

# First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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## *Octocon Getting Bigger*

It seems that barely a week goes by without one Octocon person or another moseying up to me and saying "so, did you hear who just confirmed?" I must say I'm getting a trifle peeved; if they only added one guest a month, it'd be a lot easier on my fingers. But instead of a guest of the month, I've got to go through loads of 'em. Ah well.

But enough of this. Who are these guests? Well, amongst the attendees will be such diverse people as Michael Marshall Smith, Peter F. Hamilton and Andrew Porter.

**Michael Marshall Smith** is more of a short storyist than a novelist, but if you haven't read *Only Forward*, you've missed a really cool debut novel. And if you can find any of Pan's Dark Voices horror collections, you can read a couple of his award-winning shorties.

**Peter F. Hamilton**, as all are doubtless aware, is the author of a number of techno-thrillers, including the incredibly nifty *The Nanoflower*, a tome that's at the top on the lists of nearly everyone here at chateau First Contact.

**Andrew Porter** is, of course, the editor of *Science Fiction Chronicle*. Compared by many to *Locus*, *SFC* is a lot nicer to those of us on this side of the Atlantic, as *Locus* can be a trifle parochial. *SFC* is also the magazine that broke *Locus*' zillion-year run of Hugos when it won the Best Semi-Prozine, a feat it has since repeated, proving it wasn't a fluke.

## *Preacher Signing in Dublin*

Can it be true? Can Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, the creators of the coolest comic to appear since the dawn of the second age of mankind, be coming to Dublin for a signing? Worry not, for 'tis true. Get ready to dig out that copy of #1 you've been keeping in a vault, and wend your way to *Forbidden Planet*, Dawson Street on 7th June for a totally nifty signing. You'll be able to ask them where they get their ideas from! You can ask them if they sign body parts! You can ask Garth why he didn't give a credit to PFJ for the joke he nicked!

*Preacher* has, in a mere fourteen issues, become the coolest and most eminently readable comic on the market. It's got a 'Mature Readers' label to encourage the kiddies, and although it's about a guy with super powers, it's not a superhero comic. All I can suggest is that you rush to the comic store of your choice and pick up *Gone to Texas*, a collection of the first story arc. Of course, if you do that you won't be able to get the limited edition poster that's rumoured to be given to anyone who buys the book on the day of the signing, but what the heck, Live a little.

## *In this month's First Contact...*

Has The X-Files become a victim of its own success? (page 9)

Exactly how bad is Space : Above and Beyond? (page 4)

1996 Hugo Nominations announced (page 3)

## Howdy

You've noticed, haven't you? You were sitting there, thinking 'something's different.' And so it is. For those still wondering, the last issue saw a change in size to A4. Why? Quite simply, for the hell of it. I wanted to see what it'd look like, and I confess that I'm quite happy with the results. Your opinions are, as always, welcome.

## Next Month in the ISFA

Gosharoonie, it's been a while since we've had a science talk. Next month, come along and talk to Leo Enright, RTE's science correspondent, talk about the Apollo missions. You all know about Apollo 13, but what about the others? Come along to Coopers's Pub on Abbey Street (beside Liffey Street) on Tuesday, 4<sup>th</sup> June at 8:00.

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### The Irish Science Fiction Association

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First Contact is edited by Robert, Man of Destiny (rde@irelands-web.ie) on a Dell 486 (sort of) using Word for Windows 7.0, while he quaffs Blue Mountain coffee in an X-Files Mug, munching on the odd Jacob's Jaffa Cake, and sipping the occasional Jolt. The music is played on a Mitsumi CD-ROM (single speed), currently The Divine Comedy's Casanova, the third and best album so far from Neil. The Mitsubishi video is set to record American Gothic on Sunday and Animaniacs on Monday. The magazine was printed on a HP Laserjet 4L. I hope. I mean, I haven't printed yet or anything. If you read this, it's a good sign.

## Contents

3 : **News** or stuff that happened in the last month. Not everything, you understand. There'll be a comprehensive news section next month: it's been looking a little sparse lately.

4 : **Television** or What Robert really hated this week. Can there be any doubt that *Space : Above and Beyond* sucks? Actually, it begins with the same word as *Space Precinct*. Coincidence? I think not.

5 : **Letters** or Thank You Martin. Two letters: gosh. You'll spoil me.

6 : **Cinema** or What Robert hated, part two. I do like stuff occasionally, you know. Have I mentioned how cool Babylon 5 is?

7. **Comics** or What James Bacon reads. Not that he just reads comics, you understand. He's got a few book reviews here as well. God bless 'im.

9. **CD-ROM review** or Adam Darcy plays with his computer.

9.5 **Opinion** or Michael O'Connor launches the first salvo in the X-Files backlash. Does it suck? You decide.

10. **Graphic Novels** or What would First Contact be without Bob Neilson's reviews?

12. **Book reviews** or not book reviews: that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the library to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism, or to take arms against the sea of reviews and, by opposing, end them.

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## News

### **McAuley wins Clarke Award**

The 10th Arthur C. Clarke Award has been won by Paul J. McAuley for *Fairyland*. It was a very tight decision, with the second place going to Ken MacLeod for his debut novel, *The Star Fraction*. It seems that McAuley has been pissing off some fantasy fans who bought *Fairyland* under the impression that it was a fantasy novel. If only they'd learned to look at the picture on the cover or – dare I suggest it – read the blurb?

### **Ellison in Quadruple Bypass Operation**

Harlan Ellison has had to cancel his scheduled appearance at Albacon because of a quadruple bypass, in which 27.5 inches of artery were taken from his left leg to perform the operation. Despite his wishes that no flowers be sent his house, it seems, smells "like an Algerian whorehouse" because of well-wishers' floral donations. He's no recovering at home.

There was some worry that as Ellison was such a high-profile guest, Albacon '96 might have to be cancelled. The committee, however, seem to have decided to go ahead with emergency back-up Terry Pratchett. Anyone who joined on the basis of Ellison's attendance has been promised a full refund.

### **Hugo Nominations Announced**

L.A. Con, the 1996 Worldcon, have announced the nominations for this year's Hugo Awards. Space prevents us from printing all the nominations, but they're probably available from [rec.arts.sf.announce](mailto:rec.arts.sf.announce); they're definitely available from [rde@irelands-web.ie](mailto:rde@irelands-web.ie)

### **Best Novel**

*The Time Ships*, by **Stephen Baxter**

*Brightness Reef*, by **David Brin**

*The Terminal Experiment*, by **Robert J. Sawyer**

*The Diamond Age*, by **Neal Stephenson**

*Remake*, by **Connie Willis**

### **Best Dramatic Presentation**

*Apollo 13* (Universal) Brian Grazer, producer; Ron Howard, director; William Broyles Jr. and Al Reinert, screenplay

"The Coming of Shadows" (*Babylon 5*) (Warner Brothers) J. Michael Straczynski, Douglas Netter, John Copeland, producers; J. Michael Straczynski, screenplay; Janet Greek, director

"The Visitor" (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*) (Paramount Television) Rick Berman and Ira Steven Behr, executive producers; Michael Taylor, screenplay; David Livingston, director

*Toy Story* (Buena Vista) Ralph Guggenheim and Bonnie Arnold, producers; John Lasseter, director; Joss Whedon, Andrew Stanton, Joel Cohen, and Alec Sokolow, screenplay

*12 Monkeys* (Universal) Charles Roven, producer; Terry Gilliam, director; David and Janet Peoples, screenplay

### **John W. Campbell Award**

For Best New Science Fiction Writer, sponsored by Dell Magazines

Michael A. Burstein (1st year of eligibility)

David Feintuch (2nd year of eligibility)

Felicity Savage (2nd year of eligibility)

Sharon Shinn (1st year of eligibility)

Tricia Sullivan (1st year of eligibility)

This year sees an astonishingly high quality represented in the 'Dramatic Presentation' category; it's one in which picking a winner would be incredibly difficult, but I'm tempted to go for *Babylon 5* just on general principles. However, my money's on *B5* or *Apollo 13*. A second episode of *B5*, by the way, received enough nominations to qualify, but the producers withdrew "The Fall of Night" in favour of "The Coming of Shadows."

If David Brin doesn't win the Best Novel award for *Brightness Reef*, there ain't no justice, and the smart money (i.e. mine) is going on Tricia Sullivan for the Campbell.

### **B5 – The Wrap Party**

Barely half way through the run, and already a convention is planned to celebrate its triumphant conclusion in 1998. Guests confirmed so far include Straczynski, Ellison and oodles of others, and it promises to be a blast. For more info, you might check out <http://www.bilpin.co.uk/TheWrapParty> or e-mail [B5committee@bilpin.co.uk](mailto:B5committee@bilpin.co.uk)

## Space : Above and Beyond

"From the producers of *The X-Files*." What a hollow phrase that is now. Do you remember those heady days of 1995, when we were promised a new show by Wong and Morgan? One that would match *The X-Files* for sheer watchability, *Babylon 5* for sheer action and *Star Trek : Voyager* for sheer length? When we would reach the next level of television, with *The Show to Beat All Shows*? And we got *Space : Above and Beyond*.

It was a bad sign, I suppose, when they couldn't even agree on a name for the program. Originally called simply *Space*, then *Above and Beyond*, its final title eventually amalgamated the two. So what did we get? The watchability of *Space Precinct*, the action of *Nationwide* and, let's be fair, the sheer length of *Star Trek : Voyager*.

The problem with this program can be summed up in one word, but I'm not going to do that as it'd make for a review almost as boring as the program it purports to comment on. Instead, I'm afraid you'll have to endure several more paragraphs of Your Humble Servant itemising the myriad problems of what could have been a cool show.

The premise behind the show is simple: Earth, having decided that they have peace throughout the galaxy, sets out to colonise a number of worlds. All this is disrupted when the Cylons a mysterious alien race attacks an outpost on, if I remember aright, Epsilon Eridani (and not a Babylon station in sight. They're like cops and busses, you know) and wipes out the entire colony. It then proceeds to blast the shit out of Earth's top fighter squadron, leaving only a bunch of untrained Space Marines to kick alien bottom. Which, of course, they do. Sorry to ruin the pilot for you like that.

There are two main problems with this show: the action bits and the no-action bits. In the action bits, actors fire unnecessarily huge and complicated guns at dark shadows, and roll in the dirt when nearly hit by laser fire from the dark shadow of the first part. Who shoots at whom? Who cares? Some of the explosions are nice, though.

But explosions in space do not a science fiction programme make. "Give us characterisation," you say. "We don't want non-stop action, we want real characters."

Normally I'd agree, but when we're given this motley crew, combined with lacklustre writing and deeply boring expositions on personal dilemmas, we wish they'd hired fewer actors and more video toasters. Unfortunately, the special effects budget doesn't stretch to more than about five minutes of fight sequences, so the rest of the time we're faced with padding. Imagine, if you will, a scene in *Babylon 5* where Garibaldi picks his nose. Pick, roll, flick, it's over in two seconds. Not so in *S:AaB* (wow! I've just realised who's sponsoring this program!). The gutsy female, smarting over the loss of her family to AIs, jams an index finger up the left nostril. With haunting music in the background, she slowly extracts the booger, and examines it for about five minutes. We know the impending flick is somehow symbolic of her separation from her dead family. She goes out of focus, and we see the haunted figure of the In-vitro behind her. He clenches a fist, knowing that as a "Tank" who has sinuses that never clog, he can never know the pleasure of a good dig. He walks over to the porthole of his ship, and looks out onto a distant star. The commander walks up behind him, silently, and places a hand on his shoulder. "We're marines, son. We don't need to pick our noses." The commander then goes off to give another two-line homily to another agonising marine. I swear, it's worse than reading *The X-Men*.

In a tragic triumph of optimism over experience, I'll continue to watch *S:AaB*. Maybe they'll realise that if a ship is two parsecs away, you won't be able to see it out the window. Maybe they'll find a decent writer. Maybe they'll be able to write about people without resorting to appalling clichés. "You know, I'm off home to see my wife for the first time since this war started." "Fuck, he just got killed by a sniper!"

It's possible that I'm being a bit too harsh. But verily, I say that in order to write this review, I decided to watch the pilot a second time for reference. I got five minutes into it before I realised that there was no way I would be able to subject myself to seeing any episode more than once. Lord knows, even once is several times too many.

**Robert Elliott**

## Letters

Dear Robert,

I thought the last newsletter was rather good. In particular the A4 format appealed to me.

Now, before people start shouting about quality, appearance, promoting the ISFA, etc., I would like to get my dig in.

The A4 version has a lot going for it; it's probably easier to collate, am I right? [*it's a pain in the arse in any format - RDE*] It was more spacious, probably an optical illusion, it looks better on the Bus [*so that's where I left it*], it was bulkier and it felt heavier, leading me to believe it was better value for money.

I used to think A5 was the only way to do zines, until extremely professional and popular British zines appeared on my doorstep in the A4 format. There may be a few pence difference in the postage but it's worth it. Would the committee continue to support an A4 version, with more pages; is it economically viable? I think it is. The zine also appears to have sold well in the usual places, not getting lost so easily.

As you probably won't have any other feedback as usual, my voice will be the majority opinion expressed and therefore a positive one, will ye be as positive?

The contents were very good except for Martin Brady's spa letter, I was surprised. I don't think it would make any difference if there was a fiction mag. There hasn't been one from the ISFA for so long, I doubt it matters any more.

On a more positive note, I must say the last three meetings have been highly entertaining and jolly good fun, the first, of a non-specific nature was very spontaneous and it was good to shout about whatever we'd like to see, regardless of whether it happens. Gill Alderman was unable to make the second meeting "Female Authors or Something," but Maggie, Maura and Helen filled in eloquently and I had a good time. In future, novenas shall be bought for Gill's ill health to prevent her attending. [*oh, stop that. Read one of her books.*]

And although Michael "hard man" Scott didn't turn up either, the chaotic "Top Ten Things in SF" was extremely enjoyable, if rather rowdy.

I do believe Robert Neilson is ultimately responsible for these meetings, with his ability to keep control, yet not being too formal and knowing how to have fun. He's a great meeting coordinator.

I think that the more that goes on at a meeting, the more captivated the audience. It also means that the whole meeting isn't a loss if no-one tells the guest speaker to come along. I also enjoy John Kenny's quiz for some perverse reason.

On a totally different tangent, I must thank John Kenny for putting Titus Groan, Gormenghast and Titus Alone by Mervyn Peake into his Top Ten books, as I didn't know there was a Steerpike

character in them. I must also thank all the people who voted with great vigor for those books to be on the Top Ten SF books at the last ISFA meeting. The names have been noted.

All in all, there may not be many people in the ISFA, but at least some - me, anyway - are having fun. Keep up the good work.

Yours,  
James Bacon.

Ps. I'd appreciate straight answers to questions: if you can't won't answer them, Robert, ring a committee member.

*You know, if the end of the world were approaching, while the rest of us were preparing or souls for some manner of afterlife, I suspect James Bacon would avail of his last minutes in a frantic attempt to find out who wrote the Steerpike column. Ah well. Maybe he'll find out some day.*

*Regarding the A4 size, no-one on the committee has expressed any problems with the new size; it was done as an experiment, but I wasn't gainsaid when I mentioned a desire to keep it at that size. RDE.*

Dear Editor,

In the spirit of 'openness and transparency' espoused by Martin Brady in his letter in the March/April First Contact, would he please clarify a number of comments as they were particularly obtuse and puzzling.

The bit about the ISFA being the sum of its parts, amputation, feedback, total agreement and Paradise lost. If you are talking about an ISFA magazine, say so and expand on your points. I would be interested in a frank, open and transparent discussion on the issue.

'Erosion of known ISFA ego zones.' As someone who has only been to a few meetings in the last eighteen months I'm surprised that you even know anybody in the ISFA let alone the state of their ego zones (*zones?*).

And finally, saying that you will eventually vote ISFA if all these things are dealt with is not very helpful. As you have probably heard many times, the ISFA is what its members put into it. If you join, at least we come a little closer to perhaps being able to produce a magazine some day. If you join, at least you get to have the opportunity to get involved in the newsletter or anything else you might care to mention. But I have always found that the ones who shout the loudest are the ones who are least prepared to do anything (except for James Bacon, that is).

Yours sincerely,  
John Kenny

## Cinema

*The Lawnmower Man 2*, directed by... aw, who the hell cares?

It's not often one can go to the cinema and watch a film that defies all expectations. One that surpasses all but the wildest and most fanciful of speculations, that leaves one coming out of the cinema swearing that they done seen about everything.

Such a film is *The Lawnmower Man 2*. It manages something that the world would have sworn impossible: it's even worse than *The Lawnmower Man 1*.

Where to start? Well, the character's name is a good place. You remember Job, named after the biblical guy? Mister Drug Pusher has obviously been around, because Job now has an E: obviously our American chums couldn't handle the idea of 'Job' rhyming with anything other than 'Knob.'

At the start of the film, Jobe has no legs and is hooked into cyberspace, where he gets a kid to summon help in the form of some guy who created a fancy chip that looks for all the world like a tetrahedral version of Pinhead's cube. After a bit of Rambo-esque "I want tranquility here: my fight is over" he obviously joins the fray, and soon is involved with a bunch of – I kid you not – kids in an attempt to stop Jobe's bid for world domination.

Did that last paragraph make sense? I apologise if it didn't, but now you know how I feel after watching this execrable piece of... oops, there was nearly a pleonasm there. Suffice it to say that this is not a film to watch.

But where to start? Well, this film takes place, ostensibly, in cyberspace. Now cyberspace, as everyone who doesn't write movies knows, is a virtual realm from which it isn't possible to take over every computer on the planet. It's a simple concept; why to writers have such problems with it? But there's more wrong with this movie than mere bad writing.

Take the explosions, for example. There are lots of them. You may have seen the odd movie where one or two of the booms were, how shall I put it, superfluous. Well, if you add them up, multiply by a sixteen-digit prime number and subtract six, you're left with the approximate number of extraneous explosions in this film, and we're not just talking quantity, here, either. Some of these break several laws of physics, not least among them the Law of Conservation of Energy and the Minimum Taste Quotient Conjecture.

The presence of the kiddies and the lower certificate would lend credence to the hypothesis that this film, like *Robocop*, started out as 18s and eventually opted for the wider audience. What's equally obvious is that the writers, producers and director of this film have no regard whatsoever for its audience, and cheerfully assume that everyone will enjoy this movie as long as it's got a babe, a few kids and a shitload of explosions.

The graphics are pretty nifty, but nowadays they're nothing great. Lets face it: once you've seen the White Star battle the shadows inside the atmosphere of Jupiter, you're not going to be impressed by a few nice buildings.

The most interesting thing about this film is that it stars Ely Pouget as a woman who finds herself in charge of a scientific project that gets out of hand and endangers everyone that moves. Just like she did in *Death Machine*, a straight-to-video movie that's infinitely better than this piece of shit.

**Robert Elliott**

## Comics

### James Bacon

*The Dreaming #1, Vertigo, La Ban & Snejbjerg, £2.25*

The Dreaming are stories set in the Sandman's vast kingdom. There will be no Sandman, but lots of stories set within the Dreaming, with the now well-known characters of the Dreaming. Neil Gaiman is creative consultant to the comic, so the fans will be kept happy.

The first story arc, "The Goldie Factor" is about Goldie, the Golden Gargoyle, who is quite unhappy as her master is Able, and Cain keeps cutting off Abel's head or bashing him.

The story in itself is quite good. Cain and Abel trying to find out more about golden gargoyles in order to find Goldie, go around various places but realise that someone else previously had an interest in the subject. There is a serious chance that Goldie may be in harm's way, when it is befriended by an armless and legless man.

At the end of the comic, editor Alisa Kwitney tells us that the comic isn't *Sandman*, and that she thinks that the story is great and that there will be stories with Lady Johanna Constantine and Mad Hettie and that Bryan Talbot, Peter Hogan, Steve Parkhouse and Dave Taylor will be doing future story arcs. She said it so it must be true.

To be honest I enjoyed the comic, and on the back page Terry La Ban nails his colours to the mast and says good things, like buy the weird-looking comics at the back of the shop and such.

La Ban is a good writer and Snejbjerg's art is neat, but what I liked in particular was the feeling that La Ban at least won't try to imitate Gaiman, he'll write his own way, and it's a good way too.

*Batman Black & White #1 (of 4), DC, various, £2.70*

At long last, some real stories in a Batman comic. These comics are drawn and written by the cream of comics, all in prestigious black and white in a cheap, normal-format comic.

Each issue will have a number of stories, and #1 has five of them, which are so good it's like "the boys are back in town" and they're kicking ass.

These stories show feeling and thought, and are a very fresh look to the Batman. This

issue, the heroes of the hour are Ted McKeever, Bruce Timm, Joe Kubert, Howard Chaykin and Archie Goodwin with Jose Munoz.

I particularly liked the Chaykin story, no disrespect to any of the others. I enjoyed the way these stories invoked the thought process, giving a jump start to a character who, with five ongoing comics, is rather boring and old.

The artwork is very good, obviously individualistic, with each artist's own unmistakable style only adding to the imaginative stories. Also, the reading and action is faster, it always is with black and white, but here it's like a big event, all the other Batman comics being in colour.

You probably won't find #1 in the shops as I know Sub-City and Forbidden Planet in Dublin are sold out, but issue #2 will be out just as you read this, so go and enjoy a comic that's really good, or wait for the graphic novel, if they publish one.

*Dominion - No More Noise #1, Masamune Shirow, Dark Horse, £2.70*

Dominion star Leona Ozaki is a Sergeant in the Newport police department. She's a squad leader, commander of a ten-person squad comprising four mechanics and three tanks with two-man crews, including herself. This issue sees her chief assigning Uni and Anna - two android criminals - to her squad. Leona hates these two and when they step out of line, she shows them what she's made of.

The storyline here is funny, with lots going on in the background of panels. Shirow's artwork, which is reproduced by Dark Horse in black and white, is very smooth and free-flowing and attractive, as are most of the characters.

The action is fast with lots of sub-plots, but not so many that a newcomer doesn't spot them. Shirow even gives a little explanation here and there for the 'new' reader.

I enjoyed this comic, and I find that the more manga I read, the better it gets.

*Dakkon Blackblade - A Magic Legend, Prosser/Morales/Kaalberg, Acclaim, £4.50 (with a free Dakkon Blackblade card from Chronicles)*

I have never bought a set of Magic cards, but I've played the game frequently, and I find it very enjoyable and interesting with lots to offer on the mind stimulation/racking front.

Unfortunately, Magic comics aren't in the same ballpark; they're not even in the same league, floating somewhere in the Endsleigh division.

I had been led to believe that there were one or two good comics, but Dakkon isn't one. The artwork, although colourful, is boring, with no excitement and as for the story, it appears that the lads shuffled a deck and pulled out twelve cards, and then invented a story using them. And then just to remind the reader that it's a Magic comic, all the card names are highlighted when they're used.

It just doesn't work. The characters are going to great lengths so they can be seen to use words like Transformed Swamp, Citadel, Protect, etc.; in actual fact, if you took the magic cards out of the story, it wouldn't exist. It would be loads of yes and no.

I'm very surprised to see such a dreadful product coming from the Magic people; they're great at games but really crap comics people. If you like Magic, stick to it; if you like comics do likewise, try the other media, but don't mix.

It's like I love nothing better than a good dump. I also really enjoy Chinese meals. But I don't eat...

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*Okay, so strictly speaking it's not a science fiction shop, but you can check out <http://www.baen.com> from here, so I reckon it counts.*

## Cyberia CyberCafé

I must confess, I was somewhat dubious about a CyberCafé in a building called 'The Arthouse,' especially when it's located in Temple Bar. However, gentle reader, for you I will brave anything, and so Friday evening saw me sitting in Cyberia checking out their take on the CyberCafé. And a nice place it is, too.

Upon climbing the stairs, you'll find yourself in a sparsely decorated room -- very much in the Temple Bar idiom -- and surrounded by eight P75s and seven or eight tables that are there to put the 'cafe' in CyberCafé.

It's a relaxed atmosphere, and despite some fairly poxy music (inevitable these days: does no-one listen to The Divine Comedy?) a pleasant hour passed, with a hi-res (1024x768x256), 17-inch monitor guaranteeing that all would be clear and visible. The 64k line was very nice, but hampered somewhat by the fact that my computer was running very slowly; I felt like I was running a 386SX rather than a Pentium. Why was it so slow? I've no idea, and towards the end of my session I was getting a little pissed off with the crappy response times for anything. I also found the lack of word-processing software a trifle annoying, and am sitting here typing this in Wordpad.

Pricewise, I can have no complaints. At four quid an hour, it's cheaper than the average cafe, and with £30 as an annual fee for an e-mail account, it's definitely one of the less expensive.

So what have we got? On the plus side, the high resolution on the computers is very nice after using some shitty, bog-standard VGA on some machines elsewhere. The staff seem to know what they're talking about, and pricewise, it's the most competitive I've seen so far. There's a decent range of network games (but no *Doom!*), and each machine comes with a CD-ROM, which can't be bad.

However, the two machines I tried were both running very slowly, and I was less than ecstatic with the range of software available. And because Cyberia is going through IOL, you'll be unable to access any of the newsgroups that the upstanding folks who run Ireland On-Line deem unsuitable, and you won't be able to post to any of the newsgroups. You'll also find that the virus scanner is out of date, so be careful about what you stick in the A drive. The coffee is also a little on the expensive side, at 90p a cup. It's very nice, but I've a tendency to go through litres of the stuff, so it adds a few quid to the price.

Basically, despite its faults, Cyberia is a fun place to be. If the machines were faster, it'd be totally excellent.

*Cyberia Internet Cafe, Arthouse Multimedia Centre, Temple Lane, Temple Bar, Dublin 2. e-mail [games@cyberia.ie](mailto:games@cyberia.ie), tel. 679-7616. Open 10am to 10pm every day.*

**Robert Elliott**



## CD-ROM REVIEW

### *The Dig*, LucasArts.

*Min. Requirements: 66 MHz 486 PC compatible, 8 Mb RAM, double-speed CD-ROM drive.*

This game has been in the pipeline for over four years, and the hype has built up quite a bit over this time. The cover proclaims the game to be "a deep space adventure by Sean Clark in collaboration with filmmaker Steven Spielberg." According to the manual, Spielberg was going to develop the idea into a film but "costs proved to be too prohibitive." I heard that the original idea was to make it into an episode of Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories*, which would explain why the project was considered too costly, but the cynic in me thinks that wouldn't look as good on the front cover. Either way, Spielberg suggested that LucasArts make an adventure game from the story.

*The Dig* opens with an asteroid approaching on a collision course with the Earth. A shuttle crew is dispatched to deflect it into a different orbit with nuclear charges. The explosion opens up a chamber in the asteroid, which turns out to be a probe from an alien civilisation, and the landing party are promptly whisked off to the alien world of Cocytus. Taking the part of shuttle commander Boston Low (voiced by Terminator 2's Robert Patrick), you are left to explore this apparently desolate planet with your companions - the arrogant scientist, Ludger Brink, and the feisty reporter, Maggie Robbins (who, as usual in these games, engages in verbal jousting with Low to hide the fact that they really fancy each other). The aim is to find a way back home, which may be linked to the reason why the alien civilisation has disappeared. There is actually a half-decent SF story here, and Orson Scott Card contributed some of the dialogue.

If *Rebel Assault II* is an "interactive movie", then I suppose *The Dig* is an interactive cartoon, because the style closely resembles cel-animation (okay, there's a few 3D cut-scenes developed by Industrial Light and Magic thrown in). The playing interface is the familiar point-and-click system developed all those years ago for *Loom*, and used in most LucasArts adventure games, such as *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. The latter bears some resemblance to *The Dig*: not only was it based on a George Lucas Indy story (which has subsequently been dusted off when Harrison Ford agreed to do *Indiana Jones and the Lost Continent*), but both have wisecracking main characters, and the emphasis is on logical puzzles. These can require some lateral thinking, as you try to decipher alien control systems, and if there is a problem it's that sometimes you are left desperately trying every possible combination to try and solve a problem. But if they made it any easier, then LucasArts wouldn't make any money on their helplines and player's guides. I *am* getting cynical. Then again, maybe I'm not, because there is also a *Dig* novelisation, and CD soundtrack, available. Hmm.

The verdict: A classic LucasArts adventure. If you're not familiar with their previous titles, this is an excellent starting-point.

Adam Darcy.

## Opinion

### Michael O'Connor

I am here to bury *The X-Files* not to praise it. What started as an intelligent and somewhat innovative series has now turned into an the ultimate *Star Trek* variant.

Now on its third season, it opened well with the two concluding episodes of the season two cliffhanger. The three episodes told a great story of Mulder's search for the secret behind the UFO cover-up.

It was a costly search for the two agents, both paid a terrible prices for the knowledge they gained.

Knowledge so sensitive the powers that be resorted to murder to preserve it. We were led into the deeper circles of power. We were given a look at the global powers who control the UFO secrets. All in all three great episodes that left us panting for more.

And then? Nothing, zilch. Mulder and Scully go back to their old cases as if nothing happened. The personal tragedies they suffered are put aside with barely a sniffle. The truths they sought to uncover

are still hidden. And no mention has been made of them since.

Episodes 3 through 8 in season three are the worst kind of formula writing on TV. Each week M & S come up against a strange death, they breeze into town, have trouble with the local law enforcement, argue over whether the case has a scientific basis or not and then solve it. More than two stories are direct remakes of previous stories. Two of the stories are very similar to previous ones.

It seems clear that Chris Carter has dropped the elements that made the show a huge hit in favour of maintaining his share of the ratings. I mean, look at the amount of merchandise in the shops for you to buy, there is nearly as much as there is for *Star Trek*. You can buy everything from albums to 'zines now. Watch it if you will but expect none of the greatness the show had in the first season. From now on I am going to give *The X-Files* no more respect that I give to *Star Trek*.

## Big Comics

### Graphic Novels reviewed by Robert Neilson

*Star Trek - Deep Space Nine (Boxtree, Graphic Novel, UK£8.99) Dax's Comet by Jerry Bingham, Tim Eldred and Bruce McCorkindale*

As I often do when reviewing, I find myself asking questions as much as attempting to supply answers. In the case of *Dax's Comet*, I ask myself why. Why regurgitate episodes from a comic book series in graphic novel form? To reach a different and wider audience? Possibly. But surely there should be more than just a commercial justification. Surely there should be an artistic reason. In the case of a limited story cycle like *Elf Quest* or *Miracleman*, the end justifies the means. But also, the resulting graphic novels suit the format, and the story, at the end of the day, could be said to be a novel in graphic form.

Now there are plenty of mundane, average novels - plenty of crap ones also - so the fact that *Dax's Comet* is a pretty so-so episode from the comic series is not reason enough for me to cast doubt on its right to be presented in graphic novel form. What raises the question, in my opinion, is the fact that *Dax's Comet* is only one of two pieces in the big comic - not even substantial enough to stand on its own. So, doing the maths, we have a two part story - *Dax's Comet* - and a one-off tale (according to the back cover) entitled *Lapse*. Assuming that a two-parter means the original would have taken up two issues of the original comic and a stand alone story equates to one issue, we divide the cost of the Graphic Novel by 3 and come up with an equivalent cost of three quid (rounded slightly) per issue for the privilege of getting a card cover and very little else.

If you're an avid DS9 collector and you missed these particular issues of the comic then perhaps there's a justification for shelling out a premium. But the stories are pretty average. *Lapse* is about Odo being given an injection which disagrees with his unique physiology causing him to run amok in DS9. *Dax's Comet* is about a religious cult on Bajor which awaits the return of a comet whose cyclical passing has destroyed past Bajoran civilisations. Can disaster be avoided this time with the help of DS9? What do you think?

Technical Merit: 5.5    Artistic Impression: 5.1  
Originality: 5.0

*The Uncanny X-Men - Executions Books 1 & 2 (Boxtree, Graphic novels, £8.99 each)  
Words - Chris Claremont Pix - Jim Lee*

I guess I was never cut out for reviewing Graphic Novels. Yet again I find myself confused. What the hell is going on? The cover of *Executions*, Book One, has a picture which features one X-Man and two other super heroes. The tag line proclaims Wolverine- Captain America- Black Widow-together again -- for the FIRST TIME! (?)

Leaving aside the paradox of pairing the words/phrases together again and first time, this little tag line raises an interesting point for all anal retentive anorak. X Men fans. Possibly you all know the answer, but I'll pose it anyway (answers on the back of a five pound note to *First Contact*). If Wolverine and Captain America are ® - you know the silly little symbol that litters the front covers of Marvel titles these days - how come Black Widow is ™?

Anyway, back to the real world. My reason for mentioning the cover art at all is to pose yet another question. Why, in a graphic novel which comprises eight issues of a comic (or at least eight episodes from the comic series), do the publishers choose to feature two heroes who feature in only the very first portion. Now, this is a two-part question and the second part goes something like: Why is part (chapter?)one of this Graphic Novel considered to be part of said novel at all? It features a battle with Wolverine, Captain America and Black Widow on one side and The Hand on the other. The battle takes place during the summer of 1941.

The action then moves to a contemporary time line with settings in Australia, a galaxy far far away and the savage land (should that be capitalised? should it be ™ or ®?) and protagonists which would appear to feature every fucking mutant in creation. And then some. As an occasional comics reader and X-Men reader (and viewer) I thought it should be a simple matter to follow a plot line. It's all down there on the page after all, isn't it? Well, no. It's not. There's a lot of back story to this plot which just could not be explained and frankly, if you don't know it, don't bother.

Really, the plot line is summed up best by paraphrasing (slightly) the back cover blurb on volume two. *The X-Men have teamed up with the Starjammers in a battle royale*

against Deathbird and the Imperial Fleet (of the Shi'ar Empire) What they don't know is that masterminding the conflict and heading the opposition is none other than Professor Charles Xavier - The X-Men's long-time mentor. What is happening here? Who can be trusted? Things are not what they seem for the hapless X-Men, faced with a cast of thousands in an unfamiliar, faraway galaxy.

All I can do is echo all the italicised sentiments. Particularly *What is going on here?* and *things are not what they seem and cast of thousands*. But I've still got to return to one of my earlier questions - What the hell have Captain America and Black Widow and the first chapter incident got to do with the rest of this sh... story?

Maybe my byline should be puzzled. Maybe I should have sent this review to Marjorie Proops. Maybe it's time I grew up.

*Spider-Man's Greatest Villains* (Boxtree, Graphic Novel, UK£9.99, 176pp)

At last, something I can understand. A title that explains everything. Stories that make sense. Consistent settings. A cast of very few. Thank you Spider-Man, even if you are ©.

As the title suggests this is a collection of stories featuring favourite villains from the series down through the years. The earliest story is from May 1964 and features Dr. Octopus; the latest is from 1994, when Carnage appeared in Amazing Spider-Man

Annual No. 28. It's great to be able to look back over the development of the strip in that time, the progression of the artwork through different artists and styles and particularly the development of the Spider-Man character.

In the early stories featuring Doc Octopus and Mysterio we are given a glimpse of the basic elements upon which today's complex super hero was based. There's Aunt May, J. Jonah Jameson, a critical lack of funds, a sweet girl whom he worships and a certain naive integrity which is guaranteed to get him into trouble despite his best efforts to conform to the requirements of 'normal' society (in his time off as Peter Parker).

Although J. Jonah remains the same one dimensional caricature, the remainder of the strip has over the years become the very model of Marvel's character-based social realism stories. It is difficult to get the full flavour of the complexities involved in the eight relatively short snapshot stories included here. If I have a complaint it is that the pieces included here can give you no more than a flavour of the types of characters and storylines that have been developed over the years. But as a sort of retrospective, the type of thing you see regularly from Rock artists, *Spider-Man's Greatest (Hits) Villains* is a thoroughly enjoyable presentation with value for fans and newcomers alike. Get it while it's hot.

## Next Month in First Contact

Golly, it's been a while since I was able to predict with any degree of accuracy what was coming. I mean, all it takes is one butterfly in the pacific and my predictions are totally haywire. But here's my educated guess (this magazine supports the death penalty for anyone who uses the word 'guesstimate').

### **Cybercafés**

Yeah, I know I promised this before. Several times, in fact. But there's no denying that the first report appears in this very issue. And unless a new bookshop opens up real soon, you'll be reading about The Planet Café, Dublin's first cybercafé and home of your editor's e-mail.

### **Babylon 5**

Continuing its policy of making sure everyone watches this amazing programme (Sundays, 6:00 in case I forgot to mention it), we'll be taking you on a tour of the series so far, courtesy of Adam Darcy.

### **Other stuff**

The Savage Dragon CD-ROM, and various diverse subjects so secret, even I don't know about it yet. Wait and see.

## Books

*The Bloody Red Baron*. Kim Newman. Carroll & Graf, \$21.00 pp356, HB

For those who loved Kim Newman's excellent *Anno Dracula* (which posited an alternate world in which Dracula returned to conquer England) *The Bloody Red Baron* is necessary reading. The story is not a sequel to the first novel, but is set thirty years after the events in *AD* during the "Great War" - enter the domain of World War I flying aces who have sharp, pointy teeth.

First off, let me make it perfectly clear. Kim Newman vampires are not cuddly. Nor are they cynical fops who flit around humans for cheap thrills. Kim Newman vampires are killers. They can be cold, inhuman, (often) unattractive, and deadly. This is a refreshing change from the recent trend in vampires who despise themselves and wander around looking for redemption. In the *AD* universe becoming a vampire is often a decision made consciously by the "warm" knowing that they only have a 1 in 5 chance of surviving the massive changes into vampiredom without dying or turning into freaks. Plus, the vampires' bloodlines are all-important - not a very new idea - but each bloodline contains certain inherent traits (such as shapeshifting or immunity to sunlight). What Kim Newman does in *The Bloody Red Baron* is take the vampire shape and stretch it to the limits - imagining how the barbarians in the labs in WW I (on both sides of the war) would experiment upon vampires to achieve new designs in order to win the war. *The Bloody Red Baron* examines war and its dehumanising effect on people - where the real beasts are those who mastermind the wars with

little attention paid to those who must fight them. The novel is also about obsession, duty, guilt and love and is very difficult to explain without ruining many of the book's best features. The other difference from *AD* is that there is much a easier relationship between vampires and humans - they have grown accustomed to one another. In this book the war is definitely between the Allies and the Germans.

As usual, he has assembled a wonderful cast of characters. I was delighted to see the return of Charles Beauregard, now thirty years older and still determinedly "warm". The younger protagonist is Lieutenant

Winthrop who becomes obsessed with the title character, and representing the undead is

the charming vampire journalist Kate (showing that Kim Newman had a deft touch in depicting woman characters), and Edgar Allan Poe as a German sympathiser. As usual, he had peppered the narrative with many other characters, both real and imaginary, such as a vampiric Churchill and the undead Biggles. Brooding over all of them is the presence of Dracula himself - pulling all the strings like a monstrous puppet master.

I would highly recommend this book but beware, it is dark and serious - and appropriately so for the subject matter. I look forward to the next alternate history that Kim Newman tackles.

PS For UK/Irish readers this novel will be released on May 6th, 1996.

**Maura McHugh**

*Babylon 5 #5 - The Touch of Your Shadow, the Whisper of Your Name*. Neal Barrett, Jr., Dell, pp248, £4.50

What is it about spin-off novels that they have to have the most unoriginal covers imaginable? Take any *Trek* novel; the cover depicts the a couple of the crew, maybe an alien and some generic spacey scene. In this area, if no others, *Babylon 5* is following in *Trek's* footsteps; the fifth novel is almost indistinguishable from the first four, with barely a hint of originality.

But why gripe? After all, I only judge a book by its cover when I'm looking at titles of which I know nothing; this is a *Babylon 5* novel. It's going to be cool.

Yeah, right. Actually, it isn't bad, but I'm only saying that because when I read spin-offs, my standards unexpectedly lower. I've no idea why; it just means that when I read a truly good spin-off novel like *Q-Squared* or *Clarke's Law*, I'm pleasantly surprised. No such luck here, though.

Garibaldi is the hero of this novel, the tale of a nine-million-mile long thingy that's approaching Babylon 5, and is giving everyone on the station really nasty nightmares. This makes people a lot meaner than usual, and causes a lot of shit. To make matters worse, this novel is set in early 2260, so the station is filled with religious types come to find out about the mysterious sighting. All in all, not a place to be if you want to avoid a fight.

There are two main problems with the book: the characters and the humour. The latter is welcome: at least, it would be if it worked. However, it comes off as bad Douglas Adams, and there can be little worse. Of the characters, I can only mention that Kosh speaks in complete sentences, and says what he means.

If you're looking for originality, then look elsewhere. About three chapters into this book, I knew (well, suspected would be a better word) exactly which seminal SF novel this was going to emulate: the ending, therefore, came as absolutely no surprise. I won't tell you which novel it was, but it'll be obvious.

Reading this book is like listening to Wagner: it has its moments, but it also has some fairly lousy chapters. This isn't going to stop a lot of people reading it, of course, and the hour or so it'll take (it's an incredibly fast read) won't diminish your life too much. Nonetheless, there is still only one really good Babylon 5 novel available, and that's *Clarke's Law*.

**Robert Elliott**

*One For the Morning Glory*, John Barnes, Tor, hb, £14.99, pp319

And you thought John Barnes was a science fiction writer. So he is, but this novel is traditional fantasy, and a really cool novel it is too. To mention the plot would be futile, suffice it to say it's the story of a prince and his companions, and it involves quests, battles, goblins, witches, evil sorcery and everything else that goes to make up a good fairy tale.

As everyone knows, the older a story is, the more likely it is to be true. And if a story is sufficiently old, it'll be true all the time: it keeps happening. So when a quest is called for and the prince is the only man for the job, we know all will be well because, as is common knowledge, princes who go on quests are heroes, and heroes don't usually fail. Of course, this is no reason for complacency; as our prince points out himself, "Hundreds of princes died on Sleeping Beauty's thorns, and I'm sure some of them were splendid chaps." Nonetheless, it's a good omen for a prince to undertake a quest, and when he rescues a maiden from goblins (with the usual conditions applying, of course), we know he is a hero, and all will be well by the end of the book.

An interesting aspect of the book is Barnes' use of words with meanings other than familiar: a gazebo is a type of animal, a

chutney is part of gun, and so forth. We're not talking Twilight Zone levels of change here with people going on Dinosaur breaks, but there are a number of words that are given new meanings. This appears to be arbitrary, but it's possible that your reviewer, who is after all a bear of little brain, may have read this entire book with allusions and metaphors flying over his head and impacting on the bedpost.

But strange meanings aside, *One for the Morning Glory* is one of the finest fantasy novels I've read in a long time. The blurb compares it to Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, and it's a valid comparison: it shares with that book a sense of humour that guarantees it many a re-reading.

One of the very few fantasy novels worth reading in hardback.

**Robert Elliott**

*The A to Z of Babylon 5*, David Bassom, Bantam, £8.99

There's no denying it: the book is what it says. From Abbai to Zoog, this book contains all you need to know. Wondering what Flarn is? It's a Minbari food. Want to know who played Guerra in the pilot? 'Twas none other than Ed Wasser. In this respect, the A to Z of Babylon 5 is doubtless a treasure trove for all those who can't remember the name of Garibaldi's father. But let's face it, most of us manage to go through most of our lives without once wondering the name of the race to which Deathwalker belonged.

This is the sort of book – albeit about *Star Trek* -- that's been selling out in Forbidden Planet for many a year. Before I got this, it never occurred to me to wonder why. I've got my *X-Files A-Z* (which came with a magazine), and now I've got the *B5* version. And much as I go around pleading with one and all to watch the program, I've got no use whatsoever for this damn book.

It's well-researched. It covers not only the first two and a bit series, but it covers the comics and the first five novels. The writing, however, is very dry, with a number of descriptions coming directly from dialogue in the series. And while, as an encyclopaedia of sorts, criticism is outside the author's remit, the book is totally devoid of commentary. This can make for very dull reading.

It's possible that, if there were a use for this sort of book, the style could be forgiven. But unless there are a large number of people planning on writing books or episodes, this book can be seen as little more than a useless,

albeit complete, guide to a programme that everyone should watch, even if they don't know that Sanchez (doctor) is a medlab physician.

**Robert Elliott**

*She Fades Away, Michael Carroll, Poolbeg*

Julie Logan agrees to tutor her cousin Brian for a month, thus allowing her parents to be taken away on a holiday by Brian's, the pair go and stay with their grandfather for the duration.

But their grandfather does not, as was thought, live alone. Throughout the history of the house an apparition has been present, appearing only when there is a death or birth in the family.

With the arrival of Julie and Brian, not only does the apparition appear, it sends a message, a cry for help. It soon becomes a race to find out who the ghost is in the hope that such knowledge will shed light on the identity of the person about to die. Julie in particular finds herself deeply embroiled in the mystery, as the apparition appears to be in the image of a female, looking like many of the women in the family, Julie included.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Michael Carroll has a great understanding of people's feelings, and he plays with the readers as they progress through this novel. It's well-paced with a very interesting story, with enough twists and turns to make it electrifying.

I could not read this novel fast enough: his writing is magnetic, compelling one to read on faster and at the same time allowing the reader to comprehend the full flow of what is happening. He truly has his finger on the pulse of the youth, displaying a respect for the young of today with his characters acting like modern Irish teenagers: shrewd, technically-minded, learning to understand complicated situations. Too many authors writing in the same area often display naïve and outdated characters, solving problems far too easily.

His language adds to the realism of the characters, and his knowledge of human nature gives an added reality check to an enjoyable read.

As well as that he writes well. Any man who can describe with such accuracy feelings, situations, actions, expressions and reactions and then have the literary skill to inject these things so vividly through words into the mind of any reader is truly wasted on a novel that will be read only by a few thousand. But for

those few it will be anything but a waste, it will be a triumph to find and to read such an enjoyable book.

I eagerly await his first 'adult' novel with great anticipation, and I envy the publishers who will make so much money out of this man.

**James Bacon**

*The Star Wars Omnibus, Alan Dean Foster et al, Warner, £9.99*

Everybody knows Star Wars. Even my grandmother knows it to be a 'spaceish' movie. Well, here for all to enjoy is the Omnibus edition of Star Wars the book version, never to be released again. Well okay, we may add a few more spelling mistakes and then republish it, but that's show business.

With the current Star Wars boom, I was surprised to see an economic version of the books, particularly as only a short while ago they released hardback editions of all three at £11 each and they sold.

As for the stories, they are good, but you'll know the ending and it's good to read the bits that were edited out by George (or whoever) in the movies. I still find *Empire* the most amazing read of the three, Donald F. Glut giving an amazing performance. His writing is very good, the skills of a well-published author trickling through. It must be said, though, this Glut chap seems to be so good his name isn't even in the SF encyclopaedia.

Alan Dean Foster's is, though. Strange that. If you haven't seen the movies for a while then these books will rekindle the excitement and pleasure that you had when you first saw the movies. It's good stuff. And if you haven't seen the movies, well you must be really sad, or a trek-type person.

**James Bacon**