

# FIRST CONTACT

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association  
Volume 3, Number 3      March, 1995      ISSN 0791-3966

---



## Dwarf VII Confirmed

The BBC have confirmed that following the acquittal of Craig Charles on rape charges they're proceeding with a seventh series of Red Dwarf. Charles, having expressed anger at the publicity brought by the case, said he was looking forward to returning to work. The current plans are for a ten-episode Red Dwarf VII, as well as the long-awaited Christmas special, first mooted in 1993. It's expected that Red Dwarf VII will feature the return of Holly, but speculation is rife as to whether Hattie Hayridge will be the head in question. However, the presence of Rimmer is in doubt, as Chris Barrie has expressed a reluctance to return to the role because of problems with the quality of the scripts.

## Diskworld on TV?

Preceding the arrival of Terry Pratchett's Johnny and the Dead on UTV on the 4th April, Granada TV have announced that they've secured the rights to Pratchett's Diskworld, of late being spelt with a silent <sup>TM</sup>. More on Page 3, as they say in all the best periodicals.

## Clive Barker in Dublin

Clive Barker, the author and film maker, will be making an appearance in Dublin this coming 28th April, when he'll be signing books in Sub City, Dublin's newest science fiction book and comic shop at 11:00. Afterwards, he'll be adjourning to The Central Hotel, where a coffee morning hosted by the ISFA will run from 11:30 until 12:30. Anyone who was present the last time Clive was in Dublin will remember that he held an entire room rapt for hours, and managed to field a range of questions from the floor, covering all topics from directing, writing and his work as an artist.

All ISFA members are invited – nay, encouraged – to attend this event, as Barker remains one of the most personable speakers to appear at an ISFA event.

## INSIDE...

- 02 Hi from the Committee
- 03 News and stuff
- 04 Star Trek : Voyager
- 07 Magic : The Gathering
- 09 Star Trek : The Card Game
- 11 Comics Reviews
- 13 Video Reviews
- 15 Book Titles
- 17 Top Ten Books
- 19 Book Reviews

# A Word from the Committee

Greetings,

This is just a short note from the new committee to introduce ourselves, and to make a few points. As you may or may not know there are but four of us: Conor Stephens is Chairperson and Membership Secretary, Kathryn Cassidy is the Public Relations Officer, Ruth Cassidy is our treasurer, and I Vincent Canning am of course your Secretary.

The first thing we'd like to do is to thank the previous committee for the great work they did in running the ISFA last year. We'd also like to thank Brendan Ryder for administrating the ISFA over the last few months.

One point we'd like to make is that despite some ideas mooted at the E.G.M. it is our intention to continue the publication of the Phase Magazines in their current format for the duration of this committee at least.

Now while we cannot deny our brilliance we are but four lowly mortals (honest!) and as such we will surely heap blessings and praise upon those who would offer ideas or suggestions, especially topics for monthly meetings.

Thats all we have to spout on about at the moment so cheery-bye.

**Vincent Canning**  
**ISFA Secretary**

---

---

## Editorial

Welcome to the April issue of First Contact, a fun-filled issue that takes a brief look at the world of card games. Sadly, space considerations mean that we can only look at the two most popular games -- Magic : The Gathering and Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game -- but depending on interest and space next month we'll try and look at some cool stuff like Jyhad and Illuminati (and maybe even Diamondback). All the usual stuff is abound inside for those of you who don't care about card-collecting geeks.

### Oops

If you spent most of the the last month leafing through your newsletter looking for those Web sites I promised, you have my most abject apologies. The were omitted because of the faulty memory of your humble servant, who forgot to put them in. I promise they're around this month; I haven't figured out where.

**Robert, Man of Destiny**  
**Editor**

# News

## Pratchett on TV

(contd. from Page 1). It's expected that the series, based on a number of Diskworld novels, will take the format of individual two-hour comedy dramas.

## X-Files Sequel?

As rumours continue to spread about an alleged sequel to the X-Files, two of its writers, James Wong and Glen Morgan, have created a new action/adventure series called *Space*. This was being mentioned as a direct sequel to *The X-Files*, but it seems it's a programme that will stand on its own. As for those rumours, it seems Fox is still very interested in a sequel, possibly set in space, but that there are no firm plans as yet as to what format this sequel will take.

For those of you who've been waiting for *The X-Files* to appear on video, by the way, it's been rescheduled so that the first two tapes are out on the 3rd May. Despite repeated promises from its producers that we'd see it before Summer, however, there's still no sign of *Babylon 5* coming out on video. If you're interested in such things, by the way, expect *Red Dwarf VI* on video in May, *Voyager* in June and a brand new *Wallace and Gromit* in September. If you must know, *Generations* will be available to rent on 21st August and on sell-through in November, but I wouldn't bother if I were you.

## Outer Limits on BBC2

The BBC have bought the rights to the remake of the *Outer Limits*, and plan on showing it towards the end of the year, after they've finished with the second season of *The X-Files*. It's part of their new SF season which will extend to video, with all twenty-six tapes in the *Blake's Seven* series being sold at a trifling eight quid each. Be warned, however. The beeb have also shelled out for a showing of

*Space : 1999*. While probably the best thing Gerry Anderson did up to *Space Precinct*, one can hardly take that as a recommendation.

## The Inevitable Happens

Even as *Star Trek : Generation* is hurtling through history as the worst three quid ever spent by an editor of *First Contact*, work has begun on *Star Trek Eight*. As yet, there are no plans for a bad guy – or, one suspects, an Enterprise -- but we live and hope that nobody who had anything to do with *Generations* will be allowed within fifty feet of a word processor. Lord, hear our prayer.

## Best Sellers

The five best-selling paperbacks in Forbidden Planet, Dublin during the month of March are...

1. *Mirror Dance*, Lois McMaster Bujold
2. *Expiration Date*, Tim Powers
3. *Merlin's Wood*, Robert Holdstock
4. *Deep Space Nine : Proud Helios*, Melissa Scott
5. *ST:TNG - Balance of Power*, Dafydd ab Hugh

As for the hardybacks...

1. *Earthfall*, Orson Scott Card
2. *The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived*, Robert Rankin
3. *One King's Way*, Harry Harrison
4. *The Diamond Age*, Neal Stephenson
5. *Iron Hand's Daughter*, David Gemmell

My thanks to the virile, handsome and single book buyer in Forbidden Planet, Dawson Street for my help in compiling this list.

# STAR TREK: VOYAGER

## WHITHER OMNIPOTENCE?

“The Cage”, “Encounter at Farpoint”, “Emissary” and “Caretaker.” What do these Star Trek episodes have in common? Answer: Each is a pilot for a new incarnation of Star Trek.

But the episodes have a lot more in common than that ... Each introduces an almost omnipotent alien race, with the ability to create convincing illusions to threaten or confuse one or more of the cast: the Talosians, Q, the beings that live in the wormhole, and the Caretaker. We’ve only seen the Talosians once more, in “The Menagerie” (which is basically the same story), Q has appeared more than once, even crossing over to DS9, and we can assume from Voyager’s pilot episode that the Caretaker’s race will resurface at some stage. The Bajoran prophets have been awfully quiet lately, but I expect that they’ll be back.

Each pilot also introduces a character who is slightly removed from the human norm, to act as an observer of our ways and spout philosophies on our race and show us our frailties: Spock, Data, Odo and Neelix (all right, so Voyager’s Neelix hasn’t done this yet, but give him time...). Spock captured everyone’s imagination in his attempts to lose his emotions, Data gained fans for the opposite reason, Odo works because he doesn’t want to be human — he just wants to be himself,

and Neelix works because he’s naive and cynical at the same time.

There are other similarities in Trek’s pilots, but I want to concentrate mainly on the Voyager pilot. It’s clearly designed to fit in with someone’s idea of what a Star Trek pilot show should be like: Bring the crew together, establish their mission, introduce an alien we haven’t see before (just so we won’t accidentally think that this is some other Trek), and, most importantly, give us a Greater Understanding: in “The Cage” it was that people can be just as happy with illusions as they are with reality; in “Encounter at Farpoint” we learned that despite our pride, the human race is nothing compared to what else is out there; in “Emissary” we are shown that our grasp of existence can be meaningless to another race; and in “Caretaker” we learn that ... that ... cm ... Ah.

The most important thing about Voyager, as far as the Star Trek concept goes, is not that a woman can be just as good a Captain as a man. It’s not that two differing factions can work together for a common cause. It’s not even that Star Trek has to have a Vulcan and an Asian to be successful. It’s this: Janeway has a choice of using the last of the Caretaker’s power to get her ship home, or breaking the Prime Directive by using that power to help

the Ocampa.

There have been episodes of TNG where breaking the Prime Directive (that is, non-interference with underdeveloped cultures) has been the mainstay of the plot. In *Voyager* it sets the background for the entire series: Janeway's decision, ironically, is more in line with Maquis policy than Federation ideals.

The crew of the USS *Voyager* aren't simply the squeaky-clean Federation we're used to from TOS and TNG: There's the Captain, Kathryn Janeway (Kate Mulgrew), who is, I admit, *reasonably* squeaky-clean; Tom Paris (Robert Duncan MacNeill), who got chucked out of Starfleet, then joined the Maquis and mess that up; First Officer Chakotay (Robert Beltran), a Maquis officer descended from Native American Indians; Neelix (Ethan Phillips), an alien scavenger who joins the crew to act as a guide, cook, handyman, whatever they need him for; Kes (Jennifer Lien), an Ocampa with a nine-year life-span; Harry Kim (Garret Wang), a Starfleet officer and the only normal one of the bunch; B'Elanna Torres (Roxann Biggs-Dawson), a half-Klingon, half-human woman with a fiery temper; Tuvok (Tim Russ), a Vulcan with a slightly sarcastic sense of humour; and The Doctor (Robert Picardo), a computer-generated hologram with a brisk, no-nonsense manner.

A fine collection of Roberts indeed, but it was Harry Kim who worked best for me. He's just an ordinary chap, a bit wet around the ears, nothing weird

about him at all. Right behind him was Tuvok. I didn't think that it would work, another Vulcan in a starring role, but Tim Russ was magnificent. Janeway is a good Captain, Chakotay should make an interesting First Officer, but he had little to do in this episode. Paris could be the perfect antithesis of DS9's Bashir, though I expected more from the man who was once Nick Locarno. I liked Neelix a lot, though I don't know why he couldn't have been a Ferengi. The Doctor (who is unnamed in the show, not even in the credits, but will apparently be called Doc Zimmerman) provided some humour, and Robert Picardo is one of my favourite actors, so I have high hopes for him.

At the far end of the good characters scale — where the needle wavers dangerously close to the “not very good” zone — are B'Elanna Torres and Kes. It seemed to me that they were been thrown into the plot just to help the other crew member escape from things. I know that it's not fair to judge them after just one episode, but I found them boring.

There are three major new races introduced in “Caretaker”: the Ocampa, the Kazon, and the Caretaker's race. Of these, the Ocampa are the least interesting. We've seen them many times in other Treks, though usually they have different noses, ears or bumps on their foreheads. Also least interesting are the Kazon: these are bad guys who look sort of like minimalist slacker Klingons. The Caretaker is a lot more appealing, because he's a very powerful being from another galaxy

who manages to wipe out almost the entire Ocampa race. Racked with guilt, the Caretaker pledges to look after the survivors, and acts as an almost God-like benefactor. But the Caretaker is dying, so he begins taking ships from other parts of the galaxy, in an attempt to find a close match for his genetic structure to that he can be reborn in a new body. When the Voyager crew are pulled into the Caretaker's space, they find themselves outside what looks like a southern farm, complete with pitchers o' lemonade and banjo-playin', dungaree-wearin' Jethros. This is, of course, an illusion. The crew see through this and confront the Caretaker, who has them whisked away for examination. Next, we see the crew suspended on wires from the ceiling of a high-tech lab, a scene eerily reminiscent of the movie *Coma*, which starred the producers' first choice for Janeway, Genevieve Bujold. There's no indication if the Caretaker is in any way connected to the TOS episode "Shore Leave", in which the alien who controlled the planet's illusions called himself the Caretaker, but it could very easily be the same character. For that matter, it might be worth speculating if the Caretaker is from the Q continuum

...

The plot device to get the Voyager a long way from home works well, it ties in with the rest of the story and doesn't feel contrived in any way. The same can't really be said for Neelix and Kes's reasons for joining the crew. They just turn up and say "Here we are. Can we join?" and Janeway says "Okay."

The future of the show should be interesting. The Voyager is trapped on the far side of the galaxy, and for the ship to reach the Federation it would take over seventy years as the crow flies (or as it would, if it had the energy). But somewhere there is another alien of the Caretaker's species, and it's Janeway's objective to find it, and on the way, it seems, they're going to have a damn good time.

And, as they *are* on the far side of the galaxy, there's no real way any familiar faces can cross over into this series (that said, we do get to see Quark on DS9 before the Voyager begins its mission). The writers have been asked to steer clear of flashbacks or illusions that make the crew think they're at home, so the budget for guest stars should be pretty low. Q, of course, might be able to make an appearance, and if he does I'm sure that he'll refuse to help the crew get home, citing his reasons as "There is so much for you to discover out here." But the Voyager won't be entirely cut off from that part of the galaxy we know so well: in an upcoming episode the crew will discover how to use a wormhole to communicate with a Romulan ship.

But don't let any of my negative comments deter you. "Caretaker" is by far the best of the Trek pilots. It's not up to the standard of TNG at its peak, nor DS9 in the latter half of its second season, but it shows much more promise than "The Cage", "Encounter at Farpoint" and "Emissary" combined.

Michael Carroll

# Musings on Magic

by Nigel Baker

If you've been to an ISFA monthly meeting recently, you may have noticed suspicious figures in a corner hunched over a table and diligently studying its contents. Every now and again one of the shapes places something on the table evoking a response from the other figure, either a smug grin or a disappointed frown. You may jump to 1 or 2 conclusions about this. It's either the latest arms deal going down, or someone is playing Magic.

I've been playing Magic:the Gathering for nine months now and I'm almost an old hand at it. Magic, the first of its type and the most popular, has been around for less than two years and has already become the most played game of any type in many gaming circles. It was designed by an American Mathematics Professor named Richard Garfield, who still has a say in how the game progresses in the future, and is published by Wizards of the Coast.

## The Game

The idea behind the game is simple: You and your opponent(s) are wizards. The cards in your hand are your spells, and you play land, from which you draw mana for your spellcasting. Get them before they get you is the prevailing attitude in the game, all the while striking a balance between offence and defence.

There are five colours of Magic in the game and you build your deck from a combination of all, some, or just one of these. Each colour has two opposite colours which it has spells to deal with directly. Unfortunately they also have spells to deal with it. The five colours are Black, Blue, Green, Red and White but there are also Artifacts. These don't have a colour and so can be put in any deck, regardless of composition. Artifacts are items left over from Wizard's wars from times gone by,

and can be extremely useful to have in your deck.

## Starting Magic

When you're starting off, the main limitation to your deck is the cards you have available to you. But as you pick up more cards you get more choice as to what you put in your deck colour-wise. Anything you don't put in your deck you can trade off for what you do want to put in. Trading is as big a part of Magic as playing the game actually is, but beware, because there are a lot of unscrupulous people out there who would be more than happy to give you the worst deal of your life, and make you feel as if you've just stolen from them. Don't trade until you know the value of the cards you are giving and receiving is my advice. There are a few magazines on the market that contain card lists with each card's relative rarity, so it's worth getting your hands on a copy of *Scribe* preferably, but *The Duelist* or *Inquest* may have what you're looking for. There is also a book published by Wizards of the Coast called the *Pocket Players Guide* which has a lot of information and tips about playing, but it was published well before the current edition and so is a bit out of date.

There are two types of Magic people, the collectors, and the players. Collectors attempt to get full sets of all the cards and expansions sets, spending inordinate amounts of money just to get that one rare card that very few people have, whereas players just get the cards they want to put in their own particular decks, and don't care much for all these weird and wonderful cards that no-one will ever find a use for. I myself am a bit of both, trading for cards that I don't have but not sacrificing the cards that I need for particular decks.

## The History

When Magic was first released in September

1993, the result was what is now called the Alpha printing. This edition was scheduled for a print run of 10 million cards but they stopped the printing after only 2.6 million, when they realised how many mistakes and misprints there were. They then fixed what they could and continued the print run. This next 7.3 million became the Beta edition. When these cards were finished, they took a long hard look at the results and found that there were nearly as many flaws in this as there was in the Alpha printing. They then changed some cards again and gave them a white border to differentiate them from the black border of the Alphas and Betas. They called this set Unlimited and it was just that, in that there was no upper limit for printing these. Around this time they released Arabian Nights and Antiquities expansion sets. But there still were cards that didn't fit in with the feel of the game in the Unlimited edition. Cards that made one colour too powerful over the others or that didn't fit in with the colour's ideas, and, of course, there were the cards that no-one could understand. They were just too mystifying for the average player to get the intricacies of. So they went through every single card in the Unlimited, removed all the cards that were unbalanced or confusing, standardised all the remaining card texts so that cards that did the same or similar thing would read the same instead of contradicting each other. Then they printed the Revised edition. The Revised is quite a bit less confusing than previous editions, and the cards that were taken out were replaced by certain cards from the Arabian Nights and Antiquities expansions. This is the edition still on sale at the moment but it's due to be re-revised soon. All of the cards that were taken out from the Unlimited can be bought from traders, but they're not cheap. The going price for a Black Lotus is currently \$150. This is the dearest card overall and by the price you can safely assume that this card is extremely rare. I know one person who has one and he is afraid to play with it in case it gets damaged.

## Tournaments

Wizards of the Coast, the Glasgow branch, run official tournaments at conventions all over Europe, including Gaelcon in October in the Kilmainham Hospital, and Warpeon, UCC Games Society's annual convention in January. The standards in these competitions is high, and since some of the players have out of print cards, the cards that were taken out when the Revised edition was printed like the Black Lotus, and can use them in tournaments, that gives them an edge over the newer players. Having these cards does not guarantee a win but it does shift the odd in their favour, if these cards come into play. As a result a new tournament has been introduced which only Revised cards and cards from the last two expansions are allowed. This opens up the field to everybody, so skills in playing and deckbuilding are more important than the individual cards in the deck.

There seems to be a division forming, in that people are either pro- or anti-Magic and they can do the strangest things to show on which side of the line they stand. At Warpeon this year at an auction of Magic, one card, a Black Lotus, was bought by a whip round for £220. Stranger still, the whip round was started by people who work for Wizards of the Coast. And even stranger yet, they bought the card to burn it, and burn it they did. If anyone can explain that, would they please shed a little light in my direction?

## The Future?

It has been called a fad, a blow-in, a passing craze. They said that about role-playing and that's still going strong. The Magic craze will blow over, I'm pretty certain, but when, I don't know and for the moment, I'm quite happy to play Magic for enjoyment, and try to collect the cards I don't have. As long as there is someone else playing or trading Magic, I'll still be around. Happy Gathering.



# Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game

by Captain Robert D. Elliott

The strangest thing for me about *Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game* is that it's actually a good game. I got into it first purely in self-defense; working in Forbidden Planet, I sold the game, and after myriad attempts at explaining it without having a clue what I was talking about ('Er, did you ever play Top Trumps? Well, it's like a really complicated version of that.') I threw caution to the winds, got a pack and figured out the rules. Now when a customer inquires, I hold my head up high and in a loud, steady voice say 'Why certainly, sir. What would you like to know?.' About fifty-one per cent of the customers get annoyed at being called sir, but what the hell.

But enough of this inane waffle. *Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game* (hereinafter referred to as The Game) puts you in charge of one of three groups; the Federation, the Romulans or the Klingons. The idea of the game is to build outposts, man ships and boldly go across the spaceline, completing missions, foiling your opponent and generally trying to win the game. And all this with only sixty cards.

As with other customisable card games, there are more cards available than you can use, so unless you've only got a small selection, you're going to need to configure your deck. And if you are one of those players with few cards, it's unlikely that you're going to be able to do it properly. Unlike Magic, for example, where it's possible to play with

any combination of cards (although you'd be damn lucky to win anything with a Magic starter deck, either), in Star Trek you need a certain number of cards; six missions, one ship and the crew therefor, one outpost and a few dilemmas. And whereas I'm sure there are a few starter decks out there that contain these cards, the vast majority would be lacking, leaving you spending two quid on a fifteen-card booster pack. Playing The Game is great fun, but to be honest it's a pain in the arse to set up. First of all, players put down their mission card in a line (called the timeline, or the spaceline, or something), alternating them so that either player owns every second card. Then, having the missions on the table, each player 'seeds' the timeline with artifacts (good to get) and dilemmas (guess). These cards will be encountered by whomever attempts the mission under which they're placed, so as a general rule you give yourself artifacts and your opponent dilemmas.

Once that's done, each player takes seven cards from their remaining pile, and beings to play. The first priority is to get a ship and crew out, because until you do you're just playing event cards to pass the time. This ain't no Deep Space Nine; if you don't have a ship, you don't do nothing. But once you do have the ship, you wend your merry way around the timeline, setting up traps for your opponent, solving missions and generally trying to get to one hundred

points first. You're given a certain number of points for each mission (between twenty and forty-five), and there are bonuses to be earned along the way if you're careful. A good way to play, by the way, is to ignore the one hundred point rule, and just play until most of the missions have been completed. A one hundred point game can last as little as ten minutes, and it's not worth it for the amount of time it takes to set up.

As far as complexity is concerned, I must confess that the game still surprises me. Although a lot of the cards seem very simple, when played in the right combinations can be quite lethal, and games have been won or lost on the strategic placement of a seemingly-innocuous card.

The game has a few drawbacks; as I said, it's quite tedious setting up, all the more so because both players have to keep track of which cards belong to whom. Whenever a card is used from the timeline, there are mutterings of 'your card,' and when read, the card must be returned or carefully rotated so its ownership isn't in question. Granted, this happens in games like Magic and Jihad as well, but a lot less often, and without the ridiculous bookkeeping that's necessary in this game.

The other problem I had with the game — and I must confess that it's becoming less of a problem as time goes by — is that it's far too easy to rig the game in the early stages so that you give yourself all the artifacts. Because there are two types of missions — planet and space missions — it's possible that your opponent won't have the necessary

dilemmas to cover all your missions, so all you have to do is see which ones are left (if any), and slap one or more artifacts underneath. Once you've got your ship, you can wend your merry way towards your safe mission, complete it (if you've got the personnel) and grab yourself some free help. This sort of rigging is possible in several places, but I've taken to looking on it as part of the opening strategy, and I'm careful to have enough dilemmas of the right type to stop any cheating bastard that tries that trick on me.

Oh, and one other grumble; it's only possible to play a two-player game. A third player is right out. There are myriads of us trying to figure out a three-player variant, but the accountancy aspect of the game makes this very difficult. Magic : The Gathering is much more entertaining when played as a group, so Star Trek loses quite a bit by its loner status.

The Game is inevitably going to appeal to trekkies more than anyone else; each card contains a picture from The Next Generation and some cute but useless factoid, so even if you learn nothing else, you'll learn how to spell Anaphasic Organism and which crew member it affected. Nonetheless, Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game is a game that will keep you going for hours; once you've got the cards to really reconfigure your deck, you'll spend many a happy evening sitting in saying 'Ooh! This'll kick arse!' while your flatmates look on pityingly and say things like 'get a life, you sad bastard.'

Does anyone want forty-seven Wesley Crushers for a Captain Picard?

## Comics Review

*Babylon 5* #4, DC, by Moretti, Netzer & Leigh, £1.75

*The X-Files* #2, Topps, by Petrucha & Adlard, £2.25

*Magic : The Gathering — The Shadow Mage* #1, Armada, by Gomez, Mayerik & Pascoe, £2.25

One of the things I've always admired about trekkies is that they'll read any old shite as long as it's got the Star Trek name on the cover. Regardless of the quality, any comic or book within the Star Trek franchise will sell in huge quantities. I always fancied myself above that sort of thing; after all, life is too short to read so much shite simple because of its cast of characters.

How is it then, that I find myself with standing orders for all three of the above titles? Each of them is a merchandising spin-off, with characters created by others and intended for a different medium. I can only plead that I approached each of the titles individually, and judged each on its merits as a comic and not, for example, a Scully and Mulder fix. That's my story, and I'll stick to it, irrespective of how many people heard me swearing when *The X-Files* arrived a week or two late.

But let us start with *Babylon 5*. Considered by many to be the ultimate in science fiction television (they're close), *Babylon 5* is slowly heading the Star Trek merchandising route. An important difference, though, is the inclusion of the *Babylon 5* comic in the canon; everything that happens is real. In Trek, if it ain't on TV, it didn't happen. The first issue of the comic was written

by Straczynski, and he co-plotted a story arc for the next few issues. This, of course, means, that if you want the whole story of *Babylon 5*, you gotta read the comic as well as set the video every Monday before going to work (this isn't the time to complain about Channel 4's scheduling, but that time will come).

After all that, what's the comic like? Well, storywise, it's very good, but is let down severely by the fact that the neither the penciller nor the inker is able to draw male characters. Talia Winters, Ivanova and Delenn all look reasonably as they do on TV, but none of the male characters is recognisable. Garibaldi I guessed at (he's less hair than most), but both Sinclair (who's still around in the comic) and Sheridan could be anybody. Even apart from the characters, the artwork is uninspired. The drab look may be deliberate, given the tone of the series, but it's not a look that works. This is a pity, as the story deserves more. One can only hope that John Ridgway does better in the next issue, but even though he's an excellent artist, I fear his isn't the style suited to this comic. Definitely one for *B5* fans only.

What, then, of *The X-Files*? Sporting an excellent cover by Miran Kim (of whom I haven't previously heard), "A Dismemberance of Things Past" is a

typical X-File, complete with the obligatory hint of aliens. Stefan Petrucha, the comic's writer, took a different approach with his first issue, having Scully and Mulder confront the secret of Fatima, but it seems that having tried his bit at different territory, he's back to the familiar with army conspiracies, possibly involving aliens. This second issue is much better written than the first, and along with the freebie comic that was given away with Wizard magazine last month, shows that Petrucha is learning quickly from the experience of writing the comic (I believe he writes Duckman as well, so doing two TV adaptations may be helping. Then again, how could writing for something as awful as Duckman be good?) and I look forward to much better things from him in future.

Of the artwork, I can only say I want to see better, real soon now. Although I can handle Scully and Mulder looking almost nothing like they do on TV (though why it bugs me reading B5, I don't know) the artwork overall is static and lifeless, and leads me to believe that all the good things I've heard about Charles Adlard were rumours put about by his mother.

*The X-Files* is a very well written comic that deserves to be read, despite the artwork. Never condescending as other comics can be, it manages to keep the spirit of the TV series, and that's enough to make it an essential read for me.

Finally, we have *Magic: The Gathering — The Shadow Mage*. The first thing that springs to the mind of anyone who's played the game is 'how do you make a

comic out of that?' Well, unbeliever, it's been done. And not only in comics; a series of novels and short stories have already started. These all have something in common; absolutely no background whatsoever. This, as it turns out, is a bonus, as all the writer has to do is to keep within the framework of the duel and he's free to make up whatever he likes. Wizards of the Coast obviously maintain power of veto over anything they don't like.

Of the three comics I've mentioned, *The Shadow Mage* is the most integrated into a whole. It's got a good story, it's got good artwork, and it's got great colour. It even came with a free Magic card (ok, so it was only a fireball. What do you want, another Lord of the Pit?). All this, and a dude from Wizards of the Coast spending a page telling you what cards were used in the battles in the comic? If only £2.25 were as easy to spend when I were a sprog.

Actually, what *The Shadow Mage* does is tell a simple, straightforward fantasy story. It's set on Dominaria, a land of Dominia, and features magic a la the card game. Apart from that, it's a simple fantasy story. And it's one that's told darn well. Expect nothing whatsoever by way of originality, but for a good story, well-told and beautifully complemented by excellently coloured artwork, this is one to watch. I understand that the writer, Jeff Gomez, is working on the other Magic: *The Gathering* comics as well; I look forward to seeing what he does with the new Ice Age series coming out in a couple of weeks. If it's as entertaining as this, it'll be worth a read.

## Video Review

*Mesa of Lost Women, Killer B's, 70 min*

*Cat-Woman of the Moon, Killer B's, 70 min*

*The Brain from Planet Arous, Killer B's, 70 min*

There are many people out there — most, probably — who consider the phrase ‘Shite B-movie’ to be a tautology of the highest order. People who consider all black and white movies with unconvincing monsters and terrible dialogue to be bad, just because they're unable to find anything good about them. Well, to all those doubters, I say "Tish! Pshaw!" Get back to watching *Howard's End* again, and leave me to my B-Movies. Whatever the hour, one shouldn't miss the opportunity of watching a gorilla in a diving helmet running up a mountain.

Which is why I'm forever grateful to those nice people at First Class Films for bringing out three outstanding movies on video. Well, ok, not outstanding. Below average, let us say. For two of the three.

First off, *The Brain from Planet Arous*. Two nuclear scientists, sitting out in the desert, realise that some strange radiation is coming from a distant mountain. Packing up their geiger counter and their hair dryer, they wend their way up the mountain only to meet... the Brain from Planet Arous! One scientist is killed, and the

other possessed by the evil, floating brain with eyes. You know the type. Soon, the evil brain (called Gor, fact fans) begins his plan to take over the Earth. Can anyone stop him? Why, maybe. There's Vol, a good brain from planet Arous, who takes over (are you following me here?) the scientist's girlfriend's dog, so he can follow Gor around until such time as Gor can be killed (handily, he has to rest in his normal state once every twenty-four hours).

I was just thinking as I watched this film that it had quite a decent script, when I heard something I thought I'd never hear. This film actually contains the line "Don't you worry your pretty little head about that." I thought that was a rumour! I was sure it was communist propoganda, set out to make American film makers look like jerks. But it exists. This is the film.

*The Brain from Planet Arous* is a very silly movie. If you're into that sort of thing, this is more relaxed than most, but still contains enough blatant scientific errors to keep the most relaxed person's fingers and toes all occupied. I must say I

enjoyed this movie a lot.

As did I enjoy *Cat-Woman of the Moon*. Although much sillier than *Brain...*, it does contain a number of redeeming features, of which my favourite is the fact that the film is actually called *Rocket to the Moon*. Small letters underneath let us know that its original title was *Cat-Woman of the Moon*, but I must confess that the new title does nothing for me. Give me Cat-Women or give me death!

The story, such as it is, concerns a manned (and womanned) trip to the moon. When they're nearly there, the navigator (and only woman aboard) decides that she's going to land just inside the daylight terminator, and when she does so, the crew begin to suspect that she's under the influence of the dreaded Cat People. Can it be true? There's only one way to find out; watch the movie. You won't regret it. I can't guarantee you'll be thrilled, but this is definitely a movie with a very high silliness quotient.

Finally, we have *Mesa of Lost Women*. There's no other way to describe it; this movie is unremitting shite. In fact, it's not so much a bad movie as a monument to all bad movies. It does absolutely everything wrong. From the disjointed time sequence to the diabolical narrative in a doom-laden voice, from the

irritating guitar music to the appalling script, this is a film that gets nothing right.

A fact that makes it almost compulsive watching.

The story concerns (of course) a mad scientist, who has secluded himself in the desert so that he can carry out his dread experiments. What, you may be wondering, is he experimenting on? Well, my friends, ask yourself not *what* he's experimenting on... but on *whom*? For the evil scientist is experimenting on beautiful young women, splicing their genes with those of trantulas, to produce a horror the likes of which the world has never seen! The mad scientist (who has a hunch-backed assistant; hands up those in the back who doubted) is all set to take over the world when... but why should I spoil the good bit? Actually, I couldn't find the good bit. This movie, I'll say it again, went beyond shite, disrupted the space-time continuum and came out the other side. Somewhere on the other side of the galaxy, there's a bunch of cavemen sitting around worshipping this film. In three million years, they're all going to grow up, make movies like this and export them to the rest of the universe. At least I'll be dead when they get here.

**Robert, The Reviewer Who Walks Like a Man**

Sometimes we read 'em, sometimes we don't. **Michael Carroll** now delves into the soft underbelly of today's literary society, and reveals the dark truth about...

## Book Titles

My quest for wonderfully different titles of novels and short stories is picking up speed. It began a couple of years ago when Jack Womack published *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, a truly wonderful title, and every time I see it I say to myself "I wish I'd thought of that."

The sf, fantasy and horror genres provide us with many superb titles, but take some of them out of context and they can get downright weird. *A Stainless Steel Rat is Born* makes sense only if you're familiar with Harry Harrison's character. Likewise, *So Long and Thanks for all the Fish* doesn't mean much to people who don't read Douglas Adams.

Then there are the humorous titles. Tom Holt's *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* is a nice play on a couple of familiar phrases, as is Lionel Fenn's *The Once and Future Thing*. In fact, Fenn is up there with the best of them, with *Time: The Semi-Final Frontier* and *The Mark of the Moderately Vicious Vampire*. Robert Rankin spares no syllables with *The Greatest Show Off Earth* and *The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived*. In the long-titles category, Bill Watterson scores highly with *Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons*, as does David Langford, with *The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two* (which, by the way, is not the full title).

I'm particularly fond of Terry Pratchett's *The Dark Side of the Sun*, William Tenn's *Of Men and Monsters*, Tanith Lee's *Tales of the Sisters Grimmer*, Robert Rankin's *They came and Ate Us* and *The Suburban Book of the Dead*, Alan Moore and Alan Davis' *D.R. & Quinch's Totally Awesome Guide to Life*, Douglas Adams' *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, and Ray Bradbury's *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. The nicely-titled collection *There Won't Be War*, edited by Harry Harrison and Bruce McAllister, features Ratislav Durman's "The Long-Awaited Appearance of the Real Black Box". One of my favourites from outside the fantasy genre is Dylan Thomas' *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. A great title which never made it is Harrison's *QEII DOA*, which appeared under the very boring name of *The QEII is Missing*.

Unfortunately, fantasy movies always seem to have rather dull names, like

*Stargate*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (oh, how imaginative), *Time Cop* and *Francis Ford Coppola's Bram Stoker's Dracula* (they really should have just called it something catchy like ... oh, I don't know ... how about *Dracula*?) but occasionally there will surface a winner like *Aliens*, which isn't such a great title in itself, but it's perfectly suitable as a sequel to *Alien*, which is a boring name. However, Ridley Scott was on a winner with *Legend*. How appropriate can you get?

So what I'm looking for here is really clever sf, fantasy and horror titles. Send them in to the ISFA, and maybe we'll publish a list of the best. They don't have to be particularly long titles, they just have to be brilliant. And real, of course. No making them up. And we don't want anyone sending in titles they consider to be brain-numbingly boring, because for a start there are far too many of them, and for a finish someone might suggest *Moonlight*. Anyway, if I can collect about fifty-thousand excellent titles, I'll publish them in a book called *Bugger Me Backwards with a Wire Brush*.

However, my own award for the best title ever goes to that fine writer, Christopher Fowler, for a story in his collection *Sharper Knives*: "The Vintage-Car Table-Mat Collection of the Living Dead."

---

---

## net.surfers' bit

See? I told you I'd get it into this issue somewhere; sorry about their absence last month. Basically, this is a list of a few addresses of web sites and newsgroups on the net that the First Contact team of experts feels may be of interest to SF fans. Obviously, there are absolutely zillions of sites out there that are worth investigating -- and millions more that aren't -- but in the First Contact laboratory these are the ones that people enjoyed. Check 'em out.

[http://akebono.stanford.edu/yahoo/Entertainment/Paranormal\\_Phenomena/](http://akebono.stanford.edu/yahoo/Entertainment/Paranormal_Phenomena/)

<http://lilly.ping.de/-sven/doom.html>

<http://www.bookwire.com/> (online book shop)

<http://www.hyperion.com/lurk/countries/uk/eplist.html> (Babylon 5)

<http://www.em.cf.ac.uk/Movies/> (Movie database)

<http://www.mic.dundee.ac.uk/~l.f.html> (Fortean Times)

<ftp://fp.erl.com/users/ro/lensman/sflinks.html>

**Newsgroups**

alt.tv.x-files

rec.arts.sf.written



# Read Me

Once again, it's time for one of our merry Top Ten lists. This month, let's hear it for Pádraig Ó Méalóid, manager of Dandelion Books, which I've been assured (by Pádraig) has the largest selection of second-hand science fiction books in the country. Thanks for the list, Pádraig, and thanks for not putting numbers on them, and writing one to a page. You really know how to make my job easy. First Contact is proud to present, in an order arbitrarily picked by the editor, the books.

## 1. *Ivory*, by Mike Resnick

The last Masai warrior must find the long-lost tusks of the Sacred Elephant of the Masai, and hires a researcher to help him. Like a lot of Resnick's books, *Ivory* is really a number of related short stories with a framing device, and the researcher's findings form the various individual pieces. Resnick is a consummately professional writer, yet there are at least twenty of his books unavailable over here. Answers on a postcard to the usual address.

## 2. *Clans of the Alphan Moon*, by Philip K. Dick

A planet-wide psychiatric hospital has been deserted by the staff when the Intergalactic War Front comes too close. Several generations later, the various loonies have aligned themselves into different groups, so you have the paranoids, the obsessive-compulsives, the schizophrenics and so on. I learned more about abnormal psychology from this book than you would from a shelf of texts. And did I mention a Ganymedian slime-mold called Lord Running Clam? My

favourite Dick book [*oh, stop that — RDE*].

## 3. *Hyperion*, by Dan Simmons

This is a stunning book. It is lyrically written, gorgeously paced and plotted out to perfection. For once I won't synopsis, but will only say that you have my word as a second-hand book seller that this is a truly wonderful, unique book. Do yourself a favour. You'll thank me afterwards.

## 4. *The Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

To say that *The Watchmen* is a graphic novel is a bit like saying the Taj Mahal is a building. The plotting is so intricate and the artwork so beautifully detailed that, after more than ten readings, I'm still finding things I missed before. This is the work that blew the whole comics industry wide open. The most important graphic novel ever published.

## 5. *Popes and Phantoms*, by John Whitbourne

Admiral Slovo becomes involved with the Vehme, a mysterious secret society,

and finds himself involved with the Borgias, amongst many others. Inevitably, he ends up saving the world. This is a weird and wonderful book, and I'm eagerly awaiting anything else by him.

**6. Bridge of Birds, &c, by Barry Hughart**

Master Li and Number Ten Ox solve mystical mysteries in Ancient China. Gorgeously lyrical madcap mayhem, not to mention heavy drinking.

"Delightful!" said my friend Larry, and quite right too. Why aren't there more books by this man?

**7. The Anubis Gates, by Tim Powers**  
Brendan Doyle finds himself abandoned in the past. Taken in by the 'Thieves' Guild, he rapidly becomes embroiled in events far too complex (not to mention weird) to synopsis here. Time travel, poets and a nasty little chap called Dog-face Joe. My favourite book.

**8. The Brentford Triangle, by Robert Rankin**

Pooley and Omally save the world from the forces of darkness between pints of large at the Flying Swan and the odd game of allotment golf. The fate of the world hangs on a darts match. This is Robert Rankin's finest hour. Buy this book (and, while you're at it, why not join Sproutlo[snip]. *I'll do the plugging around here—RDE]*

**9. Various shorties, by lots of people**  
This is cheating a little. Anyone who knows me knows I that I have a soft

spot in my heart for short stories. So... here are my five favourite short story writers.

1. Frederic Brown
2. Bob Shaw
3. Larry Niven
4. Robert Sheckley
5. Joe Haldeman

And my two favourite short stories.

1. The Ugly Chickens, by Howard Waldrop. All you ever wanted to know about dodos.
2. Sandkings, by George R.R. Martin. Nasty alien thingies. And still makes my skin crawl every time I read it.

**10. This isn't a book either, Ó Méalóid**

And here's a brief list of other books I've enjoyed recently

Orphan of Creation, by Roger McBride Allen

The Postman, by David Brin

The Song of Phaid the Gambler, by Mick Farren

The Sheep Look Up, by John Brunner

The Lyonesse Trilogy, by Jack Vance

Mythago Wood, by Robert Holdstock

Only Forward, by Michael Marshall Smith

Aurian, by Maggie Furey

Bimbos of the Death Sun, by Sharyn McCrumb

Anno Dracula, by Kim Newman

So there you have it. A little horror, a little science fiction and, which surprised the fuck out of me, quite a lot of fantasy. Can I have that pint now, Robert? *[no. RDE]*

## Book Reviews

*Magic : The Gathering — Whispering Woods*, Clayton Emery, Harper Prism, £4.99, pb

You've bought the cards, and the expansion packs and the extra expansion packs and the expansion expansion packs, plus the additional cards... so it was inevitable that the books should appear (what about the t-shirts, the trainers, the movies and the burgers — mana burgers; no toppings, just expansions).

Having just written two stories for the forthcoming *Magic : The Short Story Collections*, I approached *Whispering Woods* with something of a professional interest. I had read — and enjoyed — Clayton Emery's *Tales of Robin Hood* (Baen Books), so I was surprised and rather disappointed that *Whispering Woods* turns out to be nothing more than a rather ordinary, generic fantasy. Perhaps I was expecting something more; the game has been such a phenomenon, but the game works because of the imagination and involvement of the players. I found it difficult to become involved in this novel.

*Whispering Woods* is the story of Gull, the Wizard's Assistant (what we used to call a Sorcerer's Apprentice), who falls in with Towser (the Wizard). There are many and sundry adventures, most of them thrown in so that individual cards can be mentioned, and there is a subplot where Greensleeves, Gull's sister, recovers her lost wits. The novel is well-written and pacy, and the characters,

especially those of Gull and Greensleeves, are well drawn, though the rest of the characters are a little two-dimensional, and the outcome is predictable.

In its favour, *Whispering Woods* offers the readers the opportunity to acquire one free unique card — this is splashed very prominently on the cover — but be aware that the offer is only available in the USA.

Michael Scott.

*The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived*, Robert Rankin, Doubleday, £15.99, hb, pp267

With his eleventh book, Robert Rankin confirms that the trilogy is the natural order of the universe by bringing to a conclusion the third volume in the travels of Cornelius and Tuppe. This time, however, they are helped on their adventures by a young dead chap named Norman, who sadly ended up in the afterlife with a full-time job, working for the Universal Reincarnation Company. Their task? To stop an evil, diabolical plan, of course. The nature of the plan is, basically to create lots of gold out of sea water. I've been assured by several footnotes that the process is sound, and that it is indeed a nefarious scheme. "What," you say. "Just converting seawater to gold? Tish and pshaw!" Aha, replieth I. But supposing you kill off ninety-percent of all life, and all the dead people at the same time? As you can see, it becomes a scheme of monstrous

proportions. So dread is the scheme, in fact, that only one man would dare attempt to pull it off. The most amazing man who ever lived; Hugo Rune.

If you've read the previous two volumes in this series, you'll know what to expect. There's the running joke, that half the population finds incredibly funny and the other half gets pissed off by. There's the inevitable, shall we say, iconoclastic aspect; did you know that there's proof that God messed up? That proof is bollocks. Not in the sense of being inaccurate; the proof actually *is* bollocks.

Then, of course, there's the style of writing that makes Rankin unique today. Messing with words and phrases in ways that would have Joyce hopping for joy, making liberal use (I should hope) of some manner of thesaurus to delight us with sesquipedalian sauce, and other such stuff that makes a Robert Rankin book a joy to behold.

It gets a bit tiring writing reviews of Rankin books, you know. The review inevitably ends with a recommendation to buy not only this book, but all other books in all other series. That's how I'm going to end this one, you know. Wait and see.

**Robert Elliott**

*Magic : The Gathering -- Arena, William Forschen, HarperPrism, £4.99, pb, pp297*

William Forschen is one of the masters of gung-ho space opera; what's he doing writing a fantasy novel? I suppose that seeing as he wrote (or was it co-wrote? I can't remember) one of the Wing Commander books, someone figured he

was qualified to write a book based on a game. And, curiously enough, he is.

*Arena* is the story of Garth, a one-eyed mage who's in town for the Festival, when all the mightiest wizards meet, and challenge each other to duels. It's the results of these duels that decides who gets the best contracts for the year, and the House of the mightiest wizard can look forward to riches indeed.

Into all this comes our Garth, Houseless as he is. This means that he's forbidden to practice magic in the city for the duration of the festival, a fact that stops him not at all. In fact, he seems quite determined to get into trouble, something he manages quite well and quite often.

Basically, *Arena* is one big list of fights, wherein our author tries to get through as many Magic cards as possible. Forschen is an accomplished storyteller, and he does his job well, but one constantly gets the feeling that this could have been a truly superior game-based book. The very nature of the game of Magic means that there's very little background, and Forschen wasted the opportunity by simply having his protagonist engage in bigger and bigger battles. Given the constraints of other game-based worlds (Krynn springs readily to the skull) to waste such a blank tapestry is quite criminal. Well, not as criminal as writing a *Dragonlance* book, but you know what I mean.

*Arena* is a quick, simple read. It's a well told story, but it could have been much better.

**Robert Elliott**