindead* (1992) or *The Evil Dead* (1981), it isn't silly enough. The eye-rolling, scenery-chewing slapstick is witless and is mixed with the sort of portentous nonsense about destiny and the dark side spouted in *Highlander* and *Star Wars*. It's an uncomfortable blend that seems increasingly derivative the longer you watch. This is schlocky exploitation cinema and ultimately nothing exceeds its welcome like excess.

Versus

Director: Ryuhei Kitamura

Screenplay: Ryuhei Kitamura & Yutai Yamaguchi

Cinematographer: Takumi Furuya

Starring: Tak Sakaguchi, Kenji Matsuda, Yuichiro Arai, Minoru Matsumoto, Kazuhito Ohba
119 minutes



Marlin McGrath watches *The Wicksboro Incident* (2003). "Inspired by *The Blair Witch Project* and proof that low budgets don't always mean more imagination. Watch it and see if you can guess which of the 'actors' paid for the whole thing as a vanity project.

So, tell us about your experiences with aliens.

Well – pause, looks down at script – in 1953 everyone I knew was murdered in a – pause, looks down at script – giant government/alien conspiracy.

Incredible! How did you survive?

I went on the run, hiding for fifty years. I changed my – pause, looks down at script – name, kept on the move and told no one what I knew.

And now you're telling the story to two imbecilic film students because?

Got – pause, looks down at script – bored, I guess.

This acting thing is tougher than it looks!

Sure – pause, looks down at script – is!

So, what are we going to do now?

Well, I'm going to lead you gormless idiots into deadly danger and you're going to walk around carrying a video camera with endless batteries, endless film and no problem filming in the dark. It seems to be super-glued to your head.

That's, like, so cool.

Not if you've seen *The Blair Witch Project*.

Sorry? Which project?

Exactly.

Can you tell us something about these aliens?

They all dress in black suits, which isn't a cliché, they just want you to think it's a cliché, they're very clever like that. And they are telepathic – but don't use their powers to notice people pointing video cameras at them from a few feet away. They invented the Harrier jump jet and they chase you with helicopters of various types that might just have been flying around in the sky anyway. They

don't like to show off their advanced technology.

But you say they invented the jump jet?

Well you don't think America is capable of creating such advanced technology do you?

No, but didn't the British invent the Harrier?

British... aliens... is there really any difference?

And where will we find them?

In Texas. They've completely wiped out the population of a town called Wicksboro and flattened the whole site, except for its most obvious feature, a giant, shiny steel grain silo. Which is handy, otherwise we'd never find it.

I'm sure the last place the aliens will look for a renegade scientist and two documentary filmmakers making a film about alien conspiracies is a former research site and a place that they wiped from the map?

Mmm. Maybe we better think this through.

Do you think there's any chance that the secret underground laboratory with the damning evidence of the truth about the conspiracy might have survived?

Not unless the aliens (or the script) are really stupid... On second thoughts, yes, I do.

If we get in trouble, do you think I should run for my life, staying away from authority and keeping out of sight or should I arrange to meet with a government agent who lied though his teeth to me at the start of the film? You really aren't very bright.

Do you think I'll die?

I think you'll wish you had after 80 minutes of this hopeless drive.

Grey Matters

That nice **Mark Plummer** worries that you're all getting old. I said GETTING OLD, dear.

It has been a grey kind of year. That at least was going to be my starting point: fandom is getting old, where are all the young people, will there be anybody left to keep fandom alive beyond the first decade of the twenty-first century?

This isn't just a mopey product of the fact that I turned forty in 2004, and seem to be having altogether too many conversations with my fan contemporaries about pensions.

No, I was going to cite Ted White's guest of honour speech from the 2004 Conflu convention and a lengthy post from long-time American fan rich brown [sic. rich brown always spells his name without capitals. No, I don't know why.] to the *trulen.net* website in which, amongst other things, he actually provides some statistical backup for the often cited claim that fanzine publication really is getting more expensive these days and is now pretty much beyond the pocket of the average American school kid.

And I was going to mention the fact that, for the second time in four years, no future Eastercon committee had come forward in advance of the bidding session, necessitating another last-minute scratch bid (albeit one that's now shaping up quite nicely: www.eastercon2006.org).

I was going to back all of this up by quoting an apposite piece I'd found in a fanzine – fandom is getting old, where are all the young people? – before executing a neat u-turn and revealing that, aha, this quote was actually from an article by Sam Moskowitz in an issue of *Redd Bogg's Skyhook* published in 1953, thus demonstrating that we've been saying that fandom is greying for half a century or more, and things are really no worse and maybe they're actually getting better.

London fan Caroline Mullan has a theory – disclaimer: this is in the sense that John Clute has a book – that a convention-goer should aim to meet at least one new person at every event they attend. It's quite a good idea, I think, and I have to report that I've actually met loads of new people at Conventions this past year, almost all of whom are well under thirty and many of whom – again, hah! – are now doing stuff for the BSFA. But I'm not going to do all this, mainly because it turns out that, umm, having now looked at the issue of *Skyhook* (which, incidentally, should have won the Retro Hugo for best fanzine of 1953), it seems that Sam Moskowitz didn't say anything about the greying of fandom at all.

Serves me right for doing research. Clearly I should have simply **asserted** that that was what Moskowitz said, sure in the knowledge that none of you lot would have actually gone and looked it up. Actually, having had that thought,

Worldcon 2012: What's left of fandom goes out for the day, but can't remember why.



I nearly went off on another tack and produced a column quoting extensively from an obscure and entirely imaginary 1950s fanzine – *Em-Dash* or something – which, I would claim, had actively predicted the appearance of Claire Weaver, Geneva Melzack, Niall Harrison and Tom Hunter and their rise to total domination of world fandom by 2005. But no, back from the world of fantasy, I shall quote from Sam Moskowitz anyway:

'Today fandom has grown so vast and complex that contact and familiarity with every group and phase of it is virtually impossible. A few fans who are sufficiently active and prominent are known to almost all in fandom, but they are becoming fewer. It can no longer be taken for granted that all fans know who is the president of the East Panchuk Science Fiction Club; not only are they ignorant of that information, but they are disinterested in learning it.'

How unlike the home life etc.

I have been spending more than the usual amount of time ferreting around in old fan publications recently. Bookseller Andy Richards gave me a small pile of Worldcon programme books, wrapped in a rather odd flyer on which somebody seems to have been trying to write less than entirely complimentary limericks about John Brunner. There's some amazing stuff there, from the 1950s onwards, which does rather demonstrate that (pace Moskowitz) the more things stay the same, the more they change.

The programme book for the 1950 Worldcon reveals the schedule of events for the Sunday, in its entirety: a fanzine panel, a demonstration of a 'matter

radio', a talk on dianetics, and a 'preview of an outstanding science-fiction motion picture'. The 1953 Worldcon (member #1: Harlan Ellison) offered accommodation at the

Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, a double room with bath would set you back six dollars a day, although I am more curious about the purpose of the 'charmingly decorated entertainment rooms'. This information is from the progress report, which was accompanied by a flyer for 'The presentation of the first annual Achievement Awards chosen by ballot of the members of the convention.' That's Hugos to you, boss.

The 1968 programme book carries a full-page ad from Gene Roddenberry in which 'We thank you for your support'. Just as well he probably didn't see the ad a couple of pages on in which 'the committee to nominate Patrick McGoochan and *The Prisoner* for a Hugo' trumpet their claim that 'Spock is a bad lay'. And there's even an advert bidding Minneapolis in '73, from back in the days when it was still a forthcoming event (the context here is that the 1973 Worldcon was in Toronto but to this day there's a bunch of people who are 'still' bidding Minneapolis in '73). On a more sobering – and greying – note, the 'In Memoriam' page lists 17 names (including Anthony Boucher, Groff Conklin and Ron Elik); the same listing for the 2004 Worldcon, which admittedly casts its net somewhat wider, has 84.

Maybe we're greying after all: fandom is getting old, where are all the young people, will there be anybody left to keep fandom alive beyond the first decade of the twenty-first century? In fact, I'm sure I read a Sam Moskowitz piece on this very theme in an old issue of *Skyhook*...

The World of Null-awards

Why are we here? **Claire Brialety** wonders about awards.

Time is once again an inconstant friend. Depending on when the mailing arrives, you may find that there is hot news on the BSFA website about the shortlists for the 2004 awards. Alternatively, if you read this before 22 January 2005, you have time to rush to the postbox or to send me email with those last few nominations that you've kept putting off sending because you like the spontaneous fun of discovering that you've disenfranchised yourself.

So what I'm saying, to paraphrase the 1980s tv show *Why Don't You...?*, is that you should stop reading this column and go and do something less boring instead. For anyone who remains, the question must arise again about why we are here.

Well, obviously we're not here anyway. Whenever you get your hands on *Matrix*, by the time you read this I'll be a good few weeks in your past. And as I write, it's hard to tell where you all are and whether there was anyone actually reading this to heed my siren call to stop it right now. Is there anyone out there? Does anyone read this column, or do you all believe there's a blank page in every issue of the magazine?

On the bright side, I could say anything. Time to restart the campaign for more science fiction featuring otters in airships, clearly. And I shan't take it personally, because if you're not reading this it's only because you're not interested in the BSFA awards. It's just that I take that a lot more seriously than being ignored on my own account.

So, let's try this a different way. It seems to me that a lot of BSFA members don't feel a connection to the BSFA awards, either because you haven't read or even seen eligible works in time to nominate them, because you don't think that there's much SF or fantasy around at the moment that's good enough to receive an award, or because members of the BSFA aren't actually interested in science fiction. I hesitate to cast this slur, but what the hell: in the style of many best-selling books about the mysteries of the universe, I can leap from a suspicion to an assumption to an assertion and in any case feel confident that no one's reading this anyway.

So, if you're not turned on by science fiction or by awards, what's the converse of that? Not fiction, and not an award. So the former non-fiction category seems like a good place to start.

You may have noticed that there isn't a BSFA non-fiction award for 2004. You might not, of course, because it's only been mentioned in this column and on the BSFA website ever since the 2003 winners were announced; but by the same token

you might not have noticed that there had been a BSFA non-fiction award for the three previous years, and I have to assume a basic level of consciousness amongst all my non-existent readers out there.

Occasionally people grump at me about the non-fiction award, and these days about the non-fiction non-award. Well, mostly they don't. Mostly they grump – occasionally – to someone else and for some unknowable fraction of that grumping I find out about it. But since I can say anything, I'll make another unwarranted leap of assumption and work on the basis that some people remain interested in good writing about science fiction and fantasy and in calling it to other people's attention and in applauding it.

We haven't got a non-fiction category for the BSFA awards this year because experience suggests that it doesn't deliver what anyone really wants. There was a perception that the eligibility criteria for this category were confusing, but in practice they were very straightforward. The BSFA award in each category is given for a work relating science fiction or fantasy published in the relevant year; so the awards are for a single novel, piece of short fiction, and work of art – and, briefly, for a single piece of writing about science fiction or fantasy. But it turned out that a lot of the sf non-fiction works that people were reading and enjoying weren't single pieces; they were collections of essays or reviews by one author, or anthologies shaped by specific editors. The category was too broad.

And yet at the same time the category was too narrow. For instance, if we temporarily suspend disbelief and imagine that BSFA members read parts of the BSFA magazines which aren't about the BSFA awards, we have to presume that much of the writing about science fiction or fantasy that BSFA members read and enjoy is contained in BSFA publications. It's a point of principle now that works published by the BSFA should not be eligible for the BSFA awards, in order to avoid the risk of diminishing the awards for the winners and more generally. And although in some years a flood of new books about science fiction and fantasy is widely available, most often that's not the case. And people didn't seem to be attuned to the idea of nominating any of the alternatives that would have been eligible, whether pieces from the review sections of weekend newspapers or any of the intelligent and thought-provoking writing that appears in weblogs.

Again, an award in any category needs to have a firm basis that means a nomination reflects common recognition of a good

Nominations received

* = New since last listing

Best Novel

- * *Cloud Atlas* – David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- * *Faces of Mist and Flame* – Jon George (Tor)
- * *Forty Signs of Rain* – Kim Stanley Robinson (HarperCollins)
- * *Jim Giffarte* – Darren King (Jonathan Cape)
- * *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* – Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury)
- * *Mobius Dick* – Andrew Crumey (Picador)
- * *Newton's Wake* – Ken MacLeod (Orbit)
- * *Recursion* – Tony Ballantyne (Tor)
- * *River of Gods* – Ian McDonald (Simon & Schuster)
- * *Singularity Sky* – Charles Stross (Orbit)
- * *Stamping Butterflies* – Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz SF)
- * *The Algebrist* – Iain M Banks (Orbit)
- * *The Confusion* – Neal Stephenson (Heinemann)
- * *The Etched City* – K J Bishop (Tor)
- * *The Flood* – Maggie Gee (Sage Books)
- * *The Iron Council* – China Miéville (Corgi)
- * *The Last Battle* – Chris Bunch (Orbit)
- * *The Moth Diaries* – Rachel Klein (Faber & Faber)
- * *The Seagull Drovers* – Steve Cockayne (Orbit)
- * *The Snow* – Adam Roberts (SF Gollancz)
- * *The System of the World* – Neal Stephenson (Heinemann)
- * *The Year of Our War* – Steph Swainston (Gollancz SF)
- * *White Devils* – Paul McAuley (Simon & Schuster)
- * *Worldstorm* – James Lovegrove (Gollancz SF)

Best Short Fiction

- * *'Collateral Damage'* – Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*Asimov's*, August)
- * *'Deletion'* – Steven Bratman (*Analogue*, January/February)
- * *'Delhi'* – Vandana Singh (from anthology *So Long Been Dreaming*, ed. Nalo Hopkinson & Upinder Mehan)
- * *'Footnote'* – Peter F Hamilton (*Postscripts* #1)
- * *'Inherit the Vortex'* – Ramona Louise Wheeler (*Analogue*, January/February)
- * *'Inside Outside'* – Michaela Roessner (SciFiction on www.scifi.com, 23 January)
- * *'Native Aliens'* – Greg van Eekhout (from anthology *So Long Been Dreaming*)
- * *'Return to the Planet of the Humans'* – Will Self (from collection *Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe*)
- * *'Steep Silence'* – Lena DeTar (*Asimov's*, June)
- * *'The Opposition'* – Daniel Kaysen (*The Third Alternative* #38)
- * *'The People of Sand and Slag'* – Paolo Bacigalupi (F&SF, February)
- * *'The Voluntary State'* – Christopher Rowe (SciFiction, 5 May)
- * *'The Wolf-man of Alcatraz'* – Howard Waldrop (SciFiction, 22 September)
- * *'You Will Hear the Locust Sing'* – Joe Hill (*The Third Alternative* #37)

Best Artwork

- * *Antares* – David A Hardy (from *Futures: 50 Years in Space* – also cover of *Analogue*)
- * *Cover of Cowl* by Neal Asher – Steve Rawlings
- * *Publicity poster/art work for the film Howl's Moving Castle*
- * *Concept art work from the film I, Robot* – artist uncredited
- * *Iguana* – Sebastiao Salgado (*www.guardian.co.uk/arts/salgado*)
- * *Ministry of Space* #3, page 7 – Chris Weston (Image Comics)
- * *n-trshn* – Richard Marchand (*Cover of The Third Alternative* #39)
- * *Cover of Newton's Wake* by Ken MacLeod (US edition) – Stephan Martinière
- * *Cover of Newton's Wake* by Ken MacLeod (UK edition) – artist uncredited
- * *Cover of Recursion* by Tony Ballantyne – Dominic Harman
- * *Publicity shot for the film Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*
- * *Cover of The Algebrist* by Iain M Banks – NASA
- * *Cover of new edition of The Cassini Division* by Ken MacLeod – Lee Gibbons
- * *Cover of The Year of Our War* by Steph Swainston – Edward Miller

Continued on page 27

incoming

Events

Sci-Fi-London 4

This annual film festival continues to go from strength to strength. Once again based at one of London's coolest cinemas – The Curzon Soho – this year's line-up builds on a growing reputation for bringing the best in cult and independent sf cinema to London screens. An eclectic roster of films includes a world premiere for Sean Astin's *Slipstream*, Asian lunacy with a Shaw Brothers' all-nighter and much more. See page 6 for more details.



26 January – **BSFA Event at The Star Tavern**, 6 Belgrave Mews West, London, SW1X 8HT. Mark Roberts is interviewed on the Thackeray T Lamshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases, with readings from Guide contributors China Miéville and Liz Williams. More info at www.bsfa.co.uk

2-6 February – **Sci-Fi-London 4: The Fourth London International Festival of Science Fiction & Fantastic Film**. More details at www.sci-fi-london.com

14 February – **Borders SF Reading**, Oxford Street, London. Interview by Pat Cadigan – authors to be confirmed

23 February – **BSFA Event at The Star Tavern**, 6 Belgrave Mews West, London, SW1X 8HT. Claire Weaver interviews Jon Courtenay Grimwood on his latest novel, *Stamping Butterflies*. More info at www.bsfa.co.uk

25-27 February – **Redemption (BS/B7)**, Hinckley, Leicestershire. For more info, email redemptioninfo@smof.com

Future Events

25-28 March – **Paragon2 (Eastercon)** Hinckley, Leicestershire: www.paragon2.org.uk

4-8 August – **Interaction (Worldcon)** Glasgow: www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk

12-14 August – **Consternation (RPG)** Cambridge: www.consternation.org.uk

14-17 April 2008 – **Concussion (Eastercon)** Glasgow: www.eastercon2008.org

23-27 August 2006 – **L.A. con IV (Worldcon)** Anaheim, California: www.laconiv.com

30 August-3 September – **Nippon 2007 (Worldcon)** Yokohama, Japan:

www.nippon2007.org

Movies

Assault on Precinct 13

A remake of John Carpenter's 1976 original thriller, starring Ethan Hawke and Laurence Fishburne – a police captain must rally the cops and prisoners together to protect their precinct on New Year's Eve, as armed criminals surround the station with the intent of releasing an imprisoned mobster.



7 January – *Alexander*

14 January – 2046, *Elektra*, *Team America: World Police*

21 January – *Assault on Precinct 13*

28 January – *Creep*

4 February – *The Eye 2*

11 February – *The Magic Roundabout*, *Son of the Mask*, *Hide and Seek*, *The Life Aquatic* with Steve Zissou

Comics

ABC Warriors: The Mek-Nificent 7

Advanced robots capable of withstanding atomic, bacterial or chemical attack fight in a war between Mars and Earth! Featuring artwork from some of the comic industry's greatest talents, including Kevin O'Neill (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), Dave Gibbons (*Watchmen*) and Carlos Ezquerro (*Judge Dredd*).



January

ABC Warriors: The Mek-Nificent Seven (DC Comics)

The Chaos Effect (DC Comics)

Constantine: The Hellblazer Collection (Vertigo)

John Constantine: Hellblazer – Rare Cuts (Vertigo)

X-Men: Phoenix – Endsong #1 (Marvel)

Araña: The Heart Of The Spider #1 (Marvel)

February

Bizarro World (DC Comics)

Rogue Trooper: The Future Of War (DC Comics)

1000 Faces Vol. 1 (DC Comics)

Black Panther #1 (Marvel)

Livewires #1 (Marvel)

Books

The Limits of Enchantment by Graham Joyce

The story of a young woman in the Midlands in 1966 – a woman who may be a witch. She and her family live on the margins of society, but nevertheless her family life is so stifling she seeks freedom with more outsiders, but fights to find acceptance there also.



January

John Dickinson, *The Widow and the King* (Random House UK)

William Hope Hodgson, *The Wandering Soul* (PS Publishing)

Graham Joyce, *The Limits of Enchantment* (Orion/Gollancz)

John Meaney, *Resolution* (Transworld/Bantam UK)

Dan Simmons, *Olympus* (Orion/Gollancz)

February

John Brosnan, *Mothership Awakening* (Orion/Gollancz)

Steven Erikson, *Fishin' with Grandma Matchie* (PS Publishing)

Simon R. Green, *Deathstalker Coda* (Orion/Gollancz)

Mary Hoffman, *Stravaganza: City of Flowers* (Bloomsbury)

Tom Holt, *Earth, Air, Fire and Custard* (Time Warner UK/Orbit)

Vera Nazarian, *The Clock King and the Queen of the Hourglass* (PS Publishing)

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Science in the Capital* (HarperCollins UK)

Tricia Sullivan, *Cookie Starfishes* (Time Warner UK/Orbit)

If you have any forthcoming events, publications or other material you think should be included in *Incoming*, then please contact Claire Weaver at matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk.

The World of Null-awards

Continued from page 25

piece of work. At the moment the more pressing task seems to be to get people reading good writing about science fiction and fantasy, and thinking about it and passing it on – just generally raising our collective awareness of the field. And any one of you non-readers of this column who aren't really here who feels that I'm implying or assuming ignorance on your part which also doesn't exist is very welcome to write to *Matrix* with your rebuttal, your recommendations for good sources of sf and fantasy non-fiction, and your suggestions about how the BSFA should recognise it.

Everyone else may wish to note the nominations that had been received for the awards by the end of November 2004. Shortlists for the 2004 awards will appear in the next *Matrix*. Voting forms will be mailed separately to BSFA members with full information about how to vote, which will also be available on the BSFA website once the shortlists are announced. Attending members of the 2005 Easterncon, Paragon2, are also eligible to vote, and the awards will be presented at Paragon2 on Saturday 26 March 2005.

BSFA Awards Eligibility Criteria

Best Novel

The **Best Novel** award is open to any novel-length work of sf or fantasy first published in the UK in 2004. (Serialised novels are eligible provided that the publication date of the concluding part is in 2004.) If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2004, it will be eligible.

Best Short Fiction

The **Best Short Fiction** award is open to any shorter work of sf or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2004 (in a magazine, book, or online) including books and magazines published outside the UK.

Best Artwork

The **Best Artwork** award is open to any single image of sf or fantasy artwork that first appeared in 2004. Whether or not an image is science fictional or fantastic is perhaps the most subjective judgement call within these awards (but the more information you can give me about it, the better). Provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2004 it doesn't matter where it appears.

Anything published by the BSFA itself, whether in the magazines, in book form or on the website, is not eligible. But the awards are open to works by BSFA members (including Council and committee members) provided they have been published elsewhere. You can nominate as many eligible works as you like in any category, although to count the nominations will need to reach me by January 2005. Don't assume that because someone else has already nominated something you like that this means you shouldn't bother to do so yourself. Nominations should be submitted in writing but can be sent by post (please note new address on the inside front cover) or email or just given to me in person if you happen to see me.

ENCOUNTERS

Basingstoke

Genesis SF Club

Meets every four weeks on Thursday, starts 7:30pm. The Hop Leaf, Church Street, Basingstoke RG21 7QQ
Contact: Mark Sinclair genesis@rhonovan.demon.co.uk
Web: www.genesis-ff.org.uk

Belfast

Belfast Science Fiction Group

Meets alternate Thursdays, starting at 8:00pm. The Monica Bars, Lombard Street, Belfast BT1 1RB
Contact: Eugene Doherty efennan@technolink.demon.co.uk
Web: members.belfastcity.co.uk/efennan/monica.htm

Birmingham

Birmingham Science Fiction Group

Meets 2nd Friday, starting at 7:45pm.
Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham
Contact: Vernon Brown blonsgroup@yahoo.co.uk
Web: <http://bfsg.birmingham.org.uk>

Birmingham

The Black Lodge

Meets 2nd Tuesday, 8:30pm. The Hogshead, Newhall Street, Birmingham B3 3PU
Contact: Steve Green ghstwords@yahoo.co.uk

Cambridge

Cambridge SF Group

Meets 2nd Monday, starting at 7:00pm. The Cambridge Blue, Gwydir Street, Cambridge CB1 2LG
Contact: Austin Benson oselin@com.org

Colchester

Colchester SF/Horror Group

Meets 3rd Saturday, starting at 12:30pm. The Playhouse pub, St. John's Street, Colchester CO2 7AA
Contact: Des Lewis (01255 812119)

Croydon

Croydon SF Group

Meets 2nd Tuesday, at 8:00pm.
The Dog and Bull, Surrey Street, Croydon CR0 1RG
Contact: Robert Newman (020 8686 6800)

Didcot

Meets 2nd Tuesday, starting at 7:30pm.

The Ladygrove, Cow Lane, Didcot OX11 7SZ
Contact: Nigel and Sabine Furlong furlong32@aol.com

Dublin

Dublin Sci-Fi Club

Meets 1st Tuesday, starting at 8:00pm.
Upstairs bar in Bowes Pub, Fleet Street, Dublin 2
Contact: Frank Darcy fdub@laptoppark.com
Web: www.laptoppark.com/dub/

Edinburgh

Forth

Meets every Tuesday, at 9:00pm.
The Doric Tavern, Market Street, Edinburgh EH1 1DE
Contact: Jim Darroch jd_6@btinternet.net

Edinburgh

Meeting in K Jackson's

Meets every Thursday, starting at 8:30pm. K Jackson's pub, Lady Lawson Street, Edinburgh EH3 9DW
Contact: Charlie Stross charlie@warpzone.org

Hull

Hull SF Group

Meets 2nd and 4th Tuesday, 8:00pm.
The New Clarence, Charles Street, Hull HU2 8DE
Contact: Mike Cross mike@mh.demon.co.uk
Web: www.mh.demon.co.uk/hull.htm

Leicester

The Leicester Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Group

Meets 1st Friday, starting at 8:00pm.
The Globe, Silver Street, Leicester LE1 5EU
Contact: Mark E. Cotterill theoutlanders@hotmail.com
Web: www.outlanders.fsnet.co.uk

London

London BSFA meeting

Meets 4th Wednesday, starting at 6:30pm.
The Star Tavern, Belgrave Mews West, London, SW1X 8HT
Forthcoming guests: Justina Brown (July).
Contact: Farah Mendlesohn farah@fjm3.demon.co.uk
Web: www.bsfa.co.uk

London

East London fans

Meets Tuesday after the first Thursday, starting at 7:00pm. The Walnut Tree, Leytonstone High Road, Leytonstone, London E11 1HH
Contact: Alex McLintock elenns@yahoo.com

London

The City Illiterates

Meets every Friday, starting at 8:30pm.
The Windmill, Mill St, off Conduit St, Mayfair, W1S 2AT
Contact: <http://london.pm.org/meetings/locations/windmill.html>

London

The Tor

Meets 1st Thursday, starts at 7:00pm.
The Florence Nightingale, 199 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7UT
Web: www.dig.ac.uk/SF-Archive/Anoble/london.html

Manchester

FOFT

Meets 2nd and 4th Thursday at 8:30pm.
The Crown and Anchor, Hilton St, Manchester, M1 2EE
Contact: Arthur Chappell arthurchappell@clara.net
Web: www.arthurchappell.clara.net/sf.html
Web: www.general.demon.co.uk/foft/sf.html

Northampton

Northampton SF Writers' Group

Meets once a month with SF author Ian Watson as your members' fiction.
Contact: suzanne@btinternet.co.uk

Norwich

Norwich Science Fiction Group

Meets every second Wednesday, starting at 9:00pm, people gather from 8:00pm. The Cellar Bar, Ribs of Beef, Fye Bridge, Norwich, NR3 1HY
Contact: Andrew Stitt astitt11@com.net
Web: www.homepage.sfnorwich.net/realty/optional

Oxford

North Oxford

Meets first Wednesday of the month, from 7:00pm. The Fleet, Wolvercote, Oxford OX2 8BD
Contact: Steve Jeffery powers@oal.com

Peterborough

Peterborough Science Fiction Club

Meets 1st Wednesday, starting at 8:00pm.
The Blue Bell Inn, St. Paul's Road, Peterborough PE1 3RZ
Meets 3rd Wednesday, starting at 8:00pm.
Goodbarns Yard, St. John's Street, Peterborough PE1 5DD
Contact: Pete de Secretary pde@btinternet.com
Web: www.psfclub.peterborough.co.uk/pjcl.htm

Portsmouth

South Hants Science Fiction Group

Meets first Tuesday, starting at 7:00pm.
The Maggie, Fratton Road, Portsmouth PO1 5BX
Contact: Mike Cheater mike.cheater@btworld.com
Web: www.pampy.demon.co.uk/sfsg.htm

Preston

Preston SF Group

Meets every Thursday, starting at 8:30pm.
The Grey Friar, Friargate, Preston PR1 2EE
Contact: Dave Young pdf@hairy1.demon.co.uk
Web: www.hairy1.demon.co.uk/pdf/

Reading

Reading SF Group

Meets every Monday, starting at 9:00pm except third Monday, when they start 7:30pm.
The Corn Stores, Forbury Road, Reading RG1 1AX
Contact: Mark Young empires@rsg.org.uk
Web: www.rsg.org.uk

Sheffield

Meets every Wednesday, starting at 9:00pm.

The Red Lion, Charles Street, Sheffield S1 2ND
Contact: Fran Dowd fran@dw.demon.co.uk

St. Albans

Polaris: The St. Albans SF Group

Meets 1st Tuesday, 8:00pm. The Plough, Tittenhanger Green, St. Albans AL4 0RW
Contact: Martin Stewart polaris@yahoo.com
Web: www.polaris.org

Contributors

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News: Claire Weaver, Martin McGrath and Tom Hunter

Flicker and Crossword: Martin McGrath

Incoming: Claire Weaver and Martin McGrath

RAGE against the Jedi!

Are the Jedi a religious order dedicated to preserving the galactic peace? Not according to **Roderick Gladwish**, they're a bunch of cheating, stealing, murdering, slave-driving, sexist cowards. Is it wise to be annoying a bunch of thugs armed with light sabres?

As I write this the original *Star Wars* trilogy is out on DVD for the first time so it's a good moment to expose the Jedi as morally empty and reprehensible. I had enjoyed the first three films, but with diminishing pleasure as the Force/Jedi element grew. After watching *The Phantom Menace* I realised what was disturbing me. The Jedi are as bad as the Sith, following the same 'ends justifies the means' creed that is the laziest excuse for dark deeds. They have a disregard for anything that doesn't serve their key objective – keeping the Jedi on top.

The films are supposed to copy Saturday morning adventure series like *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*, except *Flash* had a core belief system of straight talking, defending the weak and freeing the enslaved. Unlike the Jedi.

Early on in *The Phantom Menace* Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn needs a part for a spacecraft. No money, no lines of credit available (yep, the Jedi are a galaxy spanning organisation with a head of state in tow and a cash flow problem) so what does he do, offer a droid in exchange or use his Force-charged body to do some manual labour to make up for the monetary shortfall? No, he tries a mind trick to steal the part. When that fails he spots a slave boy – Anakin Skywalker. Skywalker is strong in the Force so he encourages the boy to risk his life to win his freedom and the part. The Jedi take the boy because he has something they want, but they leave his mother in slavery.

Later on in the movie the Skywalker boy blows up a space station. At the start of the film sentient beings were present not just



RAGE against the...

Angry? Don't keep it in, let us know. Let tip with your own "Rage against" whatever you loathe in sf in 650 words and send it to: matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk.

droids so the Jedi have made the child a killer. The obvious moral is let slavery persist and steal if you able (the mind thing works on weak minds, so top tip: steal from the weak). Excellent morality tale I don't think.

Perhaps it is one film with one errant Jedi. Well no, in *Return of the Jedi* a primitive species, the Ewoks – whether you like them or not – are used as cannon fodder. In *The Phantom Menace*, the floppy-eared frog-like Gungan are sent in against a superior force and were seconds from slaughter before the violence stopped. Would the Trade Federation or the Jedi who sent them to fight be blamed for the deaths? Yoda is seen training up more children for war (remember he can see it coming) in *Attack of the Clones*. Later Yoda throws clones into the fray to rescue the Jedi. Soldiers brain-washed from birth, the clones are slaves so it's back to the

Jedi having no problem with slavery or using victims of it. Does the Force cry out when thousands of clones die for a freedom they'll never appreciate? If it does I doubt the Jedi hear it. Heroes die for their beliefs, the Jedi don't.

Somewhere between Episodes Two and Four, let's have a wild guess and say during Three the Evil Emperor takes hold. What did the Jedi do then? The defenders of peace and justice, according to Obi-Wan Kenobi in *A New Hope*, become hermits staying out of the fight to watch the rebellion from afar. Ordinary folk fight and die while they wait for a great white hope. Apart from proto-Jedi Luke it is non-Jedi who win the war against the Emperor. Which reminds me, why didn't Darth Vader do the 'I am your father' thing with Princess Leia? Used to privilege she might be more susceptible to the temptations of greater power. With no Force to rely on she gets the Death Star plans to the Rebels, attacks the force field base protecting Death Star II and recruits the man who does destroy Death Star II. All that achievement and she is of no interest to Obi-Wan, Yoda or even her Father.

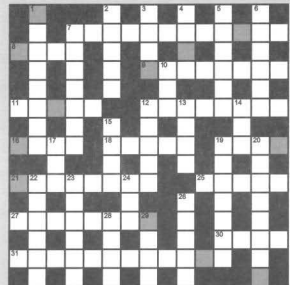
Jedi is a religion according to Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader in *A New Hope* and the UK census. A shallow selfish one where its followers are taught to milk the energy of all living things to use it to get what they want and if that doesn't work get someone else to do the dirty work.

A final thought. Anakin Skywalker as Darth Vader spent a lifetime killing innocents from Sand People (Episode Two) onwards, but he still gets into Jedi-heaven.

Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars

Finally, *Farscape* fans get to find out what happened after the cliffhanger ending of their prematurely cancelled show. Everyone else gets to enjoy a ripping adventure that stands on its own two feet, even if you aren't familiar with the characters or their back-story.

To win a copy of *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars* on DVD, complete the crossword and rearrange the letters in the shaded squares to reveal a word relating to *Farscape*'s ship, Moya. Answers to: matrix.competition@ntlworld.com by 28 February.



Across

- 7 *Farscape*'s hero (12)
- 8 Major and minor bear (4)
- 9 Coloured handkerchief – rockstar headgear? (8)
- 11 Out of bed, perhaps going around in circles? (5)
- 12 Where the posh folk live (8)
- 16 Warlike Peruvian people (4)
- 18 Directs Moya (5)
- 19 What I make in the kitchen (4)
- 21 Records, marriage office (3)
- 25 Land of Gog (5)
- 27 Agitate, military operation, stand for election (8)
- 30 Change (4)
- 31 *Farscape*'s militaristic villains (12)

Down

- 1 Former 31 across, joined 7 across (8)
- 2 *Farscape*'s Delvian priestess (5)
- 3 Strikebreaker (4)

- 4 Augury (4)
- 5 Ally of 7 across, grey-skinned Nebari (6)
- 6 Gets involved with carpenters (6)
- 7 Island, she went of her own accord (7)
- 10 Snake (3)
- 12 Untwist a rope (5)
- 13 Satisfy (4)
- 14 Anger (3)
- 15 See, blot, a little bit (4)
- 17 Just a wheel in the machine (3)
- 19 Get 15s in German variety (7)
- 20 31 across scientist, got into the head of 7 across (8)
- 22 Tooth covering, glossy paint, decorative glass (6)
- 23 Collision (5)
- 24 Fix, American truck, ship's ropes and sails (3)
- 26 Dominar of the Hynerian Empire (5)
- 28 Black (4)
- 29 Desire (4)