

newsletter



The Bulletin of The Irish Science Fiction Association

October/November, 1981

Welcome to another Newsletter. The ongoing saga of Committee changes continues, but this time I've only news of an addition - Elizabeth McDonnell in the role of Publicity Officer, which was vacated by Sharon O'Donerty recently. She has been publicizing the Aisling Gheal Short Story competition recently and was contacted by 'Southside Express' in relation to an article they wished to do on us - they did one last year at around the same time and it resulted in a few new members. So keep your eyes open for that if you live around South Dublin.

Some members have complained about the lack of a letter column in the N/L - well, I can only put in letters if I get letters so if you have anything interesting to say, let me hear it, either at the meetings or by post and I'll put it in here. Another thing I'm short of is reviews of books and films. We would consider making the newsletter longer and/or monthly if we had enough material but I just barely have enough for a short bi-monthly N/L so **START WRITING**, especially any new members we may have - who knows how many Asimovs and Clarkes we may have in our ranks and the best way to get into the writing of short stories is to write reviews first. ANY book will do!

Speaking of short stories, the Aisling Gheal short story competition is now upon us. Briefly the rules are - 1/ Entries must be typewritten 2/ Entries must not be longer than 12,000 words 3/ Entry is open to any ISFA member or Irish citizen. The prizes are 1st/£25 2nd/£15 3rd/£10.

RECENT MEETINGS :

SEPTEMBER: the quiz game which we had hoped to start this meeting did take place and seemed to be enjoyed by all. The two teams that took part showed a vast knowledge of SF and managed to get 90% of the questions asked. we shall try it again in the New Year, this time with two different teams.

OCTOBER: one of our annual Auctions took place this meeting and provided some badly needed money for the Association. It was fairly well attended and the proceeds (£15.00) were, while not a record for auctions, very welcome. we hope to have another in possibly March or April so mark your diary accordingly - there were some amazing bargains this time around and probably will be next time too.

VIDEO CLUB: the first meeting of the Video Club was held in early November. We showed 'Superman' (the first film) and, although the film was only publicized at our meeting the previous week, we still got enough to make a profit on the night. The next showing will be in the New Year - we had not expected to have 'Superman' in November and so to facilitate any members who missed it, we will show it again when the club starts proper. Brigitte Anthony very kindly loaned us her television and, along with the aid of Niall Syms and Peter Harris, the film went off without a hitch. Many thanks.

FILMS AND TV.

At the last Committee meeting a topic came up that is sure to provide a lot of discussion within the Association - the subject of Top Films. Basically what we want is your top ten films (naturally they have to have some SF content!) and in a future N/L we will publish the results. To give you some ideas, here are both mine and Pearse Mooney's:

<u>Brendan Ryder</u>	<u>Pearse Mooney</u>
<u>1</u> - "2001, A Space Odyssey"	"Alien"
<u>2</u> - "Close Encounters...."	"2001, A Space Odyssey"
<u>3</u> - "Star Wars"	"Close Encounters"
<u>4</u> - "Forbidden Planet"	"Soylent Green"
<u>5</u> - "Star Trek, The Motion Picture"	"Day Of The Triffids"
<u>6</u> - "Dark Star"	"The Day The Earth Stood Still"
<u>7</u> - "Alien"	"Dark Star"
<u>8</u> - "Superman I"	"War Of The Worlds"
<u>9</u> - "Raiders Of The Lost Ark"	"Zardoz"
<u>10</u> - "Superman II"	"Destination: Moon"

Send your choices to me at the address at the end of the N/L or give them to me at a meeting.

"EXCALIBUR" - a review by Sean May.

Quite a good film indeed although highly over-rated and with some mistakes. The main flaw is young Arthur. A most unlikely candidate for a King if ever I saw one. He looked, acted and talked like a right cretin. His voice sounded like a cross between a bogman and somebody from t'd old 'eart o' Devon (to be pronounced in a Devonshire accent). Camelot on the outside looked like nothing more than wood covered with tin foil. Boorman, in my opinion, could have settled on a plain made o' brick and sweat castle.

Okay, so now I've had my bitch about what was wrong with "Excalibur", what did I actually like about the film? It was well directed, the sets - with the exception of Camelot - were good, the lighting blah, blah, blah. The great plus in "Excalibur" was Paul Geoffrey as Perceval. He was nothing short of excellent and was the most endearing character of all. The ultra-gorgeous Heln Mirren was suitably evil as Morgana - though I prefer the TV version, she's much more evil looking - and most of the humour was provided by Nicol Williamson (Merlin), also well played.

The battle scenes in particular were well staged, and the usage of the music, "O, Fortuna" from Carmina Burana by Carl Orff to accompany them was a stroke of genius by Boorman.

So, as I've already said, "Excalibur" is quite a good film, do go to see it, but most definitely over-rated.

FILMS ON AT THE MOMENT (and worth seeing, at least in MY opinion!)

"History Of The World" (some very funny skits on "2001 ..." in particular); "Raiders of The Lost Ark"; "Conquest Of The Earth" (I really don't know about this - I haven't seen it!)

The latest 'Ad Astra' (British SF magazine) has some interesting articles, especially the one by Dr. Robert L. Forward on the future (what a great name for someone involved in SF) It also has that very witty column by David Langford who's talking about SF awards this time around.

ISAAC ASIMOV: has contracted (for a mere £50,000 advance!) a fourth 'Foundation' novel. Well, that's at least settled the Hugo award for that year!

OMNI (Vol. 3 No. 11) had a story by Ben Bova called 'Voyagers' which is a contender for next years Hugo, I think.

AMATEUR RADIO SATELLITES are launched by a simple spring. Yes, a £1,000,000 of equipment is put into space by a spring - when the rocket reaches the correct orbit, a spring is released and out goes the satellite (This information came courtesy of a radio freak, Peter Harris - who has sworn under torture that it's true!)

SCIENCE DIGEST: (October 1981) has a very interesting article by a Creationist (Duane Gish) and an Evolutionist (Isaac Asimov). As usual, the Evolutionist comes out on top but it's an article worth reading, nonetheless.

ARTHUR C. CLARKE: is planning to write the sequel to '2001, A Space Odyssey' if that's at all possible. To be called 'The Songs Of Distant Earth', a fuller description is given in his article in OMNI, Vol. 3, No. 12 and makes some interesting reading!

CARL SAGAN: has been paid a staggering \$2,000,000 advance for his SF novel 'Contact'. However, there are reports that it may, in fact, have been written by Anne Druyen. Brian Aldiss, when he heard the news is reported to have said "Anyone who gets paid \$2,000,000 for a novel deserves to be in trouble!"

THE ALCHEMIST'S HEAD: have all the latest U.S. SF magazines on sale; namely 'Analog', 'The Magazine Of Fantasy & SF' and 'Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine' as well as the more accessible 'OMNI'. Any are worth getting and all a necessity if you want to vote in the Annual Hugo Awards, presented at the Worldcon.

AISLING GHEAL SHORT STORY COMPETITION: when I typed out the details of the competition on page 1 I omitted the closing date - 1st February, 1982

ARENA 12: (Fanzine produced by Geoff Ripington, 6, Rutland Gardens, Birchington, Kent, England, CT7 9SN) contains a very interesting interview with Richard Cowper as well as reviews by Brian Stableford and David Langford, among others. Well worth getting a 3 issue subscription for STEL.80 from the above address.

The Alchemist's Head Est. 1968

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"Shiva Descending" - Gregory Benford & William Rotzler (London; Sphere Books, 1980 STEL-95)

Gregory Benford has already established himself as a well known writer by his two previous novels, "If The Stars Are Gods" and "The Stars In Shroud". These were written in the sub-genre of the so called 'hard' or technological SF., predicting human expansion into stellar exploration, thousands of years in the future.

His latest novel is set firmly on Earth around the year 2000 A.D., and takes a familiar theme, that of the Earth threatened by destruction by an asteroid or meteor, due to an orbital collision.

Although the topic has been used frequently from H.G. Wells onwards, these two joint authors stand out from the rest by their impressive command of scientific data and their powerful evocation of civilized societies breaking down under the threatened impact.

The individual characters are extremely well drawn, particularly the American political -military establishment, and the astronauts, both men and women. These are sent up with a Russian team to try and deflect the asteroid by exploding a large quantity of H-bombs near its surface.

They succeed predictably at the last moment but nevertheless I found this a highly absorbing and stimulating work of 'hard' SF, and well worth the attention of ISFA members.

"The Snail On The Slope"- Boris and Arkady Strugatsky (London; collanz 1900, ST £6.50)

This novel is the latest work of the U.S.S.R.'s most celebrated pair of SF writers to appear in English. It is completely different in style and theme from "Shiva Descending" being influenced by authors as diverse as Swift, Voltaire, Kafka and Lem.

It relates the tale of two individuals named 'Pepper' and 'Kandid' and their attempts to understand the workings of an alien bureaucracy, on an earth colonised planet, set in the far distant future.

There is a large amount of philosophical and mystical speculation which makes the novel somewhat difficult to appreciate at first. However the introduction by Marko Suvin, one of the leading academic critics of S.F., gives a most useful analysis of all the main themes and characters, together with a helpful summary of all the authors' works up to the present.

This novel would appeal to those ISFA members who have already acquired a taste for Russian and Polish SF (e.g. Stanislaw Lem's novels) and I would highly recommend it to those and other adventurous people.

Both reviews by: David Lass, M.A. Dip Lib.

"Rauix" - A.A. Atanasio (Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1981; \$8.95 (!!!))

This book should give all the budding writers of the ISFA a great boost of confidence — if garbage like this is being published in SB-95 paperbacks, we should have no

trouble breaking into the upper echelons of SF writing trade. The plot is interminably drawn out, a not-half-bad background disasterously underutilised, and the characterisations incomprehensibly vapid.

To be fair to Attanasio, I haven't read the whole thing (nor will I) but only the first 218 pages out of 446 (excluding appendices). The blurb on the back gives an accurate though scarcely complete picture of what's inside: "Thirteen centuries in the future, the Earth is populated by telepathic voors whose lives originated in a far off galaxy; by tribes of distorts desperately trying to breed themselves back to human normality; and the Masseboth, tyrannical normals whose attempt to preserve a pure gene pool has become a weapon of worldwide oppression. One man is destined to stand in the way of disaster. We watch as Sumner Kagan wages a guerilla war against outlaw distorts survives the brutal police camps, and is trained as an elite killer in the service of the Masseboth..."

What it doesn't say about the above is quite important, however: the voors are quite able to breed successfully with humans, despite their extra-galactic origins; there is no real evidence that the Masseboth are tyrannical except for the fact that the book occassionally says so (in a variety of inappropriate places); Sumner Kagan is a thoroughly unsympathetic character who kills merely for personal revenge and who seems to have no interest in personal destiny and will not make any but the slightest effort to actually achieve anything (usually the cold-blooded murder of any who interfere with his libido). The blurb does go on a bit, but it does end up by saying that "Radix" was written by "... the most talented new writer since Frank Herbert." This is a gross insult to the latter, notwithstanding the inappropriateness of the metaphor. A much more realistic finish would be "...by the most colossal bore since the Neanderthals."

In conclusion, I shudder to think of what would happen if some poor person picked up "Radix" as his first taste of SF. (Unlikely though it is at \$8.95) The effect would be the same as eating 6 week old Water Buffalo vomit as one's first taste of organic material. Why do publishers continue to jeopardise their long-run position by peddling books like this? They are doing themselves as well as SF a very serious disservice, which I, as a SF reader and devotee, can do very well without.

"Sundiver" - David Brin (Bantam SF, 1960; \$1.95)

This book is a fairly interesting first novel by an author who most likely will sink into obscurity in the very near future. The major problem with the book is that Brin simply tried to do too much.

To be fair, the action scenes are quite good, the tension first class. There are far too many characters though. They are also somewhat underdeveloped and the interactions between them simply fail to convince. One horrible flaw is that while interstellar travel exists and many intelligent species are known, it is never made sufficiently clear whether FTL drives exist or not!

A major premise of the book (in a series of sub-plots) is that certain aliens have

the power to influence the perceptions of other aliens and humans through sight, smell and so on. There is a central mystery involved (why did a silver spaceship with an intelligent chimpanzee aboard self-destruct in the photosphere of the sun?) but because of the wide variety of false clues perpetrated by different aliens, the reader simply gets sensorily overloaded. When it (soon) becomes clear that no evidence can be trusted, the reader simply ignores new clues. And, not unjustifiably, he will give up. Since the characters are as colourless and stereotyped as they are, the reader just won't care who drugged, hypnotised, seduced, betrayed, or outthought another. Or why.

In short, the book worked on a fairly good idea, struggled monumentally, and failed. It simply doesn't fulfill what the reader has the right to expect --- development is patchy and usually inappropriate. My recommendation --- no.

Both reviews by: John McCarthy

"The Dragons Of Eden" - Carl Sagan (Coronet Books, 263 pages £0.95)

Carl Sagan is one of my favorite exponents of science along with James Burke, David Attenborough and Jacob Bronowski. Most people are acquainted with him, through his television series 'Cosmos', although there seems to be a wide spectrum of opinions (some decidedly unflattering) on the subject.

'The Dragons Of Eden' sees Dr. Sagan exploring a subject far from his specialisation: the evolution and operation of the Human brain. Needless to say, since I am a Christian and Dr. Sagan appears to be an atheist, there are some ideas in the book that I do not agree with. I find his viewpoint on abortion particularly distasteful and a little illogical, though I do not have room to go into it here.

That's the criticisms over with so I can get on with the Good Points. In the book Dr. Sagan presents the Human brain, not as a *Fait Accompli* but as a product of evolution. During this evolution new bits were added to the brain as this was less fatal than altering the existing parts. The result is the triune brain consisting of the Lyopic system, the Neptilian complex and the Neocortex. A lot of today's problems could be due to tension between the components. The most recent addition - the Neocortex, is the centre of intelligence, the part that tells us how stupid war is, The R complex is the deeper darker side of us that produces the animal urges and emotions. This part could be said to be the cause of aggression. There are many other interesting concepts in the book including the investigation into Chimpanzee intelligence and the possibilities of expanding the abilities of the Neocortex through the addition of artificial components. I was particularly fascinated by the situation where a person can effectively have two brains in one skull due to the severing of the Corpus Callosum.

The book is very speculative in parts as its' author freely admits. However it is very thought provoking and so well worth a read.

Reviewed by: Declan Brennan

"Firestarter" - Stephen King (Futura, £1.95)

I suspect that Stephen King took two of his previous books, 'Carrie' and 'The Dead Zone' put them in a barrel and churned them around, turned the handle and Hey Presto! - came up with 'Firestarter'. All of the ingredients are there - the hard luck element from 'The Dead Zone' and the girl with the psychic powers from 'Carrie'.

I'm not putting the book down or criticising it, mind you. On the contrary, it's a damn good book, but it's just that there seems to be a lack of originality that there never has been in his other books. (Ripping himself off, perhaps)

The main theme that ran through his previous novels concerning individuals with psychic powers being cursed with whatever powers that they may have, telekinesis, Telepathy, Precognition or in this case, Pyrokinesis also is present in 'Firestarter'. You also have John Rainbird substituting for the Randall flag character of 'The Stand'.

The plot concerns the efforts of Andy McGee and his daughter Charlie, to escape from the clutches of a U.S. Government agency known as 'The Shop'. Because, in 1969, Andy McGee and Vicky Tomlinson along with several other hard up students, voluntarily took part in a drug experiment in which most of the participants went insane or died. Those that survived ended up with certain psychic abilities and they went under surveillance by 'The Shop'. But when Andy and Vicky married and had a daughter Charlie, who was born with the ability to start fires simply by thinking about it, then the shop paid more attention to the threesome. Vicky was murdered in a botched up kidnap attempt and Andy and Charlie had to flee from the area; the story then begins with them, once more being persued by 'The Shop'.

King illustrates Andy and Charlie's abilities perfectly and the story climax is brilliant. Although 'Firestarter' is not Stephen King's best yet (I don't think he can improve on 'The Shining') it is still worth reading.

Reviewed by Sean May

"Solaris", "The Chain Of Chance" & "A Perfect Vacuum" - Stanislaw Lem

"Solaris" - In a sense this attempt at describing the first human encounter with an alien mind is more satisfactory than books such as "The Mote in God's Eye", it is less entertaining. Its' superiority lies in its more scientific approach as well as in the avoidance of easy human-like cop outs such as the moties. Lem uses his powerful imagination and scientific background to describe in detail the progress of 'Solaristics', (the study of the planet Solaris and its apparently sentient ocean), while at the same time weaving in an analysis of what we regard as human or alien. For the latter purpose he uses the idea that exploration of the cosmos is just an investigation of ourselves as reflected in other cultures. This idea is embodied by the 'guests' which the solarists receive, ie the inner thoughts of the solarists made materially manifest by the power of the ocean.

However the action itself is rather sparse, and most of the time we are simply reading solarist tomes over the hero Kelvin's shoulder, even if the tomes do contain

sometimes fascinating descriptions of structures which the ocean throws up and which serve to make the descriptions of the alien world all the more convincing. "The Chain Of Chance" - As a thriller, this book works extremely well, maintaining a level of suspense throughout which is aided by adding ever more wrinkles to a complicated mystery. It is a fast moving adventure in the footsteps of a 'scientific detective' who is duplicating the movements of one of a number of businessmen who all died similar deaths and who had besides a large number of things in common. On another level, the book concerns some seemingly deep point about the theory of probability, which is discussed at length and couched in various terms but which boils down to the trivial concept that there are so many events jostling around in this increasingly complex world that something extraordinary is bound to happen every now and then.

"A Perfect Vacuum" - It seems very strange reviewing this book, which is in itself a series of reviews of imaginary works. Among other things, these reviews include brilliant take offs of all the cliches that you find in the monstrous pile of reviews, such as this, which the literature industry pours out. Particularly brilliant in this regard (cliche!) is 'Gigamesh', which is a *reducio ad absurdum* of the pumping of books full of meanings which are, to say the least, a bit far - fetched. Also notable is the introduction which is itself a review of the reviews but also of itself.

"Les Robinsonades", "Gruppenfuhrer XVI" and "Being Inc." are all classic examples of Lem's worlds of successive layers of reality and illusion. The usual density of outrageous ideas permeates the rest of the reviews to make this book a good example of Lem's style of humour.

Reviewed by: Hugh Deasy

SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS

- CHANWELCON - The 1982 British Easter Convention - Metropole Hotel, Brighton, England. April 9 - 12. Attending membership £6.00, supporting £3.00. Rooms at reasonable rates. Contact Channelcon, 4 Fletcher Road, Chiswick, London W4 5AY, England.
- CHICON IV - The 1982 World Convention - guaranteed a great time - all the big names in SF and lots of films and talks. Contact CHICON IV, Box A 3120, Chicago IL 60690 USA.

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