

First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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In a packed programme tonight

The Clipper

More than a Bewley's tea and poxy encryption chip; NASA's DC-X rocket is an opportunity being wasted. **Paul McKinley** explains all.

What to Read

As well as an abundance of book reviews, your editor offers his choice of reading material. If you can't find something in this lot, it's time to go back to **Harold Robbins**

Competitions

I've been reliably informed that the best way to get people to read this darn thing is to offer them some free stuff. Throwing any pretention of journalistic integrity to the 4.0 winds, I got me some prizes. What are they? How do you enter? What is the capital of Idaho, and why does it sound so silly? Most of these questions and more will be answered. Inside. Just buy this first, okay? We need the money.

Lots of other stuff.

Well, some other stuff, anyway. Impeccable grammar (usually) and a mostly-spell-checked document, lovingly combined with exquisite phrasology and a respect for the language heretofore found only in the most October of literary journals, we strive to ensure when it's respect for the language is what you seek, **First Contact** is what you look to.

It's Congoing Season

By the time you read this Octocon will have happened, and you can find out exactly how cool it was next month. Unless you were there (which you probably were), in which case you already know.

But worry not, for Gaelcon is almost upon us. Those of you who feel most at home in a large room full of sweaty fanboys* will be ecstatic: imagine an Octocon crowd, only with more people dressed in black. With zillions of events – including tournaments for card games other than Magic (gasp!) – it's an essential trip for anyone interested in anything to do with gaming.

Card Games taking over the world

They've been around for a few years now, and everyone expects the bubble to burst any day. But with more and more licensed games coming out that appeal to the collector as well as the gamer – combined with the fact that some of these games are actually good – it looks as if they'll be around for a good while yet.

I was going to include a page or so on the current state and look at games such as Netrunner (the best game yet by far), Monty Python and the X-Files, but then Magic's new expansion, Mirage, came out and so you'll just have to wait until next month. During the meanwhile, you can pop down to your local store and pick up a starter pack of Netrunner. Not nearly enough people play this totally cool game.

*made you look

editorial

Zowie! October already, and the cold hand that is the impending Octocon is breathing down our necks with its icy fingers breathless with anticipation. How many metaphors did I mix in that sentence? Anyway, the thrill of an Octocon always throws my grammar off. See? I even ended a sentence with the word 'off.' Damn, did it again.

The reason for this prattle (if I could justify the use of the word 'reason' is that Octocon is unquestionably the event on the Irish SF calendar. And given the impressive guest turnout this year, it looks as if the publishers are finally beginning to take the convention seriously. But none of that matters, as all you need to know is that Octocon is upon us, and if you haven't joined yet, you're probably too late. In fact you're probably reading this at the ISFA table at the convention. Well, put it back. You haven't paid for it yet.

Oh, and another thing: good news, in fact. That is, if you consider no news to be the aforementioned. This month's newsletter will contain little by way of news pages. You'll have noticed this before: it happens whenever I'm struck by the impression that it's a waste of time and pages. This is because I've been thinking that it's impossible to cover everything that happens to any degree of respectability: with the amount of people out there with net access, it's pretty superfluous. Most of the information I pass on comes straight off the net, and I see no point in regurgitating what people already know. I'll continue to publish Irish news – this is, after all, the newsletter of the ISFA – but I reckon there's little use in wasting trees to no good purpose. Oops, a pleonasm. Told you the grammar was slipping.

If you want the news back, or indeed if you've any suggestions as to how I could make it interesting (to write as well as read), then by all means drop me a line. I exist only to serve, and

if people want news, then gosh diddly darn it if I won't provide.

Another thing that I should mention (but usually forget) is the ISFA's monthly meeting. Drop along to the Ormonde Hotel on the first Tuesday of any month you like, and prepare for an evening just filled with merriment, laughter and general science fiction-related stuff. Next month's meeting is a table quiz, so if you know the city where Captain Carrot patrols, the year the great war came upon us all or the name of the book starring Michael Valentine Smith, then pop along. If you don't, pop along anyway. It'll be a blast.

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This newsletter was brought to you by

The Irish Science Fiction Association

30, Beverly Downs
Knocklyon Road
Templeogue
Dublin 16.

e-mail bhry@iol.ie

newsletter : rde@irelands-web.ie

You know this stuff by now as well as I do. f'gawd's sake. Copyright yadda vadda, usual stuff, if you write it it's yours. © 1996, etc. Today's show was brought to you on a Dell 486 with 24Mb of RAM, Word 7.0, the letter X and CDs featuring Animaniacs, Alanis Morissette, the Divine Comedy, Mozart, Nick Cave, Tori Amos, Portishead and Tom Lehrer. Actually, the CD didn't feature Mozart; it's just some guys playing stuff he wrote.

Top Ten Books

After months of hassling others for their favourite books, and much slapping of the forehead when he saw some of the choices made, your editor has finally put his ass on the line and made a fist of it. Violent disagreements to the usual address. A caveat : the order, for the most part, is entirely random. Consider all ten to be equally cool; only a few are more equal than the rest.

10. *Dune*, Frank Herbert

Say what you will of the film. *Dune* the book is cool. Forget the sequels. forget the fact that the planet shouldn't be able to support an oxygen atmosphere. forget the number of times you read the line *They have tried to take the life of my son.* In italics. yet. This is a read nonpareil, and utterly deserving of the description 'epic.'

9. *Cyteen*, C.J. Cherryh

In all the lists that have appeared in this magazine. I don't recall a single title by Cherryh, which I find utterly amazing. OK, so I'm not a great fan of her fantasy, but Cherryh is consistently producing some of the best science fiction available today. Not nearly enough of her books are in print, but fortunately *Cyteen*, one of her best, is available from NEL. If you've never read Cherryh before, this is the book to read to find out what you've been missing. It's got so much in it, I'm not even going to try to describe it.

8. *Magic Casement*, Dave Duncan

Pretty much anything by Dave Duncan is brilliant (except the Swordsman series, which was only OK), but for the definitive ultra-cool heroic fantasy, read the *Man of His Word* series, of which this is the first. I read this book expecting a bog-standard quest, and found myself stunned by the story-telling capabilities of the man. Whenever anyone asks me to recommend a fantasy novel, this is the one I suggest.

7. *Deathbird Stories*, Harlan Ellison

As an essayist, he's unrivalled. There are those who'll say that his fiction is just as good, but give me a good collection of tirades against inanity and apathy any day. Either way, *Deathbird Stories* is one of the best short story collections you'll ever read.

6. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Robert A. Heinlein

After reading shite like *I Will Fear No Evil* and *The Number of the Beast*, I was despairing of ever finding a really cool Heinlein novel. I reckon he was better as a short story writer – check out "All You Zombies" and "There Was a Crooked House" – but I've since discovered that some of his novels are pretty nifty, and this is far and away the best. Probably the only Heinlein novel deserving of the word "Excellent."

5. *Mission Earth*, L. Ron Hubbard

Only kidding. It's complete shite.

5. *The Dispossessed*, Ursula K. LeGuin

Most people say *The Left Hand of Darkness* is her best book, and it *is* great. In my humble opinion, though, this is better. Like most of her best books, it's been out of print for ages, so let us give thanks that it's finally being made available again. Rush out and buy your copy now.

4. *The Brentford Triangle*, Robert Rankin

The book that has everything, including the funniest darts match you'll ever read about. It's probably wise to read *The Antipope* first, but I didn't, and still thought it was the funniest book ever. The only one that comes close is Tom Sharpe's *The Throwback*.

3. *The Naked Sun*, Isaac Asimov

Along with *The Caves of Steel*, his finest novel. An honorary mention also to his collection *The Bicentennial Man*. Most of Asimov's stuff is well worth reading, just stay away from anything he wrote after *Foundation and Earth*, his first truly awful book.

2. *Mirror Dance*, Lois McMaster Bujold

My absolutely all-time favourite writer. Pretty much all her books – one exception, the only-OK fantasy novel *The Spirit Ring* – are set in the universe of Miles Vorkosigan. Read *The Warrior's Apprentice* and you'll be hooked: *Mirror Dance* won Bujold her third Hugo for best novel, and deservedly so.

1. *Brightness Reef*, David Brin

I was waiting eight years for this book, and it was worth the wait. Forget what I said about there being no order to these books: this book is my favourite book. Ever. Read *Startide Rising*, then read this. It's soooooooooooooo cool. Brin's last few books have all been excellent; if you don't want to read an Uplift novel (and there's no reason you shouldn't), check out *Glory Season*. But whatever else you read, read *Brightness Reef*.

So there you have it. As usual for these lists, I must mention those authors who deserve to be here but aren't; Jane Lindskold, Orson Scott Card, Harry Harrison, Philip K. Dick, Christopher Hinz, Maureen F. McHugh and Bob Shaw have all written books that I read again and again, but unfortunately 'ten' is a rather limiting number. Even if I were to switch number bases, hexadecimal wouldn't be sufficient. Ah, well.

Competition Time

Yes! Competition time again here, for no other reason than Forbidden Planet Dublin gave me a bunch of scripts for various movies. If you're interested in winning, for example, Premiere deluxe scripts for all three Indiana Jones Movies, then all you have to do is answer five simple questions.

There's a problem, though.

I haven't actually written the questions.

However, you're a bright bunch, and I'm sure you won't let tiny details like that stop you. Just send your five answers via the usual media to the usual addresses (to be found on page the second), and you could be in with a chance of winning... something.

ROCKET SCIENCE AND REALITY

P. McKinley

"Its like watching a walrus trying to scale a ladder" is how Marshall Savage describes NASA's attempts to get into space¹ and many space enthusiasts agree wholeheartedly. Certainly NASA's recent history has been a string of billion dollar cock-ups: Hubbell, Galileo, the Mars Observer. The international space station 'Alpha' doesn't inspire confidence either. The project is years behind schedule and has already spent double the original budget without a single piece of hardware reaching orbit. It keeps shrinking too; from a permanently manned seven person station to an intermittently manned four person station - if it gets any smaller we may see the first dwarf astronauts. In fact the whole 'Alpha' project seems to have more to do with awarding fat contracts to national aerospace firms than any real scientific objectives. Even the space shuttle itself, the promised reusable 'space truck' that was going to make space travel routine, costs between one and half a billion dollars per launch (win the Lottery every week for 5 years and you could just afford it) making it just about *the* most expensive way to get into orbit. NASA has pulled its socks up a little under its new director but only in response to serious calls from congress to scrap the whole damn thing.

There is no fundamental reason why achieving orbit should cost very much more than the fuel used to get there. Its expensive now because rockets are effectively one-off, precision engineering items that are thrown away after a single use. The shuttle is not much better since you only get part of it back and it takes thousands of people three months to patch it up between flights. There are better ways. For example, the Kistler Aerospace Corp are looking for just \$500 million (one shuttle flight!) for the design & production of their 'K' series reusable launchers and Pegasus air launched boosters offer (limited) access to orbit with minimal running costs - launch control is a couple of PC's for heaven's sake! The best known of these cheap launch systems is the Delta Clipper. Originally conceived by Gary Hudson (who called it 'Phoenix'), the 'Delta Clipper' was intended to operate more like an aeroplane than a traditional rocket. Eschewing the high performance philosophy of NASA where engineering excellence is pursued well past the point of diminishing returns, its Air Force designers settled for a craft utilising relatively heavy and simple but also cheap and reliable technologies. The DC-X sub scale prototype cost \$60 million³ and certainly seemed to bare out that decision by having a very successful flight record, even surviving an emergency landing after an engine blow out (go on - try that on a shuttle or Ariane rocket). With launch costs a tiny fraction of NASA's and the ability to launch every few days, the Clipper could have made spaceflight available to almost every country and many private corporations. Of course the Clipper may not have worked - it was still in the non-orbital prototype stage - but it was looking good. However, the funding evaporated along with the intended 'Star Wars' payloads and the DC-X fell into NASA's hands. Busy with their own flying money-pits they were at a bit of a loss as to what to do with it. They added a bunch of dubious 'improvements' to the prototype and managed to blow it to pieces on its first test flight. No new version is planned despite the original's successes. It seems NASA are glad to see the back of an embarrassingly cheap launcher. So, if NASA's intention is to explore, industrialise & colonise space then they are going about it in a spectacularly ham-fisted fashion. Why should that be?

Governments always consider the military implications of new technology first and so should we. For starters: satellite reconnaissance got much of the kudos for the relatively bloodless victory in the Gulf War. Would things have gone so smoothly if Saddam Hussain could have launched an orbiter a day to track *American* troop movements? Want to know the latest on Lockheed's 'Skunk Works'? Do one orbit with perigee (closest approach to Earth) at 80 or 100 miles and see for yourself. Every two-bit dictator would own his own orbital spy plane and every ecological organisation could hire one - no more secrets. You might like that, governments don't. Then of course there's the big fear, the one that's been haunting the military since 1957: nuclear bombardment from space. There are already a distressingly large number of nations with nuclear capacity, not all of them friendly, and their number can only grow. In a world where thousands of orbiters cross US territory every year to service a growing space industry early warning systems and interceptors would be useless. An enemy could get a nuclear bomber within a few minutes strike range of *anywhere* undetected. You don't even have to use bombs. How about a few tons of Anthrax spores wafted over New York or a mile wide Sarin cloud rolling down the Hollywood hills? The attacking country need not even fear retaliation as tracing the source could be difficult and if it were discovered a few military or religious 'fanatics' could be blamed and put on show trial. Hell, just call it an accident and send commiserations when your 45 ton spaceplane impacts at hypersonic velocity on Capitol Hill. So sorry but

accidents do happen - remember Skylab? OK, its expensive on spaceplanes but there are a number of countries who would consider it a bargain.

The Americans don't need a cheap orbiter to do these things. They have ICBM's, spy satellites and military bases around the globe. What they need is for other countries *not* to be able to do them. Economic and social benefits from a cheap launch system and space industry are virtually an act of faith among the converted (and may indeed be essential for the survival of our species) but to hard-headed military men and short-term politicians the advantages are nebulous while the threats are clear. America is spending considerable time and effort to prevent nuclear and ICBM technology from falling into unfriendly hands. It seems unlikely to say the least that they would allow, much less encourage, the spread of an equivalently dangerous system.

What of private launch contractors then? Surely they could do with a radically cheaper delivery system? Well, not really. The satellite market is already pretty over-subscribed with a large number of national and private companies chasing a limited annual launch requirement. It would only take two operating Delta Clippers (or something like them), launching every three or four days at a few million dollars a time, to corner the market and put almost all commercial operators out of business. Perhaps industrial activity in orbit might increase to compensate but would *you* bet your mortgage on it? At best a cheap launch system would mean a drastic reduction in profits for several years.

So, what is NASA's role in all this. Firstly, to take any promising launch system such as the Delta Clipper and kill it with bureaucracy (or big explosions). Form study groups, do engineering reports, increase efficiency by adding ludicrously non-cost-effective technology and get committees to investigate every change. A few years down the line the project is just one more of hundreds in the organisation that have an illusory kind of progress but are actually going nowhere. The second role is perhaps the most important and that is to maintain the *image* of space flight as difficult, hideously expensive and a waste of time. The DC-X sub-scale prototype cost a few tens of millions of dollars, peanuts by normal launcher development standards. A couple of hundred million might have produced an orbiter. Another couple of hundred million might have produced an assembly line. That's a lot of money - about as much as one shuttle launch - but there are countries spending more now to acquire nuclear weapons. The only way to prevent some 'rogue nation' from developing orbital bombers and sharing the high ground with the US is to make them believe that its simply not economically feasible. A series of high profile, high cost, low reliability projects would do just fine. Clearly then NASA's role is not to encourage the spread of people and industry into space but to *slow it down*.

This is not to say that launch system operators wouldn't like cheaper launch systems. A nice safe incremental cost reduction of 25% say, obtained by the use of advanced materials and technologies, would be useful. Commercial and government operators would have a substantial saving and maintain profit margins while 'leading edge' technologies would be beyond the reach of unfriendly countries. NASA's latest toy is a proposed shuttle replacement from Lockheed. Tagged the 'X-33' the non-orbital, half scale prototype is budgeted at \$900 million - 15 times the DC-X's price tag for an equivalent test vehicle. Edward Crowley, head of aeronautics at MIT and member of the panel which reviewed several launcher proposals is quoted as saying that the X-33 "pushes the technology most, which is in NASA's and the nation's best interests" ⁴. A nation of aerospace company shareholders, paranoid generals and greasy-palmed senators. The US Air Force is also spending \$2 billion on the EELV project - Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle⁵ - essentially throwaway rockets to replace their ageing Titan boosters for military satellites. If cost were a primary factor in either of these projects it would hardly seem sensible to throw away the cheap and successful DC-X then start over on something vastly more expensive.

Perhaps my reasoning is a tad paranoid. After all, you would think someone would have rumbled it by now. Still, I've aired this theory in a couple of national magazines in Britain (circulation 50,000 plus) and nobody has pointed out a logical flaw - in fact response has been very disappointing. If anyone out there can show me where I'm wrong I'll be happy (nay, ecstatic!) to admit my error.

References:

1. "The Millennial Project" by Marshall T. Savage, Little Brown & Company, 1994.
2. "Space Clipper Comes of Age" by Arlan Andrews, New Scientist, 12th Aug 95.
3. "The First Reusable SSTO Spacecraft" by W. Paul Blase, Spaceflight, Mar 93.
4. "Heir to the Shuttle Pushes the Limits" by Jeff Hecht, New Scientist, 13th July 96.
5. "This Week", Vincent Kiernan, New Scientist, 9th Sept 95.

Book Reviews

*The Lost World, Michael Crichton, Arrow,
Paperback, £5.99, 430pp*

Reading a book is a voyage of discovery. I set out on my journey to *The Lost World* beset by preconceptions. Some of them I had absorbed from elsewhere: Crichton is not a good writer. Some are merely on-going prejudices: Sequels are inevitably an inferior cash-in. Some were sheer prejudice against the follow-up to a highly successful product: *The Lost World* will turn out to have been written as a template for a film script rather than as a genuine novel.

Not all of my preconceptions were wrong, but the overall effect of reading the novel was to disarm my prejudices and confound many of the criticisms inherent in them. Yes, it definitely appears to be a template for a film, but that is not necessarily an entirely bad thing. A lot of the padding which seems to be a requirement for modern novels - perhaps so that they can be touted as a member of that most exclusive, elusive and extraordinarily marketable sub-genre, the blockbuster - can be dispensed with. As a sequel to *Jurassic Park*, a pre-novelisation of the film, *The Lost World*, and the latest offering from the pen of the mighty Michael Crichton, it will already command a market no matter how many, or how few, pages it takes to tell the story.

But as a film template, and the basis for the sequel to a highly successful Hollywood movie, it must necessarily follow certain guidelines dictated by the studios rather than the dramatic and narrative requirements of the novel. Why else would two children be imposed upon a plot which just won't make room for them. One must wonder, given the way they seem to be shoe-horned in there, that they were an afterthought. If they were not, then perhaps Crichton is not as good a novelist as he and his publishers would like to think.

But if you can suspend your disbelief, as you must in science fiction, and ignore the plot holes and lack of motivation for the appearance of the children - they stow away like a couple of refugees from Enid Blyton - and the necessary stupidity of the highly intelligent and specialised team which allows their presence, then everything is hunky dory. Unfortunately Crichton does not make it easy. Still, as I say, if you can....

The characters need, and are given, little introduction. Although the cast has changed -and in the spirit of my previous Hollywood preconceptions I must wonder how much this was due to the possible unavailability of the stars of the previous epic - in the main the new bunch are merely replacements for the old. Some time is spent on the kids because the old ones would have grown up so we need a new batch. The rest are just ciphers, there only to move the action forward.

Given all that I have said so far, you would imagine I did not enjoy *The Lost World*. Wrong. It was a good, fast-paced read and a thoroughly enjoyable piece of entertainment. Like most of the commercial product which comes out of Hollywood, it is totally disposable. It will hold your interest while you read it and repay the time invested with a commensurate portion of enjoyment. But once you put it down it will be wiped clean from your brain - rather like the tape that self-destructs in that other blockbuster - *Mission Impossible*. Though it may take slightly longer than five seconds.

Robert Neilson

*Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind, C.D.B.
Bryan, Orion, Paperback, £6.99, 607pp*

With a title like that what else could CE4K be about, except UFOs. The subtitle to this painstakingly researched piece of reportage is Alien Abduction and UFOs. Witnesses and Scientists Report. C.D.B. Bryan is a journalist who was invited to attend a 'scientific conference to assess the similarities and differences in the findings of various investigators studying people who report experiences of abduction by aliens, and the related issues of this phenomenon.' It was the type of circular letter that would normally have ended up in his bin. Being seen to take alien abductions in any way seriously is a sure route to dodgy credibility. But the credentials of the investigators were first rate - the types of minds to command respect in any circumstances.

Though a complete sceptic, he decided to attend, and to keep an open mind. The result of his attendance at the conference is an extraordinary book which is presented as pure reportage with Bryan's voice imposing but seldom, mainly to express his growing doubts about the preconceptions he had brought to the conference.

The people in attendance, both scientists and abductees, were not trying to persuade anyone of the reality of alien abductions. They were gathered together in a shared attempt to explain a phenomenon which is, to most people, beyond belief.

The conference itself, and a number of interviews with abductees held later, is presented in a matter-of-fact manner. There is no attempt made by Bryan to persuade his readers one way or the other. He simply presents the facts and the testimony he has gathered for our examination. It is up to the readers to form their own opinions.

This is a fascinating piece of journalism and deserves the attention of everyone with even the smallest interest in the UFO phenomenon, no matter which side of the belief divide they stand upon. Personally, I have always found it difficult to put any credence in alien abduction stories and tended to view them as the productions of sick minds, if not out-and-out fraud. Perhaps now, I will find it more difficult to dismiss the phenomenon out of hand. Next thing you know I'll be reading Whitley Streiber.

Robert Neilson

*Ancient Echoes, Robert Holdstock, Voyager,
Hardback, UK£15.99, 343 pp*

Robert Holdstock has come a long way since *Mythago Wood* in which he first presented his Jungian myth images of ancient beasts and peoples, remembrances not of past lives but of the very fabric from which our legends and myths were created. Many of the figures which roamed the dark edges of Ryhope Wood were the archetypes for the gods, demi-gods and heroes of British and European folklore. But not only were the inhabitants of the mystical forest myth images, but vast tracts of the greenwood existed not in our tangible world but in that elsewhere of the mind. So perhaps it was only logical for his imaginings to progress from there to an entire myth city of the communal psyche.

Jack Chatwin has experienced visions since he was a child. But his visions produce tangible evidence of their existence beyond the confines of his mind. There are sounds and smells which linger afterwards. An aura can be observed when he is in the throes of his visions. What he sees are two primitive figures with painted faces - Greyface and Greenface, whom he calls bullrunners - a brother and sister who run endlessly and are pursued endlessly.

He is introduced to John Garth who is involved in the excavation of an ancient city beneath Jack's home town of Exburgh. Garth is a city dowser who has sought the mythago city of Glanum for many years. Part of it may be beneath Exburgh, perhaps even an entryway to the elusive city. Garth believes Jack's bullrunners may be connected to Glanum and befriends the boy. And when Garth finally finds the elusive Glanum the boy is with him and witnesses the extraordinary events at the end of his quest which result in the city dowser's disappearance.

As an adult, Jack enters into experiments to investigate his bullrunners. But events come to a head when the male, Greyface, breaks free of Jack and takes corporeal form. The bullrunner wants his sister-wife to follow him and believes Jack can force her out, even against her wishes. In order to enlist Jack's help Greyface kidnaps his young daughter. Though she is returned, Greyface keeps what he terms a shadow of her which also takes on a life of its own. He explains to Jack that the shadow will drain his daughter's vitality, personality and her very future unless he co-operates.

The story of Jack's internal search for Greenface, the inner landscape through which he treks in pursuit of her and the connections between the bullrunners and the mystical city of Glanum deepen, becoming ever more intriguing as Holdstock weaves another of his resonant tales of ancient mythic wonder. This is how fantasy should be. What he has created in *Ancient Echoes*, as with the remainder of his mythago novels, comes not only from his own mind but from some deep well of group memory into which we can all dip. It is this commonality which gives his mythagos the power to affect us at the basest of levels, even below conscious thought. If we can believe him, all of us can access these images. And somehow, it feels true. Which may explain the underlying power of his writing. Read *Ancient Echoes* for yourself and see. It is not necessary to have read any of the other mythago novels, this stands alone on every level and is his best since *Lavondyss*.

Robert Neilson

*Daemonic, Stephen Laws, NEL, Paperback,
UK£5.99, 488 pp*

I should know better. *Daemonic* has a cover which appealed to me on some level I cannot explain or access with my rational mind. I liked it immediately. I wanted it. To have. To hold. To

possess. Sick, huh? Then I flipped it over and read the blurb. Always a mistake, unless you have all your wits about you. The guys who write the back cover stuff are not paid for their ability to accurately portray the worth of the book. They are paid to hook you, by whatever means possible. Either fair or foul. Bastards. They got me again, even though the villain of the piece had a stupid name like Jack Draegerman. I should have listened to that tiny voice somewhere in the far back of my mind that protested. 'Nothing with a character named Draegerman can be anything but crap.' But I didn't listen. I shut him up and, despite an odd feeling of unease (which has nothing to do with the fact that it is a horror novel), set about the task of wading into it.

First chapter: brilliant. Grabs you by the scruff of the neck and demands you read faster. Keep turning those pages. Second chapter. Good, but too like the first chapter. Third chapter: uh-oh. Somebody (Draegerman's heavies) is gathering a bunch of people together for some inexplicable reason. Mostly they go like lambs (to the slaughter, we know, inevitably). Each of those gathered is introduced. We see their background, their failings, get a flavour of their lives, and get a chance to sympathise with (some of) them. Already, before the collecting is even finished, you can begin to list them in order of death and cut out the eventual survivors from the herd. It's that type of novel. It could be nothing else.

Then we meet Draegerman's rock. Stupid name for a building. It's part office block part gothic castle, all fortress. And it's one of the main characters in the book.

Hold it. Hold it right there. Haven't we passed this way sometime before? A novel called Darkfall? By one Stephen Laws? People gathered into a building. An office block tower, all glass and concrete and malevolence. Who will live, who will die? The building as the main antagonist. Hasn't this been done, and by the same author?

Count the questions. Supply the same number of yesses. Apart from the cosmetic differences - different characters, different reason for the building become semi-sentient - this is merely Darkfall revisited. Maybe it's a little better, maybe it's not. It's hard to really give a shit. Daemonic is a little longer - make that a good deal longer - and therefore a little more detailed. But it also drags a bit. A good bit. Too many times I found myself skipping sections where I just knew what had to happen and really I just wanted to get to the next bit that moved the plot along.

All in all Daemonic is little more than adequate hackwork with little originality. There are too many places where the pace falls off, too many places where you can stop and see the cracks Laws has tried to paper over. Too many times when you ask yourself where you saw this all before: which bit of what novel this is and is it any better than the original. Much as I wanted to like this book I found it impossible. The cover is still good though and I'd really love a print of it. If Jon Blake, the artist responsible, ever gets to see this, drop me a line and let me know if it's possible to get hold of commercially.

Robert Neilson

VENOM - Carnage Unleashed by Larry Hama (writer) & too many artists to mention, Bostree, Graphic Novel, £8.99

This is a run of four comics packaged together as a graphic novel. It has a beginning, a middle and an end - and in that order - a plot, sub-plots, characters and, wonder of wonders, a satisfying story which is completed within the covers. The artwork is excellent throughout and the story is well thought out and well executed. There is even consideration given to those who might not know the backgrounds to the central characters: enough background material is worked seamlessly (well, fairly seamlessly) into the guts of the story so that you need never have picked up a marvel comic before in your life to follow this one.

Venom is an anti-hero in the classic mould. His intentions are good, he values law and order, unlike most citizens he goes out of his way to prevent crime but unfortunately he puts a pretty low value on human life. He also has the potential to be extraordinarily destructive. Venom is Eddie Brock, a human who hosts a powerful alien symbiote. His alter ego is Carnage, a similar human/alien partnering with one critical difference - Cletus Kasady, the human part of the symbiotic relationship is a sociopathic serial killer.

As our story opens Kasady is interred in an escape-proof mental facility where he is subjected to extensive study. His only perk is a computer terminal on which he plays games - specifically the game invented to retell his adventures, which he is play-testing. Unfortunately, the computer is remotely linked to the games manufacturer and the alien portion of Carnage is able to 'extrude itself as a molecular filament and travel along communication cables.' So it escapes to once more confront its mortal enemy Venom.

All in all this is an intelligent comic book which tells its story from the character's viewpoint rather than relying on mere graphic violence (of which there is plenty) to carry the reader along.

Robert Neilson

STAR WARS

The Galactic Empire - Ships of the Fleet & The Rebel Alliance - Ships of the Fleet, Bill Smith, Boxtree, Hardback, UK£11.99 each

Maybe it's my age. My three year old loved these but he doesn't have the manual dexterity to handle them without ripping the shit out of them. I find it difficult to open them without wanting to rip the shit out of them.

They're pop-up books. If there is a market for Star Wars merchandise among the under-tens (I'm being generous here in case ten year olds aren't as mature as I think) then these will probably fit right in. The technical specs which are, I suppose, the surface reason for publishing something like this (though what something else like this might be I have no idea), are laid out in quasi-engineering formats and utilise *faux* engineering terminology, but the content is almost zero and the substance even less. Why didn't they just say things like this is a VERY big spaceship which fires lights that go KABOOM when they hit the enemy? At least that would be honest.

I have to admit a bias against this sort of merchandising gone wild. These books are bad value (there are ten pages in each, including the inside of the front and back covers). They give Star Wars merchandise a bad name. They have no intrinsic merit whatsoever. Nobody with an IQ in treble figures could possibly get any entertainment from them. Shame on you, George Lucas. And the ship you rode in on.

Robert Neilson

Stephen Malone

Memory, Lois McMaster Bujold, Baen, £15.99, pp462

Those of you who deign to read this humble organ will doubtless be aware that your editor has more than a passing fondness for the work of Lois McMaster Bujold. Indeed, the life of Miles Vorkosigan has been followed with keen interest, back and forth as various novels jump in time: Cetaganda – the last one – took place when Miles

was 22. Memory is the latest (chronologically) and Miles hits 30.

Remember back in *Mirror Dance* when Miles died? (if you don't, then don't ask). It seems that his revival caused one or two problems, not least of which is a tendency to black out under stress. That's a bit of a pisser for most of us, but when you're leading a mercenary fleet to rescue a Barrayaran diplomat, it can get really messy. Particularly if at the wrong moment your handy-dandy plasma arc cuts his legs off.

Jokes about a low-down bum aside, Miles makes a rather unfortunate decision, and tries to bullshit Illyan, his boss. Not smart, and soon Miles finds himself out of work because of his willful participation in a campaign of misinformation. But Miles being Miles, it's not long before he finds himself knee deep in treachery, death and melodrama.

As with every Bujold book, this is a tome to be read in one sitting. The fluidity of the narration dupes you into thinking that you're reading another light-hearted romp a la *The Warrior's Apprentice*, and it's only upon resurfacing after many hours that you realise that you're read a damn fine book that contains a lot more than a frenetic Miles running around playing admiral.

Although mentioned peripherally, Mark makes no appearance in this book, and as *Mirror Dance* was about Mark's attempts to discover his true identity, so does Memory recount a similar struggle in Miles: his he really a Vor lord, or Admiral Naismith? As he finds himself out of ImpSec and looking for purpose, he can no longer use the Dendarii without committing treason, so it looks as if a choice has to be made.

Once again, Bujold has delivered the goods, and given us a truly wonderful novel. If you haven't started reading her, don't wait until she wins another Hugo, pick up this (or any) novel, sit back and enjoy the ride.

Robert Elliott

The Anime! Movie Guide, Helen McCarthy, Titan, tpb, £9.99

What it isn't : A complete list of every anime ever made. Nor is it a cute, easy-to-read book like McCarthy's early *Beginner's Guide to Anime*. What it is is a year-by-year list of some of the more important and popular films and OAVs to be made in the last ten years or so. And a pretty nifty reference it is, too.

Not that even the most hardened anime fan will be reading it religiously. Actually, now that I think

of it. I do know one or two otaku out there who'll do just that, simply so they can bore passers by with their knowledge and sophistication. These are the people who watch *Robotech* and tell you the names of the series whence it's derived, the actors, the directors and chief artists. You know, *trekkism* is no longer exclusive to *trekkies*. God help us.

But I digress. Those of us of a more rational bent will appreciate this book every month when Manga release their slew of titles that you've never heard of. And while I'll be the first to applaud Manga for their dedication to the genre and to the overall quality of their releases, there are a fair few that stink to high heaven. A browse through this might save you a few quid; assuming, that is, that you're willing to trust Helen McCarthy's judgement. And I've got to say, she's pretty spot on most of the time (if you translated that to mean 'she agrees with Robert,' well done).

If you're interested in anime as a genre, it's interesting. If you're just interested in watching good movies, then it's about as fascinating as Leonard Maltin's video guide. Personally, I think it's a cool book. You'll have to make up your own mind.

Robert Elliott

Honor Amongst Enemies. David Weber. Baen, 454 pages. £15.99, hb

I've said it before: David Weber wants to be Lois McMaster Bujold when he grows up. Every new Honor Harrington novel seems to confirm this opinion, and he doesn't disappoint with the latest installment.

To go over the plot would be meaningless. Suffice it to say that Honor takes the usual shit from both allies and enemies, faces insurmountable odds and comes out not only alive, but victorious. Oopsie, did I ruin the ending? Sorry 'bout that, but if you've read the previous five novels about our eponymous heroine, you'll know what to expect. Actually, you'll know *exactly* what to expect.

Not that I'm complaining, of course. The fact that the novel presents nothing, er, novel is limiting, but no-one reads Harrington novels for the intricate and complex plots. Bollocks to that; we want to see Honor kick Peep ass, and if she happens to boot some traitorous Manty in the goolies while she's at it, so much the better.

Oh, I haven't mentioned the highlight of the book, have I? Silly me. How could I possibly forget the wonderful flip book that comes free? Yesiree, at the top of every page (well, for the first four

hundred, anyway) you get to see a ship blowing up if you flip the pages in the right direction. Flip them the wrong way and you're breaking the second law of thermodynamics, so I don't recommend it.

the flip book is incredibly cheesy, and raised quite a giggle from your humble servant as he read. But giggle I may have, but I also read the book in a single night (the night after I stayed up reading *Memory*, in fact. It was a bad week for sleep).

Weber's detail of space battles is superb, and so consistent that six books in, you're formulating your own strategies to extricate Honor from her latest peril. Calculating velocities, figuring angles, all the stuff that should be in every space battle and isn't: it'll be a long time before people realise that X-Wings or even (dare! dare!) Star Furies can't fight the way they're depicted; not if they want to obey the laws of physics, anyway.

Okay, so Honor Harrington isn't Cordelia Naismith. But if you're looking for some nifty action, characters that actually develop over the course of several books and some shit-kicking space battles, then pick up *On Basilisk Station*, the first of the Harrington novels. If you've already read it, then chances are you're now on the way to the bookshop for your copy of the sixth.

Robert Elliott

World War : Upsetting the Balance, Harry
*Turtledove*NEL, pb, pp468, £5.99

First the good news - there is a new "World War.." book out. The bad news is - the series is not a trilogy. This is the third instalment following on from "World War: In The Balance" and "World War: Tilting The Balance" but nothing is brought to a finish. Plot threads from the first two books are followed up but, for the most part, continued rather than concluded. For those of you not familiar with the series its something along the lines of "Winds of War" meets "V". Hideous reptilian aliens (how come they're always reptilian, why can't we have a race of soft, furry, puppy-eyed aliens who go around raping cities and burning the womenfolk?) arrive at Earth just at the peak of WW2 with the intention of adding the world to their empire. Unfortunately for them technology has moved along since their probe discovered medieval earth and instead of facing swords and arrows they must contend with tanks and planes. The story is told via the trials and tribulations of a dozen disparate characters as the warring sides unite against the aliens - a German tank

commander, an American GI, a Russian pilot etc. There are also several continuing alien characters to give an all-round perspective.

The "World War..." series is escapist entertainment in the best sense. There is action and drama, daring-do and romance. The characters are sympathetic, well drawn and distinct so that the dozen or so sub-plots can all be followed with ease even when they occasionally intersect. The writing is clear and straightforward in the traditional pot-boiler style and the pages all but turn themselves. However, to enjoy these books to their fullest you will have to ignore a couple of holes big enough to fly an alien invasion fleet through. To start with the aliens are very much generic SF bad guys and what a set of wombats they are. Though possessed of nuclear weapons they conveniently refrain from erasing the Earth's armies with them for fear of spoiling the real-estate for the following colonists. They have an orbiting space fleet but never seem to think of using laser weapons from space or dropping radiation-clean kinetic bombs. All the fighting is done on the ground or in the air exactly as if they were armed with just modern-day weapons. The aliens must take cities and mount bombing raids just like any terrestrial army and they are unbelievably awful at it. Of course this is a necessary assumption as, realistically, any invading fleet would be so superior as to render opposition futile and the story a novella. Still, its hard to swallow even for me and I'm good at ignoring inconstancies for the sake of a good story. If you don't think you can manage the giant suspension of disbelief and want a realistic story of alien invasion try Niven and Pournell's "Footfall". If you want a slightly hokey but highly enjoyable read try the "World War..." series.

P. McKinley

Engines of God, Jack McDevitt, Voyager, 419 pages, £5.99

The tag line on the cover of this book reads "Classic Sense-Of-Wonder SF meets the X-Files". The ubiquitous 'look, this is just like the X-Files so you'll like it' style of advertising is beginning to grate a bit. You know, like when every fantasy novel was the best thing since "Lord of the Rings" and every space opera equalled the breadth and scope of "Star Trek". Well...that last bit is an exaggeration but the Tolkien stuff is true though. However, despite the superfluous X-Files connection "Engines of God" is a decent little book.. Essentially its an archaeological mystery

story. The protagonist, Pricilla Hutchins, is a starship pilot for a scientific academy investigating the mysterious race called the Monument Makers. This long vanished species built (surprise, surprise) monuments and curious fake cities on the moons of various inhabited worlds between 5000 and 25,000 years ago then disappeared without a trace. Who were these mysterious beings, why did they build their odd structures, why do the fake cities look all burned and blasted and why do the records of civilisation on the inhabited worlds record periodic collapses? Is there a connection? Of course there bloody is! And naturally enough its pilot Pricilla who, with very little deliberation indeed, puts together the clues and not the hundreds of archaeologists who've been puzzling over the problem for decades. Ah well, such stuff as heroes are made of. Anyway, back to the plot. Interesting as the main story is it might pall a bit over 400 pages were it not for the sub plots. There is tension between the scientists and a terraforming project who want to transform an abandoned world which just happens to be the archaeologist's prime sight. There is drama as Pricilla and her team are stranded on a slowly freezing starship. There is action as a landing party is hunted by semi-intelligent insects. In fact all the ingredients are here for a first rate space-opera but... Ah, the ever present 'but'. The characterisation is merely adequate. There are numerous subsidiary characters, mostly archaeologists, whom it is difficult to separate and even the central character, Pricilla, is for the most part unengaging and ordinary. The background, Earth, the inhabited worlds, star travel etc. lacks depth or conviction. Its clear they are just elements to support the plot and there is never a convincing feeling of a big, independently existing universe behind the central story. That said, "Engines of God" is quite a decent read - its just not top division. You won't feel cheated of your £5.99 or disappointed by the answers supplied though they do raise a whole other set of questions and perhaps a sequel.

P. McKinley

GOLD by Isaac Asimov, Voyager (Harper Collins) paperback, pp430 £5.99.

This, according to the editors, is the first original collection of Asimov's writing since 1982. Clearly, sifting through the waste bins for torn up rejects and sellotaping them together must have

been a time consuming job. They managed it though and here we have presented the sort of

fourth rate literary scrapings that would have even old Isaac cringing in embarrassment. Though tagged "The Final Science Fiction Collection", less than a third of the book is comprised of actual 'stories' (and here I use the phrase in its loosest sense). The rest is, amazingly, a collection of his introductions from other writer's anthologies and editorials from what I assume is the Asimov SF magazine. The introductions, usually a thousand or two words, are from various themed collections so we can read Asimov's casual comments on robots stories, flying saucer stories, alien invasion stories etc. - the literary equivalent of notes to the milkman. The last section, the editorials, are the strongest part of a very weak book. They are generally musings on the writing of Science Fiction - plotting, dialogue, symbolism etc. - and writer's lot in life. By no means a tutorial on 'how to' write they nevertheless contain so much of interest for anyone aspiring to write professionally that "Gold" will be an essential purchase.

I don't actually like writing nasty things about any author's work. Anybody who's had an article or story rejected will know the shocked disbelief which follows the realisation that other people can be indifferent to, or even actively dislike, the work you've sweated over and poured your heart into. Its especially painful to dump on the works of one of the founders of modern SF for, despite the heavy criticism of his later works, few would deny Asimov's vast influence on the field. He has written entertaining, puzzling and gripping stories as well as highly enjoyable and informative non-fiction articles. But this ain't them. One for wannabe writers and completists only.

P. McKinley

Excession, Iain M. Banks, Orbit, pp453 £15.99.

Hurrah! Another 'Culture' novel by Iain Banks. I should say straight out that I'm a big fan of the Culture - in fact I passed up Larry Niven's "The Ringworld Throne" to splurge my meagre funds on this book. That doesn't necessarily mean that I like Iain Bank's work in general. *Feersum Endjinn* was a big idea squeezed into a small book and the idiosyncratic spelling makes it hard going while "Against A Dark Background" has great characters and a richly detailed background but, like seventies pop songs, fades away without coming to any sort of real conclusion. Alas, *Excession* suffers from the opposite problem, for while the scope is broad with the usual entertainingly reworked SF clichés, mile long

spaceships, robots, interstellar war etc., the central premise is woefully thin. The plot is woven around the appearance of a black sphere, an excession - a possible gate into other universes. Some ship 'Minds' try to use the event to precipitate a war with an alien culture called the Affront. Some other Minds try to trace the stored personality of a ship captain who encountered a similar sphere thousands of years ago and who may have subconscious information. That's it. It could be an exciting story full of drama and discovery but nothing much actually happens. The excession just sits there most of the time and, except for a brief bit of activity at the end, it does nothing. Much of the plot information is conveyed via extended conversations between ships which are very hard to keep track of as they are nearly identical in style. People and ships race from point to point in an unengaging fashion and to no good purpose. The romantic entanglements between the three main characters could almost come straight from 'Brookside' and the characters themselves are the sort of tedious, self-obsessed boors you would try to avoid at a party.

There are some good points of course. As usual the best characters are drones and aliens and they get the best lines - any book which contains the phrase "Well Na Na, Ne Fucking Na Na to you then picklebrains" can't be all bad. The Affront are a great race of 'jolly good fellows' and sadists to a man (or tentacled gasbag as the case may be). It would have been nice, though very non-P.C., to see more of them and their culture. Oh, and the last-minute escape by a small drone from the clutches of the excession is exciting. Still, wait for the paperback. Then borrow it from a friend.

P. McKinley

Small Press Review

Albedo One #11, £2.50

With its eleventh issue, I suddenly noticed that *Albedo One* costs £2.50. Has it been like that for a while now, and I was just too busy grumbling about the increasing price of paperbacks, or is this the first issue? Who cares? As Ireland's only regular SF zine, £2.50 is a small price to pay to keep it going. Assuming, that is, that it's worth reading.

Let us ignore the thirteen pages of book reviews (well written to be sure, but I'd still prefer fewer reviews and an extra story), comment briefly on the Harry Harrison interview – "Informative, well-written and entertaining" – and proceed to the heart of the issue: the fiction.

The first story – "Downtime with the Virtual Dead" – sucks. A hackneyed cyberpunk tale infested with the street jargon that was so stylish in *Neuromancer* (twelve years ago), the story is by no means strong enough to overcome the irritation the reader feels upon reading the word "ultraspeedy" in the first paragraph. Mike O'Driscoll has written much better.

Cathy Buburuz' "The Delvinico Triplet" is short, but well-written and finishes nicely. The fantastic element is incidental, but to say more would be pointless. Suffice it so suggest that you read this story as an example of what the short short should be, but rarely is.

If only Tiernan Ivory would listen. Although by no means as bad as the execrable "Balloons" – his previous offering to this magazine – "Exorcism" is pointless but may prove interesting if expanded into an actual story.

Trey R. Barker can usual be relied on to provide a story that is at least readable, and "This Way" is no exception. A character-driven piece, it's nothing new but nonetheless is enjoyable and justifies Barker's continued presence in these pages.

Finally, "Progeny," Charles Robertson's latest offering. The issue's longest story, it's easily the best. The theme is an old one – aren't they all? -- but very well executed and with an ending that, while hardly a twist, isn't wholly predictable and overall a satisfying finish to an excellent tale.

So there you have it. With three good stories out of five, issue eleven bucks the trend: a point not lost on the writer of this issue's rant, which has a go at 'experimental' zines. It's a point with which I whole-heartedly agree, which of course means I liked the piece a lot.

Albedo One #11 isn't the best issue so far, but it's of a sufficient standard that it maintains the magazine's position as Ireland's last, best hope for fiction and as a magazine that stands head and shoulders over the vast majority of British small press.

Robert Elliott