

# First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

November, 1996

ISSN 0791-3966

## Inside First Contact...

### Forthcoming Books

Okay, November's generally a lousy month for new titles, but we've managed to find one or two that are worth reading. Check out the best of the new releases on page 3.

### Octocon

I remember everything. The attendees wore green, the staff wore purple. Find out what happened at the science fiction event of the year.

### The X-Files

The truth is in... damn. Nearly said it. Just so you know, the month of October saw four magazines write 'The Truth is In Here' on the cover. It's going beyond a feeble lack of imagination: it's becoming a virus. Anyway, forget all that and read our review of File 6, which includes an episode that won't be seen on TV until February.

### The Crow : City of Angels

Boy, did it suck. Sorry to ruin the review like that, but Lord, I hated that film. Find out why, and whether I managed to write a whole page without resorting to expletives.

### Magic : Mirage

If you're wondering what a Magic Mirage is, you obviously don't play the game that's sold cards in the billions. If you've already got your white weenie deck, then you can find out how a Benevolent Unicorn can make life easier.

## Theorists Dismayed

The world's conspiracy theorists were in shock recently at the news that NASA's next Mars probe will fly over the area of the planet known as Cydonia and take photographs of the now-legendary 'Mars Face,' posting them directly to the internet as they come in. Books have been written and doubtless fortunes made on how NASA at the behest of the American military covered up evidence of intelligent life on Mars and on the Moon. As the photographs come in and show the rock to be, well, a rock, First Contact editors the world over are expecting a flurry of new conspiracy claims. I'll bet money on people calculating a lower time delay than the one that occurs, thus giving NASA time to doctor the photographs.

## Shock at Trek Premiere Prices

Although Gates McFadden and Michael Dorn will be appearing at the Irish premiere of *Star Trek : First Contact* (no relation, and we were here first), it looks as if they'll be there without a major chunk of Irish fanboydom. At £30 a pop, people have been avoiding tickets in droves, preferring to wait the few days and see it for a more reasonable fiver.

## Millions to attend ISFA Knees-Up

It's unconfirmed so far, but it looks as if Marvin Millions, the celebrated Best Boy, may possibly attend the ISFA's annual Christmas bash in the Ormonde hotel this year. Keep scouring the city for futher details on what promises to be the social event of the evening. First Tuesday in December, that's, er, hold on till I call up this calendar... the third. I knew that. December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Be there.

## Editorial

You know, every month I find something new to do rather than type in this newsletter. Usually it's something simple like six hours of Scrabble or Rogue, but I've found a new delay tactic. I've got a directory full of Dilbert cartoon strips, and every time I click on my trusty 'Change Wallpaper' icon, I get a new one. It's now 5:34am, and I've typed less than half a page. Be warned: computers don't save you time. They just mean you have more fun while wasting the few precious hours you have on this mortal coil.

But you hold this journal in your hand not to hear about the time-wasting abilities of your editor (prodigious though they may be); you want to hear about science fiction. You want to read stuff. And by jingo, read stuff you shall. Last month I mentioned that I was getting pissed of with the news, and the feedback has been unprecedented. No fewer than three people have told me that they want the news back, not caring how arbitrary or incomplete it was. Seeing as that's the most feedback I've ever had, I feel that I must comply, and thusly (I know that 'thusly' isn't a word, but I really like it) you'll find the news has returned. It is, as ever, entirely centred around stuff that I like and stuff that I can't avoid (Star Trek and David Eddings, for example), and as ever suggestions are invited as to how to improve it.

If you still want to enter last month's competition, by the way, you've still got time. I've extended the date, so you've got until sometime around the middle of November to get your answers in. If you don't know what the questions or (or, for that matter, the prizes), then it serves your right for not reading last month's newsletter.

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*First Contact* is published – well, let's be honest, photocopied – on the first Tuesday of every single month unless something happens. Everyone who writes for it – me and the other guy – retain all copyright on the stuff that they write. Even if it was written without the aid of coffee. I ran out two hours ago, so the tyops will start any second. This issue is dedicated to the wonderful staff of Gloria Jean's Gourmet Coffee shop in the Powerscourt Centre. God bless 'em. 'Cinnamon nut strudel' may sound like a stupid name for a coffee, but gosharoonie, you gotta smell the beans.

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**The Irish Science Fiction Association**

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Don't forget : this year's AGM is on 19<sup>th</sup> November. You've been notified, and I've just told you again. Now you've no excuse.

## News

### Trek vs Wars

Yes, the battle of the Stars continues with the question... who's got the cheesiest book? *Star Trek* held the top seventeen places, but *with I'd Just as Soon Kiss a Wookiee : The Quotable Star Wars* by Stephen J. Sansweet, *Star Wars* is back in contention. Imagine: 128 pages of trade paperback – a tenner, probably – full of quotes from a film that every nerd backwards, anyway. Coming from Del Rey and, I think, Boxtree.

### New Darwath Novel

God bless 'er, Barbara Hambly is returning to the world of her most successful trilogy in her new novel, *Mother of Winter*. Maybe now someone'll bring *Dragonsbane* back into print and make my month completely.

### New Roddenberry show in the works

A new science fiction television series from the mind of Gene Roddenberry is reportedly in pre-production. The show, called *Battleground Earth*, is based on a bible and script written by Roddenberry in the 1970s, although it has since been updated.

Majel Barrett Roddenberry is involved with the project, as are *Babylon 5* cronies Douglas Netter and John Copeland. *B5* creator Joe Michael Straczynski said he had been offered the opportunity to write the show's two-hour pilot, but he turned down the job so he could concentrate on his *B5* obligations.

### Critical Wave RIP

Pro-zine *Critical Wave* suspends publication

After nine years, 46 issues and an estimated 4 million words in print, *Critical Wave*, one of the most respected sources of science fiction and

fantasy information in the United Kingdom, will cease publication. Apparently, a couple of year's worth of miscalculated invoices are behind the magazine's sudden demise, which will publish one final issue, available to subscribers only.

### New Frezza Novel

'What?' you say. 'Who's Robert Frezza?' You guessed his first name, didn't you? Well, anyone who's read McLendon's *Syndrome* will be rushing to their local Del Rey stockist to pick up a copy of the sequel, *The VMR Theory*. According to Del Rey, it's the 'funniest sf since Bill the Galactic Hero' (exclamation marks have been omitted to avoid offending anyone). If you haven't read McLendon's *Syndrome*, do so immediately.

### Escape from Earth

Now, I'm not one to comment seeing as I haven't seen *Escape from L.A.*, but I watched *Escape from New York* on TV recently and boy, it sucked. If you disagree, you'll probably be happy to hear that John Carpenter hasn't ruled out a third movie. If there is one, he said, it'll be the last one and will be called *Escape from Earth*. Can't wait.

### Lucas to Direct *The Clone Wars*

It looks now as if it won't be out until 1999, but George Lucas will direct for the first time in nearly twenty years. As has been reported here as well as everywhere else, the three new *Star Wars* movies are being shot back to back to back, and it seems doubtful that Lucas will direct the second or third in this prequel trilogy, set about forty years before *Star Wars: A New Hope*.

### Books in November

You might want to look out for one or two of these, due out this month...

The Abductors : Conspiracy, **Jonathan Frakes**, Tor  
The Stainless Steel Rat Goes to Hell, **Harry Harrison**, Tor  
Rebel Moon, Theodore Beale & **Bruce Bethke**, Pocket Books  
Edgeworks II, **Harlan Ellison**, White Wolf  
Some Star Wars Books, who cares, Bantam  
Maskerade (PB), **Terry Pratchett**, Corgi  
Automated Alice, **Jeff Noon**, Doubleday  
The Game-Players of Titan, **Philip K. Dick**, Voyager

## Film Reviews

~~Siskel and Robert~~

### Independence Day

First of all, let me make a couple of things clear. If it's a coherent movie you're looking for, with a strong plot and believable characters, then look elsewhere. *Independence Day* is a hokey, badly-written excuse for a bunch of special effects that would get bounced by any self-respecting auteur. It's designed to appeal to the American Lowest Common Denominator, and doesn't contain a modicum that would challenge the brain. It's a big fight scene with a few slow-moving bits in the middle that have macho wisecracks included to make it bearable.

Having said that, I loved it.

It's all a case of approaching the cinema in the right frame of mind. I'd seen *Stargate*: I knew what Roland Emmerich was capable of. Not much (actually, I liked *Stargate* too, for pretty much the same reasons). If you're expecting something intelligent, coherent or even consistent then you're in for a disappointment. If, however, you go solely on the basis of the ad (which eclipsed *Mission Impossible* for me, by the way), then you'll know what to expect: sound and fury, but little substance.

The characters are stereotyped, but this doesn't stop Judd Hirsch, Brent Spiner or Will Smith hamming it up most enjoyably. The plot, as I've said, is ridiculous: the only thing that even causes a raised eyebrow is the explanation that the aliens aren't here in revenge for Roswell, but because that's they type of bastards they are. No responsibility for America, nosiree. Apart from that, feel free to giggle at the crop duster who learns to fly a fighter jet in eighteen seconds, the computer that can interface with an alien one in seconds (obviously not using TCP/IP), and of course let us not forget the cute doggy that nearly dies at the hands of those alien creeps. Prepare to die, alien scum!

But let us ignore the plot (such as it is). Let us ignore the clichéd characters proving to be incidental to the action. Let us hope that no-one sees us enjoy this movie, and sit back in Savoy One (where else?) for some really cool graphics.

I hasten to add at this point that I'm not a CGI nerd. I've become of late totally pissed off with hollow movies relying on explosions and computers to flimflam us into thinking we're watching a good movie; for this reason I avoided both *Jurassic Park* and *True Lies*. And I've not intention of seeing *Eraser*. Why, then, did I enjoy this movie?

I reckon it was just sensory overload. The fight scenes were cool, the ships were cool and the... well, that's all that's cool. But it's enough.

If you're expecting anything out of this movie other than eye candy, forget it. But if vacuity's your bag, and you expect nothing, then you shall receive it. In abundance.

### The Crow : City of Angels

I've been reliably informed by a number of people that *The Crow* is a wonderful movie. I wouldn't quite go that far, but it was good fun and well worth a couple of watchings. This made the sequel inevitable, and those of us who remember *Highlander 2* and *Robocop 3* could only pray that such things aren't allowed to happen again. Alas, they did.

You know those films that start off quietly, but slowly build the suspense up until by the end of the movie you're at the edge of your seat? *City of Angels* is a bit like that, except you have to substitute 'suspense' with 'shite,' and 'edge of your seat' with 'in the box office demanding your money back.' This film is irredeemably awful from start to end.

For the first three quarters of the film, what we have is basically a remake of the first film, albeit without Brandon Lee. The direction is more than competent, and the director (whose name escapes me for the moment; I crave your pardon) does things with lighting that David Fincher wishes he could do but patently can't. The movie looks and feels like a Jeunet and Caro movie, but is let down (actually, dropped

from a great height) by the incredibly inept and unimaginative writing. Time and again you're left wondering how someone not only wrote this shit, but managed to get it passed all manner of intermediate stages before it was shot. Incredible.

The writer really comes into his own at the end of the movie, however, when he tries to do his own thing. The idea is pretty good, but once again it's written so badly that any thought of complimenting him on the idea flies out the window. Several pivotal scenes are handled in the laziest of fashion, and we're given plot devices that would have ten-year-olds complaining.

*The Crow: City of Angels* is well acted and well directed. The director of photography screwed up on a couple of occasions, but in general it must be said that the fault for this abomination lies solely in the hands of the writer. Avoid at all costs.

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## Comics Reviews

James Bacon

*Saint of Killers, 4-issue mini-series, Ennis Pugh, £2.25 issue, Vertigo*

The story is of the patron saint of killers, an 18<sup>th</sup> century wild West bounty hunter. He's an extremely violent and brutal man who found peace and love with a beautiful lady, only to have her wrenched from life by fate and a gang of no-good gunslingers. In an effort to kill them he himself gets killed, but he alters the state of Hell upon his entry. His heart is so cold that he quenches the fires of hell. In order to get rid of him the angel of death instructs the newly-assigned Saint of Killers in his new role. The saint returns to reap his vengeance and lies under Boot Hill, waiting for his call to rise and collect the souls of the dead or to kill as the Lord instructs.

I enjoyed the story but felt that it didn't have the edge of its parent, *Preacher*. Ennis doesn't show the humour that he can conjure up, and Steve Pugh's pencils lack the fine definition of Steve Dillon's, but the action-packed comic still punches hard, and is probably one of the best mini-series of the year, if you like violence.

*The Story of You-Know-Who, Preacher Special, Ennis Case, £4.50, Vertigo*

This comic was going to be called 'Arseface,' and of course that wasn't allowed. DC are of high moral character it appears, but the comic just doesn't do the business and comes across as a sad, pitiful, boring, morbid and expensive story with very little gratuitous violence and even less wit and humour.

The story is of a sheriff's son who is brutalised by his father, and in a symbolic act of defiance/stupidity he attempts suicide after learning that Kurt Cobain had done the same. He makes a balls of it and just blows off his face – hence the name – but anyone who read *Preacher* already knew this. It's a pity, I was expecting something imaginative from the boy Ennis this time round; you'd be better off sticking to the big picture and read *Preacher*.

*Badrock Wolverine, Valentino, £2.70, Image/Marvel*

A waste of time, money and generally a big bag of runny shite.

No story.

Crap art.

Have you a brain cell?

Yes? Well, go buy something else.

## Card Games

### Robert, Runner of Destiny

It's not often I can type something and be more or less assured of a select audience, but just now I reckon I can assume that ninety per cent of you have skipped to the next article. Of all the comments I get, "I don't read the Magic column" is by far the most frequent, which is strange when you consider that there are only three or four a year, but there you go. The people who do read this column say keep it up, and so here I am.

Now that we've got rid of all the bastards, let's get on with the review. First up we have **Proteus**, the new expansion for Netrunner. Anyone who's heard me talk about games at all will know that I consider Netrunner to be the greatest thing since sliced teenagers, and are doubtless expecting this review to be little more than another excuse to extol the virtues of this wonderful game.

Who am I to disappoint? I will, however, endeavour to get in a bit of a review amongst all the proselytising.

Netrunner takes place in the Cyberpunk 2020 universe, and pits large corporations against runners, hackers who steal information to sell or use for their own purposes. All this was set up – and excellently, too – in the main Netrunner set; unlike Magic, there's no banned/restricted list because the game is so well balanced there's simply no need.

Proteus adds some new aspects to the game: on the corporation's side, it adds morphing ICE: sentries that can become walls, walls that can become codegates, you get the idea. Most of the innovations in this expansion, however, favour the runner. First of all, there are a lot more viruses, so a virus deck becomes a lot more viable. The runner now has hidden resources as well; these are played face down, but otherwise are treated as normal resources. The runner also has a new way to win: if the corporation receives enough bad publicity, it's game over.

Overall, the runner gets more out of Proteus than the corporation, those sneaky guys at Wizards of the Coast put in a few subtle niceties for the corporation. One of the less subtle cards is Manhunt, which can give the runner up to six tags. And in a tag 'n' bag deck, that's pretty much game over unless the runner has an Emergency Self-Construct handy.

If you play Netrunner, you'll definitely need Proteus. Most of the deck strategies for both runner and corporation will find counters in this expansion: the Death From Above resource is totally cool and pretty much puts an end to the Vacant Soullkiller/Namatoki combo that pissed off so many runners.

Before I forget, let's mention the cool flavour text. I won't mention any; suffice it to say that it's at least as funny and entertaining as the original set. If only I knew why it was version 2.1 instead of 1.1.

Still with Wizards, we have **Mirage**. This is the second stand-alone expansion for Magic: The Gathering, and like Ice Age before it, it contains some of the same cards as the basic set and adds a few rules of its own.

Primary among those new rules are flanking and phasing. Flanking is simple enough: if a creature with flanking is blocked by a creature without it, the blocking creature gets -1/-1 until end of turn. Simple enough, unlikely to cause any problems. If only the same could be said for phasing.

Basically phasing means that a card is only in play for half the time: every second round it disappears from play. This seems simple enough, but I've read enough Q&A columns in enough magazines to know that in a couple of months we'll see questions ranging from the inane to the arcane. It's going to be fun.

but apart from that, what's the set like? Well, the addition of Phasing means that we're going to see the return of the Armageddon deck to tournament play: there's nothing like destroying all lands when yours are safely out of play. It won't be limited to Armageddon, either: expect to see Jokalhaups and Wrath of God go up in price over the next few months.

Individually, there are some really nifty cards – I particularly like Celestial Dawn – but overall the set seems to be quite balanced. It's enough cool card to suit all colours, with red and white making out like bandits with green not far behind. Blue has yet more counterspells: just what the world bleeding needs.

My only complaint about this set is that the vast majority of players won't have properly assimilated Alliances yet. I have a complete set myself but only know about a fifth of the cards. With an expansion for Mirage already planned, I get the feeling that WotC are pushing too hard, trying to keep people interested. I've a feeling that they might just make people give up, feeling that they can't keep up with another 350 new cards every few months.

I wasn't going to mention XXXenophile, but I couldn't resist. The brainchild of Phil Foglio based on his comic of the same name. XXXenophile is a low-brow, tasteless game with immoral artwork and lascivious artwork that'll have all right-thinking people up in arms. It's great stuff. The rulebook is hilarious, the cards disgusting and the card instructions tasteless enough to ensure that this game will endure forever. The strangest thing is that once you start playing it, you realise that there is an incredible amount of strategy involved. Initially you'll start playing in the hope that someone of the opposite sex will get a card saying 'remove a piece of clothing,' but after a while you appreciate how strategic the game is. You still play it in the hope of drawing cards that let you give another player a 'big smooch,' but you're able to justify the game a lot easier.

Finally, we have **Conrunner**, the game about running a science fiction convention. This game is a bit unusual in that each player has two different decks: in the first half of the game each player – one running a Star Trek con and the other a regular SF con – has his own deck while the convention is being organised, then in phase two both players use the same cards while the convention is running.

In phase one the convention is being organised, and the phase ends when either player has enough people signed up to attend. The number required varies, but the Trek con needs 2.5 times as many as the SF con, presumably because the Trek con has to pay for its guest of honour. Of course, it's possible to sabotage your opponent as well as trying to reach the required target yourself. Once you announce your guest of honour memberships will accrue faster, but the Trek organiser must beware of the SF con organiser's playing of Work Commitments, which causes the Trek Guest of Honour to cancel. Similarly, the trek organiser can play Mary Gentle on his opponent.

The fun really begins in the second half, when the convention is underway. In this phase, the first player to achieve twenty satisfaction points wins the game. It's easier for the trek side to win points – playing a Star Trek video every turn for twenty turns will win – but the SF con gets higher points for its actions. Generally a game will be over about twelve turns into phase two.

One of the interesting aspects is that cards can be beneficial to one side and harmful to another: Harlan Ellison, for example, will lose the Trek con a number of satisfaction points, while gaining a few for the SF con. Assuming, that is, that the Trek con doesn't play a What About 'Last Dangerous Visions'?

The gameplay is very well balanced, and during my limited play time I found that there were a lot of subtleties in the game. I wasn't happy with the fact that a number of cards – the aforementioned What About 'Last Dangerous Visions'? for example – are useful only against one or two specific cards, and I felt that the game would have been better had these cards had more generic uses as well as the specific actions.

My only other complaint is the format of the booster packs. Whereas it's possible to play with one starter pack – each one comes with forty Trek cards, forty SF cards and twenty Conrunner cards (twenty for each side) – the boosters contain five of each type of card. I'd have been happier if you could select the side you wanted, and just buy a booster with, for example, eight SF cards and seven Conrunner cards. That's only a minor cavil, though, and I have to say that the game is great fun. Recommended.

## Video Review

### *The X-Files – File 6 : Master Plan*

Okay. I'll come clean. This isn't just a review of the latest *X-Files* video, it's a chance to look over the last year's worth of programme, say a few nasty things about Fox (Fox the company, that is. I'd never say anything nice about Fox Mulder!) and who knows, maybe get a bit of a mention of the new video in while I was at it.

Let me start by saying that I started off as one of the biggest fans of the programme. When it first came out I used these pages to tell the world (or at least a small part of it) how wonderful the programme was, and I was ecstatic when it received the recognition it deserved. I watched and was delighted.

You know what's coming next, don't you? No-one starts off a review like that without continuing by slagging the shit out of the programme. I might as well have said 'some of my best friends are X-files episodes.'

Actually, I'm not going to say that much. Upon re-watching the third season, I have to say that it contained some of the programme's best episodes (all, interestingly, written by the same person). What I will say is that for the most part I was bitterly disappointed with the producers for failing to do anything new.

The good points : in "Nisei" and "731" (known to the video-watching public as "File 5 : 82517" or something), we were given a credible reason for Scully not becoming a believer in UFOs. It was getting to the stage where everyone was wondering if she was as stupid as Lois Lane. We also got three episodes from Darin Morgan, including the astonishingly wonderful "Jose Chung's 'From Outer Space'" which contains what must be the best five seconds of television in broadcasting history.

On the down side : easily fifteen episodes were spent firmly sitting on laurels. We could have seen Mulder being taken in by a hoax. We could have had a little advancement on ideas that were presented in the first couple of years. Instead, all we got was a typical mish-mash of new theories that culminated in File 6 : Master Plan.

The story came from David Duchovny, who must really hate Fox Mulder. The last time our Dave contributed a story, Pa Mulder ended up dead. This time around it's his mommy that ends up in a coma. Will she live? Will she die? Watch... and be almost interested.

The problem with File 6 is that it suffers from the *Nowhere Man* syndrome: taken by itself the story might be interesting, but when you combine it with all the previous alien stories, it makes no sense whatsoever. Chris Carter, who seems to be becoming more like Laurence Herzog ever week, has abandoned any sense of continuity and is instead going for the cheap thrill. The first part of the story – which happens to be the last episode of the third season – has Roy Thinnes miraculously healing people with an ability that makes a mockery of all previous episodes with aliens. The bounty hunter from 'Colony' and 'Endgame' makes a re-appearance, this time invulnerable to everything except that little pointy thing he used for killing the clones. Fortunately, William Mulder had one hidden in his house for about twenty years. 'Bollocks!' I cried as I watched this crap unfolding. Chris Carter has lost the plot, he's running on automatic and planning *Millennium*.

Of course, these words aren't going to stop hordes of X-Philes running to the local shop and spending fifteen quid on this piece of tripe. After all, the second part won't appear on TV until next February at the earliest. And it won't even fit into that crappy box they all paid a further sixteen quid for; they're left with extra tapes hanging onto the outside. Then, of course, there's the First Season Box, available for £70 or thereabouts, which will be bought by those who already purchased the first eight episodes on the understanding that they'd soon be able to get the rest. Not a fucking chance. Fox are using every opportunity to rip off the public, and the public can't wait to hand over the shekels. I don't know who's worse.



## Con Review

### Octocon 7

This year's Octocon saw a marked increase in the number of foreign visitors, with a corresponding decrease in local attendees. It's a point that wasn't lost on honcho Maura McHugh, who wrote about it in the convention booklet. But whatever the regional breakdown, there were sufficient people at this year's Octocon (I'd guess that the final figure was about 300) to make it an interesting event.

This is the final year that Octocon will be in the Royal Marine Hotel, and it appeared that the staff were prepared to make the most of it. In previous years they've been generally polite, occasionally annoying and occasionally wonderful. In none of the six previous Octocons, however, did they manage to be as singularly obnoxious as this year. Two people said that they'd booked rooms and said that they were coming for Octocon, and were charged a higher room rate than those who just walked in on the day. On the Saturday evening, while waiting for a cab, a couple of us entertained ourselves watching the staff insult and assault anyone trying to get into the bar. Residents were given the third degree, before eventually (and, it seemed, reluctantly) allowed admittance, whereas anyone who wasn't resident was openly referred to as 'undesirable.' Special kudos must go to the cow on the reception desk who was truly obnoxious in a manner that was above and beyond the call.

But hotel problems notwithstanding, what of the rest of the con? Well, the dealers' room sucked, with the Fantasy Centre the only dealer of note. I usually come away from any convention with ten or twelve second hand books; this year I barely managed a single tome.

The panels I will speak little of, mainly because so few people in Ireland regard panels as a main part of the convention. Those in the main room were generally attended by about twenty to fifty (not an unreasonable number), and whereas there were a number of complaints heard about the boring nature of some of the guests, others – James White and Robert Rankin in particular – delighted all.

As usual, though, the main activity was the meeting of those people whom one only sees once a year. Throughout the convention the bar was the focus for most people, and at any time one could pop in for a drink (a very expensive drink) and converse with any number of people. Basically, fun was had by all.

Octocon has become very popular amongst the Brits as a 'relaxacon;' it's more informal than most and while that appeals to most of the foreigners, a number of Irish people expressed slight disappointment. Nothing major; it's just that Octocon has evolved over its lifetime, and its style doesn't suit the locals as much as the imported fans. That, at least, is my theory on the increasingly high ratio of foreign fans. Having said that, the majority of Irish fans – myself included – had great fun at the convention. The Drazi war was very popular – the mechanics totally escaped me, but I've been reliably informed that it was very well done – and the games room was usually half empty, but those what were there were eager to play and to learn. Once again, there were more fans of CCGs leaving the con than there were arriving.

Next year, of course, is the Eurocon in Dublin Castle, but the following year will see Octocon somewhere other than the Royal Marine, who have decided they no longer want to cater for that sort of thing. It's their loss, of course; during the previous six years Octocon proved to be good fun for its attendees and profitable for the hotel, and this year was no exception.

**Robert Elliott**

## Book Reviews

*The Bloody Red Baron. Kim Newman. dammit James I need more information than that.*

This is set in the first world war, and involves vampires of superhuman strength and shape-shifting abilities. It's a tremendous good-versus-evil struggle with such vividness that you can feel the cold stinging your extremities.

I totally immersed myself in the amazing world that Newman has created and allowed myself to be buffered by the slipstreams and sickened by the bloody scenes of war-torn Europe.

This is definitely a hot book that is not to be missed. There is so much going on – to talk too much is to give away the story – but read it with the passion it deserves.

**James Bacon**

*The Galactic Gourmet. James White, you did it again, didn't you?*

This is the most recent James White book, and is truly a science fiction masterpiece. White's unrivalled Sector General universe once again entertains with a new perspective thrown into the hospital environment: that of Chief Dietitian/Cook.

The story is well-written and gives a great feel-good kick to the genre which sometimes lacks the optimism and human goodwill that White portrays so well in his books. With this, a new angle on how things work on Sector General is vividly described with the trials and tribulations of the Great Gurronsevas, a massive six-legged alien of considerable dignity who is the most renowned chef in the galactic Federation. But even with so much previously accomplished, his biggest challenge ever is to make hospital food enjoyable and tasty. He messes up, but solves many intriguing puzzles and may even have the answer to a world population dying of self-starvation.

This is a hugely entertaining read. James White has produced another masterpiece that should find pride of place on any SF fan's bookshelf.

**James Bacon**

*Endymion. Dan Simmons, by Headline Feature, £6.99 (PB)*

First things first. Obtain a copy of *Hyperion* and *Fall of Hyperion* by Dan Simmons and read them. Not that you need to in order to understand *Endymion* (which you do) but due to the fact that you should have long ago. Any ideas where this review is heading oh bewildered reader? Neither do I.

This being the third book in what is now being called the 'Hyperion Cantos' is somewhat a surprise to see written. Not because there was no need of one or that this tome is more of a result of a publishers hefty advance. No! it's just that I, me, James A. Mason never quite saw it coming. I was very content to have read and reread the two previous installments of the 'Cantos' as the feeling one was left with was of awe at the man's ability to create such a fresh and expansive universe and to do it with such invention devoid of any pretension. Also the cad gave the whole thing a very rounded feel, so as far as I was concerned the ruddy thing was finished.

Not so. The first two books dealt with a group of characters and dealt with their stories in a personal way, leaving the major plot working away in the background. This book furthers the big picture in a most clever way making the world Simmons created that bit more familiar and just a touch newer. As the large story arc is being the one in prominence, this volume leaves the impression of being a first part. The introduction of a new cast of characters lends itself to this. Some of the previously established ones remain but being an inventive writer Dan the Man has turned the tables on the ones you're supposed to hate as well as like.

Is it a tired, half-baked reheat of a book? No it most definitely isn't. This is a very rewarding book despite the fact there will certainly be another volume on the way at some stage. I never once felt that there was some cynical element involved in the writing of this book and I look forward to the furthering of Mr. Simmons' space opera epic thingy or 'Cantos'.

As for what the book is about? Read the bloody book. Unless you're the sort who likes to be told all the good bits to films and stuff.

**James Mason**

*Neverwhere, Neil Gaiman, £9.99*

What would you say to a tidy helping of dark, foreboding chilling horror, neatly wedged between a banal slice of reality and a mythic taste of magic?

If you'd welcome it with open neurons then read on.

For *Neverwhere* - the novel creates just that.

Into a delirium of contradictions and conflicting images is spun an intense thriller and charming mystery. This drama may be set in the Yuppies' ultimate conspiracy theory of the unemployed, house-less, inferior social strata having some nefarious scheme but here are none of the tired technophobe's plots of Evil young computer geniuses pulling all the strings. No beaurocrat's dream of a perfectly functioning, well-oiled criminal underworld. Instead we see an eerie dark mirror when we look between the cracks of our own sphere's facade.

Imagine wondering through medieval markets in the under today's London. Mingling with those who live in the sewers and paying obeisance to petty yet dangerous nobility. Danger and mystery, ritual and banal. *Neverwhere* is like this, only more so.

In the shadows and forgotten spaces of our own days creep the unnoticed and unwanted folk of everyday urban life. Into the places and times we don't see Gaiman projects a beguiling world of mythic intrigue and medieval politics. Honour, duty, torture and vengeance merge into an enchanting tale when sprinkled with the Magic of Lord Morpheus.

But enough of the flowery prose, for this is a damned good read. In places we're treated to a beautiful world of hope and magic, just beyond our grasp, while in other's London's underbelly is sliced open for us to gawk at, and reel from. Stereotypes are smashed while frighteningly believable extremes are formed. Amidst our urban decay the law of the jungle collides with homeless civilisation and we're treated to all it's ugly spawn.

But at the same time it's a great tale. The journey of discovery through this strange world is strewn with fascinating characters. There are villages of denizens who eat cats and worship rats, warriors of legend, monks, martyrs, demons and angels. A wolf of ignorant strength and fox of vicious cunning provide near-perfect and powerful evil, contrasting the unswerving loyalty yet all too frail humanity of our hero. The people are real enough to Superglue you to the story yet unreal enough to provide mystery and beauty.

On paper alone this is a beautiful tale, well told, so even if you've watched a few episodes of the series and decided that this wasn't quite your cuppa char I'd twist your arm to give it another shot. After all Winter's crawling in and there's few better books around to curl up with by a nice cozy fire or a nice bright lamppost and while away those hours before nightmare. What do I think? Buy it!

**James Mason**

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**Stephen Malone**

*The Hogfather. Terry Pratchett. £15.99. hb. Gollancz*

You know, I've been wondering for a while about something, and it really came to the fore while reading this book. You know all those footnotes that Terry Pratchett uses to such effect? I lie awake at night pondering how he gets them to fit on the page. They're designed in such a way that they're bound to be arsed up, leaving some unfortunate typesetter to do lots of stuff that involves words like kerning and proportioning and stuff. Hogfather's like that a lot. You'd swear that it's sheerest happenstance that the footnotes turned out to be just the right length, when I think we should all raise a mug to the noble typesetter, whose job goes unsung as Pratchett rakes in another million.

None of that was strictly relevant, was it? Well, bugger it. I mean, no-one reads Terry Pratchett reviews to find out what the book is like; they just want to know that it's out. So if no-one's going to pay attention, I reckon I might as well enjoy myself. I mean, it's no easy task, writing a review that you know no-one's going to want to read.

But on the off-chance that my mother gets her hands on this and decides to see what I spent all that money on the computer for, I suppose I'd better review the damn book. For those of you who like to catalogue such things, this is a Death book. Good news to you maybe, but I was a trifle trepidant: I didn't like Reaper Man and I hated Soul Music. It is with a song in my heart and a bird in the hand that I report that this book is rather nifty.

It's the reverse of the Guards books, I suppose. Guards Guards and Men at Arms are two of Pratchett's finest, and Feet of Clay was a bit disappointing; with these it's the opposite. The Hogfather – the Diskworld's equivalent of Santa – has disappeared, and only belief can bring him back. So in order to get people to believe in him, Death dresses up, gives out pressies and gets into the usual trouble: wacky highjinks abound.

At twenty novels, the Diskworld is doing very well even for a fantasy series, and it shows no sign of slowing down. Interestingly, the two hours before this came into Forbidden Planet I swore I wasn't reading another fantasy novel again...ever. Ten minutes after this came in, a Dave Duncan came in. But if I ever do give up reading fantasy, that won't include the Diskworld books. As long as he keeps writing 'em, I'll keep reading 'em.

**Robert Elliott**