

First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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In a Packed Issue Tonight...

Nebula for Griffith

Congrats to Nicola Griffith on her winning the Nebula for the ultra-nifty novel *Slow River*. We told you here ages ago that it was a cool book, but did you listen? Of course not. Here we are working our fingers to the bone, and for what? Anyway, find out who else won inside.

Books into Movies

Ever since Paul Verhoeven (blessed be his holy name) started work on *Starship Troopers*, SF novels have been big business again. Okay, maybe *Star Wars* had something to do with it. Find out inside which are the latest to receive 'treatments.' Okay, I'll tell you. *Ender's Game*, *Rendezvous with Rama* and *Snow Crash*.

Comics

Join James Bacon as he looks at Garth Ennis' and John McCrea's Dicks inside.

News

No Babylon 5...yet

Despite expectations that on this side of the Atlantic we'd see the fourth season of B5 by May, it now looks as if we'll have to wait until at least the middle of June. Word around the campfire is that even C4 don't know yet when it'll be shown. And anyone who's seen any of the aforementioned fourth season knows that there's no way on Earth (or Epsilon 3) that the show can survive being shown at 6:00; it'll probably need the *Dark Skies* slot in order to be shown intact.

Meanwhile, there's still no word from America as to whether there'll be a fifth season. The last episode has been shot, and will be shown at the end of season four if there's no renewal.

Talking of B5...

Congrats to JMS and everyone for the Hugo nomination for *Severed Dreams*. There were actually three episodes of B5 nominated for the Dramatic Presentation Hugo, but "War Without End" and "Z'Ha'Dum" were declined for fear of splitting the vote.

Talking of Hugos...

Damn, but I'm getting good at this linking stuff. The Hugos will be voted on in August at the Worldcon, but for now here are the nominations for best novel...

Memory by Lois McMaster Bujold

Remnant Population by Elizabeth Moon

Blue Mars by Kim Stanley Robinson

Starplex by Robert J. Sawyer

Holy Fire by Bruce Sterling

I realise that I usually pick on Lois McMaster Bujold as the winner, but this year I reckon it's between her and Kim Stanley Robinson. Of the two, *Memory* is better, by the way.

Look forward to next month when we'll have a complete list of nominations, complete with snide and unnecessary comments on authors I don't like.

Editorial

If you check out the book reviews this month, you'll notice that a number of the titles are American; the 'this month's books' section also contains a number of US titles. A waste of time, some say, an annoyance to those of us who can't get books from America. I've been treating such comments less than seriously up to now, but it's got to the stage where I'm sick of hearing of it. That and people saying that I'm only doing it because they're all stocked by my employer, Mr. F. Planet of Dawson Street. If only; it would mean I was earning a commission.

For the record, the reason so many American books are reviewed is because as a science fiction fan who loves you, the reader, I feel it is my duty to make known to you the best that the genre has to offer. If this means reviewing books that are only available off-the-shelf through the shop where I work, so be it. However, I was ordering books via mail order for years before I started working in Forbidden Planet, and I expect I'm not alone in being able to do this. To be frank, (Hi, I'm Frank) I don't really mind if you buy your copy of Michael Flynn's *Firestar* from Forbidden Planet, amazon.com or Andromeda. I mention it only because I think it's a cool book and one you have to read. So read it.

Love and kisses,

robert elliott
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First Contact

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The Irish Science Fiction Association meets on the first Tuesday of every month with a vowel in it in the Ormond Hotel, Ormond Quay. The fun starts at around eight of the evening clock. Come along. We'd love to see you.

This month's issue of First Contact is dedicated to the Fairview branch of Xtravision, which has in stock a copy of one of Troma's finest, *Chopper Chicks in Zombie Town*. Of course, this is the same Xtravision that has twenty copies of *The Nutty Professor* and one of *Fargo*, but we can forgive them that. Oh, yeah. The copyright. Almost forgot. If you wrote it, you own it. If you nicked it, put it back. If you sang it, send us a .wav file. Not that we could do anything with it. Don't reproduce without permission. This means you.

News

Books To Movies

Snow Crash – The Movie

Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* is headed for the big screen courtesy of Touchstone Pictures and writer/director Jeffrey Nachmanoff. According to Variety, Marco Brambilla has agreed to direct the project, which is where *Brazil* meets *Blade Runner*. Nachmanoff is said to be writing the screenplay for the movie "from scratch" after a number of earlier drafts by other writers proved unsatisfactory. In Nachmanoff's version, a computer virus escapes from cyberspace into the real world.

Ender's Game – The Movie

I know what you're saying. How the frag can Ender's Game be turned into a movie, even if Orson himself is working on the script? That's a good question, and the producers are not above asking for comments. Check out the FrescoPix web site (I forget the URL, but I'm sure you know how to use Alta Vista) and offer suggestions should the urge take you.

Nnnnnnnnnnnnoooooooooo!

Actor Morgan Freeman has plans to bring Arthur C. Clarke's classic SF tale, *Rendezvous with Rama*, to the big screen.

He and producer Lori McCreary have reportedly formed a production company, Revelations Entertainment, to adapt the epic tale. Now, this doesn't sound like particularly bad news. I mean, the book was great (the first book, that is), and who

better than respected thesp Morgan Freeman to take charge? Unfortunately, his choice for director leaves a lot to be desired. Remember *Alien 3*? Remember *Seven*? If you're wondering if he can possibly make three awful movies in a row, wonder no more. Of course he can.

No X-Files for Tarantino

Does Quentin Tarantino directing an episode of *The X-Files* sound like the perfect match? It nearly happened, until the Directors' Guild stepped in and said no. He got a waiver for the episode of ER he directed, but apparently it won't happen a second time.

Bryan Singer joins The X-Men team

Bryan Singer, the director behind the movie *The Usual Suspects*, is getting set to close a deal to direct the silver screen adaptation of Marvel Comics' *The X-Men*, according to a report published in Variety. Singer was quoted as saying, "We're taking the subject matter very seriously. This will not be comic-book style film, for the X-Men are an ensemble of anti-heroes, and we've figured out a way to make the story accessible to fans and non-fans alike."

1996 Nebula Winners

The 1996 Nebulas were awarded on Saturday, April 19, 1997 in Kansas City, MO.

Novel: *Slow River* by Nicola Griffith (Del Rey)
Novella: "Da Vinci Rising" by Jack Dann (Asimov's)
Novelette: "Lifeboat on a Burning Sea" by Bruce Holland Rogers (F&SF)
Short Story: "A Birthday" by Esther M. Friesner (F&SF)

New Books for May

This list is, as usual, entirely arbitrary. There are zillions of books that I didn't mention, either because I missed them in the lists or I just don't care.

Excession, Iain M. Banks, tpb, Orbit

This Day All Gods Die, Stephen Donaldson, pb, Voyager

Eternity Road, Jack McDevitt, hb, HarperPrism

Dark Skies, Stan Nicholls, pb, Bantam UK

The Ringworld Throne, Larry Niven, pb, Del Rey

Feet of Clay, Terry Pratchett, pb, Corgi

Freeware, Rudy Rucker, hb/tpb, Avon

Final Diagnosis, James White, hb, Tor

The Galactic Gourmet, James White, pb, Tor

Small Press

Albedo One #13, £2.50, A4, 40 pages

One thing's for sure; you won't easily miss the latest issue of *Albedo One*. Simply wend your merry way into your local emporium and make for the day-glo magazine that nearly blinds you. As your eyes adjust, you'll notice that there's a Brian Stableford interview to be found on the inside and that James Newell's cover art, though rough, is quite nifty. Open the magazine and you'll see – oh blessed relief – that the inside is a normal white, and you can get on with the business of reading. The four pages of book reviews are of the usual high quality, and this issue sees the letters page supersede the Severian rant column. Three pages responding to the plight of issue twelve's Severian, usually from people who are (in my humble opinion) missing the point. But they'd probably say the same of me.

On to the fiction. First we have "The Immortal Desire of Katerian Wellenbrau," the story of a woman who is about to explore what is for her the final frontier. Jason Gould has a fine narrative style, and tells a tale that's consistent and interesting. His bio reveals that he's previously contributed to such magazines as *Grotesque* and *The Third Alternative*; something you could have guessed from this piece. I assume the bit about "Glenn Danzig" and "Musical Genius" was a typo.

Bill Lythgoe's "Gentle Reader" is mercifully short; it's a nice idea – a telepathic kid has to visit a psychologist and somehow hide his little gift – but it's not the sort of incident that can fill a story. By Lythgoe, anyway. This is, we are told, his first appearance in *Albedo One*, and if he can come up with a story to match his writing, I'm sure we'll see more of him in future.

"Outside of Agamemnon's Leather Tent" gives us the second wanky title of the issue, and a story that betrays a little of Brett Easton Ellis' influence, I suspect. Its author, E.A. Hilbert is literary ed of the *Oxford Quarterly*, and he also writes poetry. This explains all; the ridiculous use of trademarks, the abbreviations in the text, the general ridiculousness and downright inanity of the story. Not *Albedo One*'s finest hour.

Andi Douglas has, I suspect, spent too long playing *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and trying to get through the intelligent door. It's something that, many years later, I still haven't done, so this story struck a chord. "Identity Crisis" is the story of Halig Disalden, a man on the run who suddenly finds himself stymied by an intelligent door that won't open without the correct ident. While not a funny story, the conversation with the door is amusing, and ending is only slightly disappointing. Douglas is another writer making his first appearance in these pages, and one of whom I hope to see much more.

"A Golden Thread" sees Nigel Quinlan giving us a wee tale of two guys bent on violence with a liberal amount of swearing thrown in. Its point totally escaped me, and it's doubtful that it can even qualify as a genre story. I was quite relieved that it was over in less than two pages.

Finally, "The Burnished Egg." Dermot Ryan is a local lad, and yet again this is a debut story, and a damn fine one at that; it's easily among my favourite stories to appear in any issue of the magazine. It's the story of Liam and his ability to read "vividly;" he acts as a sort of television set, showing what he's reading. The Bio hints that this is one of Ryan's first published stories, something that seems hard to believe. There are times you suspect that the author has just finished school – where he studied *Julius Caesar* and *Paradise Lost* – and at other times you wonder why this man hasn't had books published already. Unquestionably the best story of the issue.

With this issue's quotient of crap taking up a mere four pages (or ten per cent of the issue), this is definitely one of the better issues. Having three writers appearing for the first time here shows that the magazine doesn't have to rely on the usual suspects, some of whom appear a little more often than they deserve. The use of new writers is a trend that's definitely to be encouraged, something that isn't difficult to do in a magazine of this calibre.

Comics

James Bacon

FAULTLINES by Lee Marris and Bill Koeb

I had to read this comic a number of times just in case I had missed something or skipped a page, it appears I did not. There is only one word that springs to mind when I read this and the word is Wankey. The artwork is dreadful a dire imitation of Kent Williams, lacking all the style and artistry skill that man possesses. Marris has a serious problem. He can't write.

I thank the lord that this comic is only a six-issue mini series, why Vertigo couldn't produce another Death story or something similar is beyond me, the more crap like this they publish the more new readers will be turned away. if this was the first Vertigo comic I ever read I'd never read another.

Avoid this one like the plague.

THE INVISIBLES By Grant Morrison and Phil Jimenez.

Now at issue number 4 in its second volume, this comic has proven how right a decision a re-launch actually was. The first volume was really interesting in a cerebral sort of way and the plot twisted and turned in a really cryptic fashion, but it was too slow and at the end of the day the comic just didn't rock. Obviously some big knob in Vertigo looked at Preacher, saw the sales, grabbed Morrison and said your sales are crap his aren't, you're both great writers so sort it out.

In the first issue of volume 2 the first page just EXPLAINS the characters to the readers, the story is paced much faster and the violence rate is pushed up a few levels. Now The Invisibles really rocks and our Heroes kick real ass in the first few issues. The Invisibles set out to steal the cure to the aids virus which is kept at a Top Secret, well defended underground U.S. military base and all hell breaks lose as they encounter an awful lot more than expected.

The art work has to be mentioned as Jimenez artwork is so crisp it must be compared to Brian Bolland's it really is of an excellent calibre and it makes the whole comic a joy to read. If you were disappointed with the first volume of the comic in god's name don't allow that to taint your judgement. This is an excellent comic and definitely not to be missed.

LOBO CHAINED by Alan Grant and Rafael Garres.

If you are a fan of the monthly *Lobo* comic, then you will be dead impressed with this comic. Garres' artwork is very strong and has some of the traits of Simon Bisley's stuff; it isn't as clean but it is nice.

The story is pretty obvious. the Main Man gets thrown into the slammer and the expected mayhem and violence ensues. there is also a lot more black humour in here as opposed to the monthly, and there are some sharp lines too.

Unfortunately I am not a fan of the monthly as I believe that it is a poor imitation of what Grant, Giffen and Bisley originally produced and this comic does not meet the standard either. Grant is only doing just enough to make this comic a special compared to the monthly and Garres' artwork is a poor man's imitation of the masterpieces that Bisley could produce.

DICKS by Garth Ennis and John McCrea

I have been waiting for this comic for quite some time, since 1991 in fact when it was in the various industry mags that this comic was finished and ready to be printed, but at the time I think it was Tundra who bought the comic and they went bust leaving the comic in limbo, so I was very pleased to see Caliber bring out this comic. until I opened the comic that is.

Now a lot of you may remember a story called *For a Few Troubles More* which was published in full glorious colour in March 1990 by Crisis, it was also subsequently released in graphic novel form by Fleetway, it was only 38 pages long.

Well this my friends is a rehash of that story but 7 pages shorter in black and white and indeed not even to the Hitman standard that McCrea is capable of let alone full painted artwork.

I feel slightly ripped off by this comic in saying that though it is still a very funny story.

I am sure that issue 2 will be have a new story and possibly better artwork and I eagerly await any new story from some one as good as Ennis.

XERO by Christopher Priest and Chris Chross

This is an action packed comic that is well written and drawn. Zero is a dead man who was reconstructed using bio mechanical implants, which not only makes him one serious though dude but also allows him to walk through walls and he also has a neural link to a huge data base of information.

He is also an undercover agent.

This first issue really shows how good a story teller Priest is, and the story moves fast and smoothly even though there is a wealth of information to be taken in.

The art work is smart and very crisp. there is already a number of twists in the story and it shows real potential. Priest will become a hot ticket, with this and also his Quantum and Woody comic which are both really good his popularity will soar, but his books are crap.

Crap, and How to Recognise it

Star Trek has a lot to answer for. To be sure, it's done some good in its time; without *Star Trek*, there would certainly be no *Babylon 5*. But I'm here today to speak not of the merits of various television programmes; we all have our own opinions, and nothing I write will change your mind about the sort of television you like. Instead, I'd like to expound briefly on another legacy of the *Star Trek* phenomenon: the mountain of crap that constitutes Merchandising.

For many a year, I confess to having little by way of opinion one way or the other. I mean, there was this ton of stuff available to those who wished to purchase it, and while I myself had no need for a tricorder that actually beeps, I recognised that there are those whose opinions differ. I may have thought it slightly pathetic, but nonetheless I assumed that they had a reason for purchasing what they did.

Then came the *Babylon 5* and *X-Files* merchandise. Suddenly, I was able to buy stuff for a programme that I really liked; and buy it I did. I started off simply enough; the odd mug, the occasional t-shirt. Stuff that showed that I liked the programme, yet maintained some utility. After all, we all need mugs, and a significant number of us need t-shirts.

But then came the other stuff. As I type this, I'm looking at £25 worth¹ of plastic known as "The X-Files Authentic Film Originals Limited Edition 35mm Collector Film Cels." What is it? Two frames from an episode of *The X-Files*. And not duplicates, either; these are authentic originals. And they're unique. Well, okay, not *unique*; the two frames I hold proudly in my hand can also be found on my Limited Edition First Season X-Files Video Box. You've got to know where to look, but they're there.

Of course, I didn't buy *The X-Files* Authentic Film Originals Limited Edition 35mm Collector Film Cels. I'm not *that* much of a saddo. I simply borrowed them from a local purveyor of comics so I could bring them home to slag them off. I mention this only because I've also got one from *Star Trek : The Motion Picture*. There's only one frame, but seeing as it's 70mm it's just as good value for money as the *X-Files* ones. And it's a One-of-a-kind Original Film CelTM. It's from the Admiral James T. Kirk edition, (or the Authorized 70mm film edition, depending on which part of the box you read) and features hambo himself walking beside Scotty (did you know that 'Beam Me Up, Scotty' was trademarked? But that's a page for another day) and is, we are reliably informed, an Original Film CelTM from the first movie debut of STAR TREK. Doubtless this is a cunning plan on the part of Paramount, and as soon as there's a second movie debut of STAR TREK we'll get to pay another £25 for the privilege of owning a celTM.

So is all merchandise so inane? I'm afraid so. And while I will confess to owning the odd Star Trek action figure (I can't help it; I think Chief Engineer Michaelangelo, the "Beam Me Up" buddy is way cool). I have yet to meet anyone who can tell me what good a wrist communicator from *Star Trek : The Motion Picture* is. No-one's been able to tell me what they do with their £35 Limited Edition Light Sabre ("warning : this is not a toy"). And not a single person has been able to tell me why they paid £35 for a book of photographs from *Star Trek* that contains such thrilling shots as the set decorator holding a model of a Bird of Prey and the never-before-published picture of the USS Enterprise in front of a starfield.

If you're one of those happy individuals who thrives on spending all his² hard-earned money on interminable interviews with Brent Spiner (which I always thought was an oil rig), models of the Enterprise that are limited to a run of 235,000 (I'm not making it up, I swear) or novels that weren't written by William Shatner, drop us a line. More than anything else, I'd love to know what you do with this stuff. And whether you'd like to buy this bridge I've got lying around at the top of O'Connell Street.

¹ You know what I mean.

² Or her; the saddest of the trekkies all seem to be female

Book Reviews

Exquisite Corpse, Poppy Z Brite, pp244,
£9.99

This woman can write; her only failing is she can't seem to write a believable story. Seemingly inspired by a news article about how officials during Jeffrey Dahmer's autopsy would only do the job if the body was shackled, Poppy takes this idea to London where a similar serial killer dies in prison, reanimates, kills an American who happens to look very like him and goes to the only place the Z woman can write about. New Orleans. She describes London as if all she's seen are postcards and Sherlock Holmes films. Then our loveable serial killer with a heart that has an "on/off switch" meets a like minded twisted soul and they become the best of buds. Well bum buddies if you will. They sure did 'Phwarr'.

Enough of the homosexual innuendoes. The woman keeps on filling her pages with homosexual encounters. It's not the encounters which I'm griping about it's the filling her pages which I have a problem with. It just smacks of jumping on the "aren't queers awfully cool" bus. Does the "homosexual stuck in the body of a woman" blurb prove my point?

To me, Poppy Z seems to be the horror equivalent of William Gibson; more hype than talent. I didn't say talentless, they both have written something of worth; I just get the impression that Ms. Brite writes shocking things very well because she can't come up with a well structured plot.

Yes, she can create a lovely dark foreboding atmosphere and fill you with revulsion but what's the point if the story is just wandering around from one splatter scene to the next with no real sense of direction. To me, telling a story and having a story to tell is more important than saying something unimportant with style.

Ten pounds for a bulky book with a low page count would make me tell people to wait for the paperback but not if the book is fairly drab. Well-told but not good. Ah sod it. Don't buy it as you'll only encourage Poppy to write more stylish pap.

James Mason

Ancient Shores, Jack McDevitt,
HarperCollins, pb, pp397, £5.99

"Science fiction on a grand scale", well at least that's what the cover informs me. I'm sure

the author wants to publicly flog the blurb merchant who put that on with no idea what the book was about except that it's science fiction.

This is the third book I've read by Jackie boy and I must say he's starting to mature very nicely. He does seem to like tackling "grand scale" subjects but he never seems to go that route. More like the opposite, McDevitt favours the small everyday approach, 'what would the ordinary Joe bob do if....' in this case it's 'discover an artefact that's ten thousand years ahead of its time.'

The characters, even though they are of the John Smith variety, are well fleshed out and interesting. Which makes a nice change from the overblown, gung-ho, take charge types you normally have to put up with. As they wouldn't be that impressed with finding an anachronistic item as opposed to the farmer Joe who actually does dig up the thing.

Because we have some more realistic people running about this novel, the reader (which happens to be me) felt warm and at ease reading it. The pacing is also set at the "nice and easy" level. This makes me go through the book just that bit faster. In fact I was getting close to the end when I thought hang on there's only twenty or so pages left how's he going to finish this? Then you also go there better not be 'Read the next thrilling instalment of this 20 book saga'. Luckily none of these things happen and you don't develop a unabomber-like hatred of authors and start a campaign of assassinating writers. Jack the lad sorts out all the argy bargy in a most entertaining and skilful way.

I will add that he does leave plenty of room for other tales in the same continuity but the story that was told is concluded in a very definite fashion. After all, this is a 'slice of life' story. Who's to say that all the slices are gone.

A very enjoyable book which doesn't have adrenaline-frenzied action scenes. Still it keeps your attention in a more gentle fashion as the drama comes from the writer's heart and the people he writes about. I'd have no problem recommending this book to anyone as it's top class entertainment and it beats watching some tired worn out sci-fi franchise that's been going for thirty years.

James Mason

Idoru, William Gibson, Viking, hb, pp292,
£16.00

Gibson, the man elevated to the lofty heights of the trend-setters, namely the now deceased 'cyberpunk' movement. The irony is that he was actually following the trend not setting one. Check out Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling if you don't believe me.

Now alas the 'once and never will be again' king of this genre seems to have been surpassed by the nineties hi-tech writers. Check out Neal Stephenson and Wilhelmina Baird if you don't believe me.

Reading *Idoru* is like reading a Charles Dickens novel; it has this oddly dated feel to it.

The style of writing is stale, the level of technology is fairly mundane, the characters (now here the Dickens comparisons end) are non-dimensional and the plot is probably off looking for a decent writer as Gibson has certainly lost the plot.

There is nothing new or even interesting in this book and still the literary sections of the more cerebral papers give favorable reviews and profiles on the books and the author. This could be due to the fact that every once and awhile the media realizes that they haven't done anything on 'Science Fiction' they have to hype something or someone. A decade ago this was herr William Gibson who actually believed what the papers said about him or didn't bother to correct them.

This book is a lazy book by a lazy writer who hasn't the inclination to find out what the 'hot' technology is. People who like the genre will have read better than this, the ones that haven't won't know any better. Only buy this book if you have the intention of bludgeoning the gormless dweeb who wrote it. Is the book that bland to merit such dark twisted emotions?. Read it, if you don't believe me.

James Mason

Empire Of the Ants - Bernard Werber, pp352
Corgi, £5.99

This book contains that most delightful of rarities to be found in today's SF, an engaging story wrapped about a core of enlightening fact. The narrative takes us down two very different paths, both leading to the heart of their own mysteries. One tale is a simple enough investigation into what lurks beyond the forbidden cellar door in an ancient Parisian apartment, while the other is a fantastical

political thriller as told through the viewpoint of individual ants and one of their tribes, and it is this narrative which gives the book its strength. The overall style of the book makes for very pleasant reading, with nary a word out of place and some beautifully crafted descriptions. The 'conventional' story line contains some very well written horror passages, at all times heightening the sense of mystery, but it is always the revelations of how the ants perceive their world which linger in the mind long after you finish reading. The relative strengths and weaknesses of both the ants' communication and perception allow a few new angles to the mystery, while the exploration of this empire is always a delight. The author is a myrmecologist (or ant-studier to you and me) with over 15 years experience of studying the wee beasties in question, but it is not his wealth of knowledge which makes this a great book so much as the subtle way the information is woven into the story. This is one of those books that you will walk away from having truly learnt, quite incidentally, of a whole new world. Wars, conspiracies, adventure and the ever renewing cycle of life all take place in a truly alien land of wonder which trundles by every day beneath our very noses. This is one of those books which bring back to mind what science fiction is all about, a wonderful story is told, through an elegantly factual viewpoint. Needless to say this book gets a huge thumbs up from myself, by far the best of the books I've read in the last few months. I have but one quibble, as the author is a Frenchman, the sequel is as yet untranslated from his native tongue, and to delve into this world once more I'm going to have to dust off my old bilingual dictionary. Really, learning a new culture and relearning a foreign language, it's almost too much like hard work.

Stephen Malone

Protektor, Charles Platt, Avonova, \$5.99, pp294

Ever since the unfortunate media machine's love affair with the Internet and the more fortunate glamorisation of William Gibson's cyberspace books there seems to be an endless stream of Virtual Reality novels foisted on the reading public. This tale is one of the worst written in what is often a bland field. The concept itself is not too poor, telling of an age when humans rule the stars and computers rule the humans, at least in a bureaucratic and administrative capacity. Into this benevolent dictatorship.

where computers and machines do all the work and humans do their best to have interesting fun lives, is injected an electronic virus, which could literally end life for all mankind as they are now so dependent upon their mechanised slaves. In fact the concept could have made a very fine novella. However a terrible attempt at injecting a new exciting style completely kills this book. By far the most annoying thing about this book was the boxes of background and incidental information dropped haphazardly and apparently maliciously throughout. Rather than present these at the beginning or end of chapters, or even as an introduction or appendix, these fillers are instead placed in the middle of the story's flow, now taking up a third of a page in the midst of dialogue, later cutting a sentence in half and forcing the poor reader to skip ahead 4 or 5 pages to finish the chapter and then trawl back again to make sure no obscure clue is hidden in these asides. The story is none too inspiring either, a dull whodunit peopled with fairly one dimensional characters, requiring some effort on the readers part to give a damn about what happens to them. Sadly one of the most disappointing aspects of this book is the science side, which is slightly surprising considering the author is a frequent contributor to Wired magazine. The obligatory Cyberspace scenes being the worst in a catalogue of disasters, tying together programming techniques which are outdated today, never mind a few centuries in the future, with interfaces and representations of code that makes the truly awful Hackers movie look like the bible to programming UNIX. The occasional pseudo-philosophical insights into artificial intelligence are swamped with plot holes of planetary dimensions, and a rather bleak, and ultimately unimaginative view of the future path of computing, most of the tenets of this book would sit better in a book written 15 or even 20 years ago. So unless your looking for a paragon on how NOT to present a good Sci-Fi tale, don't bother picking up this novel. You'd be better off re-reading Neuromancer or watching the original Lawn-Mower Man again.

Stephen Malone

Living Real - James C. Basset - HarperPrism, \$5.50, pp326

Living Real is quite a different kettle of cyberfish. It's a pleasing enough read, with a well told story and some intriguing points raised. The main concept is that of a young designer of programs for a souped-up version of the internet (which can trick the mind into accepting anything as real) who discovers a new technique, allowing him to not only toy with the perceptions but the very thoughts of those who use his programs. Needless to say this discovery leads to all sorts of adventures, both real and virtual, for our intrepid hero. Overall this is a book of puzzling contrasts. The author clearly displays a fairly good grasp of the areas of interest in today's Global Network, populating his virtual world with chat rooms, roleplaying games areas and private workspaces, and yet when it comes to terminology he runs right off the rails. His super-net is known as 'The Web' and yet he has a version of what we know of as the Web referred to merely as the Internet. Whereas today we have Hackers (experts in programming and/or computer security) and Phreaks (experts in phone-systems and how to scam free phonecalls) his world is populated with Hacks (professional information terrorists) and Frecks (prankster teenage vandals of the Web - akin to today's Crackers). And of course there's the BIG problem with the story. The whole concept is based around an astounding discovery made by the hero, and yet, from the background given to the technology involved, this discovery would not only have been made in the nascent days of its development but would have been utilised to the hilt. Don't let this put you off though, as these are only background quibbles, and the novel itself is a very fine read. The characters are likable and believable for the most part and the payoff between government and dissidents in an increasingly open society is well handled. All in all the nice surprises and well crafted scenes outweigh the few inconsistencies and makes this, if not the best of virtual reality books available, by no means the worst.

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