

First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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Octocon '96 is Go

Ah, the joy than erupts when a new Octocon is announced! Who can fail to feel a thrill when they think of the myriad fun goings-on as the national science fiction convention announces that once again October sees oodles of fans converge on the traditional venue – the Royal Marine Hotel – for a weekend full of arguments, videos, guests and whatever else they can think of?

And who, you cry, is the Guest of Honour? Why, 'tis none other than **Brian Stableford**. He's an author who tends to blend genres somewhat; his novel *The Empire of Fear* was a vampire novel that was more science fiction than horror, and last year's *Serpent's Blood* was an SF book that read like a fantasy novel. Personally, I'm more fond of his shorter fiction; his collection *Sexual Chemistry* is pretty nifty, and he was nominated this year for a Hugo for Best Novella.

But are the Octoconnies settling merely for a cool guest of Honour? Not a bit of it. We have been promised a rebirth, a reinvention of Octocon that will leave all who attend stunned by its innovative approach to science fiction conventions. Exactly what this means I'm not sure (okay, I actually haven't a clue), but it should be a blast finding out. Look out for myriad exciting events and googols of new guests.

So who are these other guests, and what are these events? Sadly, the committee are keeping rather quiet at the moment, and will mention only (and rather smugly) that another guest is Mr. **Paul J. McAuley**, whom you may know through such novels as *Pasquale's Angel* and *Fairyland*. Also to be attending – yippee! – is one **Robert Rankin**, who manages to be not only a cool writer, but a totally excellent guest. His latest tome, *A Dog Called Demolition*, has just been published and as you'll see from the review later in this august journal, it's a bit of a cracker.

As for the events that we've been promised, sorry. Haven't a clue. I guess we'll both have to find out together when we attend. You are attending, aren't you?

Oh yeah, the details. Sorry. Mind like a sieve, you know. Anyway, Octocon '96 will be held in the **Royal Marine Hotel** on **12-13 October** in this, the year of our Lord 1996. Send your cheques and queries to

**Octocon '96,
30, South Circular Road,
Dublin 8.**

Or you could e-mail mmmchugh@tcd.ie if you're so inclined. At the moment it'll cost you £12 for attending or £5 for supporting, but that's going up on the first of May.

Editorial

And so, once again we have a double issue because I was late with the last one. Well, no more. Treasure this; it's the last double issue you'll see. Really.

But for a change I'd like to avail of this space to bitch about something completely different. If you read this issue's letter page, you'll notice comments on the lack of a magazine from the ISFA (the journal you hold in your hands doesn't count, of course; we're talking about a quality, fiction magazine here). The problem is that a magazine of this type is very expensive to produce, and it's difficult to get the material together on a regular basis. But worry not; I'm not going to spend the rest of the page complaining about apathy amongst the ISFA's creative element. Rather, I'd like to mention briefly an organisation set up to help promote the arts in this country; the Arts Council.

Pick up any British small-press magazine. Regardless of the quality, the chances are you'll find inside a brief thank you to the regional arts council. Even *Interzone* – a professional magazine – qualifies (at least, they did; I'm not sure whether that's still the case). However, when it comes to our own Arts council, the contribution they've made to science fiction can be summed up on one finger. The middle one.

I'm not advocating the blanket sponsoring of crap that results in the sort of banal magazines one can see coming from England. But in the past, *Octocon*, the ISFA and I'm sure other organisations have all approached the arts council, and have been offered moral support, but nothing else.

So what can be done? Very little, I suspect. But I'm open to suggestions.

On a completely different topic, a number of people have been sending me e-mail, only to have it bounce back with a notice that informs them that I don't exist. I'd like to take this opportunity to assure the readership that I *am* real, and I do have a life (of sorts). My e-mail address is rde@irelands-web.ie, and despite the occasional bounce, I do receive most of my mail. I'm currently haranguing my provider to sort out the problem. During the meanwhile, if you encounter a bouncy message, please resend. It should get through (eventually).

Robert Elliott

rde@irelands-web.ie

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First Contact is an SF magazine. It comes out ev'ry month (at least, it tries). It covers varied topics, and has been (We hope) of interest to you gals and guys. It's written – very well too, I must say – By SF fans, who know, try as they might To blame it all on the ISFA, they each retain their author's copyright. Although we'd like you to review our work, we'd ask you not to reproduce too much. You'd only end up looking like a jerk; in jail it's kinda hard to keep in touch. We hope you enjoy reading what we write; if not, be kind and tell us when it's shite.

News

Movie News

So you've read that Jonathan Frakes is to direct *Star Trek Eight*. But did you know he's also going to get a big part? It's true. It seems that the bigwigs in Paramount are a bit worried that Patrick Stewart might be a little expensive when it comes to negotiating for *Star Trek Nine*, so they want Riker to be in the fore just in case. The name "Resurrection" has been dropped, by the way. Not just because of the clash of the titles with the new *Alien* movie, either; it seems that a bunch of saddy, Kirk-fixated trekkies were assuming that the title meant the return of everyone's favourite ham. No such luck, boys and girls. It'll be the next generation only. Expect the title to be either "Destinies" or "Foundation."

Set Phasers on Litigate

Yes, those wacky Paramount lawyers are at it again. This time, they're after a Salt Lake City theatre because a couple of comedians put on a show called *Star Trek : The Voyager Home*. Starring Mr. Schlock and James T. Snirk, one can't argue that the show should be shut down for purely aesthetic reasons, but no. Filthy lucre is the reason, and once again it seems Viacom, Paramount's owners, are determined to piss off the fans. Is this any way to get people to watch *Voyager*, I ask you?

New Batman

Step up, George Clooney. After Val Kilmer decided that he didn't like wearing rubber in public after all, *ER*'s doc has volunteered his services. He starred in *From Dusk till Dawn*, and was hoping to appear in *The Green Hornet*. Whether he can do this credibly after playing the Caped one is doubtful; personally, I can't see it happening. Chris O'Donnell will still play the laddie, in a film that was renamed *Batman and Robin*.

New Steve Austin

You've seen *Clerks*, right? And you thought it was cool. You may have seen *Mallrats*, but by all accounts it's not as good. Well, director Kevin Smith's new movie is rumoured to be *The Six Million Dollar Man*, a remake of some TV show or other. Could it

be? Will we find out how Steve could run so fast despite only having one bionic leg? We can only hope. As for who'll play him; I nominate Brad Pitt. For a laugh.

TV News

New SF Series

More stuff gleaned from the net; make of it what you will.

MGM Television is said to be planning to turn the studio's recent sci-fi theatrical hits *Stargate* and *Species* into first-run TV series.

Although MGM officials declined comment, the TV version of *Stargate*, which focused on the discovery of an ancient gateway to other worlds, reportedly is on target for launch next year. *Species*, a thriller centering on a human-alien half-breed, may follow in 1998. MGM Television dug into its archives last year to produce the hit first-run anthology series *The Outer Limits* and did the same for next fall's *Poltergeist: The Legacy*.

Blake's 7 to Return

No, not on television; sorry about that. Didn't mean to get your hopes up. But if you've got one of those wireless thingies, you may be able to look forward to a one-off sequel to the series on BBC Radio sometime in the future. More on this as details come in.

For fuck's sake...

Now, I'm not one to call the BBC overly sensitive. I wouldn't dare; they might feel hurt or something. But in the light of the IRA's bombing in London recently, it was decided that to have an episode of *Lois and Clark* entitled "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" would be indelicate, and so those lucky BBC viewers got to watch a programme that was renamed to *The New Adventures of Superman*, and an episode retitled "I am Completely in Love With You." And such a snappy title, too.

Gulliver on C4

I suppose that most people know about this at this stage, but you might keep an eye out on Easter Sunday and Monday for *Gulliver's Travels*. By all accounts it's well worth a watch.

Sunday, 14th April, 6:00,

Channel 4

Babylon 5 is back. And it's cool. In fact, it's more than cool. It's amazing. It's ultra-amazing. It's the best thing you'll ever watch. I'm running out of hyperbole here, so I guess you'll have to find out for yourself. Trust me. Watch this programme.

Rimmer In or Out?

I swear, all these Red Dwarf rumours are beginning to get to me. The latest word : Chris Barrie is in all eight episodes of *Red Dwarf Seven*. There is no Christmas Special. Who knows? Maybe it's all just an attempt to get people excited after the less-than-amazing *Red Dwarf VI*. We'll see.

X-Files Soundtrack – Sort of

Check out *Songs in the Key of X*, music from and inspired by the show no-one dares call 'cult' any more. The cynical among you would call this a cheap marketing ploy to get X-Files – currently out-saddening trekkies by several orders of magnitude – to part with more of their shekels. Will it work? Three words : *The Transformed Man*.

Video news

X-Files Box Released

It's a nice box. Really. And judging by the sales, there are thousands of you out there who are now proud owners of the *X-Files* Box, sixteen quid's worth of half-hour documentary that consists mostly of ads. Inside this box you can put the four videos that you've paid sixteen quid (each) for, and look forward to the time next year when you'll be buying them all again as the series is released. Mine's on the mantelpiece.

Book News

Jordan Delayed – Again

The following was taken – verbatim – from the publisher's web page. Not that it's

going to stop you all asking at least six times a day in Forbidden Planet (and, presumably, every other bookshop in the country).

Robert Jordan's *A Crown of Swords*, previously scheduled for hardcover publication in April of 1996, has been delayed to the first week of June.

Nebula Final Ballot Announced

The final ballot for this year's Nebula Awards have been announced. The nominations for best novel are as follows...

John Barnes, *Mother of Storms*

Nancy Kress, *Beggars and Choosers*

Paul Park, *Celestis*

Robert J. Sawyer, *Hobson's Choice/The Terminal Experiment*

Walter Jon Williams, *Metropolitan*

Gene Wolfe, *Calde of the Long Sun*

Sequel to Canticle

Terry Bisson, currently in bookshops because of his new – and pretty nifty -- hardback *Pirates of the Universe* and his novelisation of *Johnny Mnemonic* is to complete Walter Miller's sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, called *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*. A parallel story to *Canticle*, it was eighty per cent finished when Miller killed himself; it was already decided that the finished novel would be co-written.

Other Stuff

Brentford Mercury Hits Big Time

You've probably read it. If you haven't, shame on you. *The Brentford Mercury*, organ of Sproutlore : The Now-Official Robert Rankin Fan Club recently came seventh in a vote of Best Fanzine in SFX magazine. Octocon too featured in best SF event of the year. Is James Bacon happy? Is he smug? How many times did he vote? We offer our congratulations to all concerned.

Bob Shaw 1931 - 1996

As reported in last month's First Contact, SF author Bob Shaw died on February 11th. This came as a great shock to everyone in the SF community: Bob had recently been hospitalised following cardiac arrest, but all signs seemed to indicate that his chances were good.

He had just moved to the US and married his second wife, Nancy Tucker. He returned home shortly before his death, and met with family and friends shortly before he passed away in his sleep.

Born in Northern Ireland in 1931, Bob worked first as a structural engineer, then an aircraft designer, before becoming a journalist and eventually a full-time author in 1975. He became involved with the SF community first as a fan. His first story was "Aspect", published in 1954, and later that year he published his first book, *The Enchanted Duplicator*, in collaboration with Walt Willis.

Bob received two Hugo Awards for his fan writing, in 1979 and 1980, reflecting in many ways the respect he had earned over the years: At any convention he attended, one of the most popular events was his "Serious Scientific Talk"... many of which were collected in *Serious Scientific Talks* (1984) and *A Load of Old BoSh* (1995).

Bob Shaw was one of the two guests (the other being his old pal Harry Harrison) who appeared at the Irish Science Fiction Association's second convention in March 1985. Bob also made a trip over to Dublin for the SFEX art show in 1991, generously gracing the ISFA with his good humour and charm despite having lost his first wife, Sadie, only a few weeks before.

He leaves behind a body of work that will never be equalled in quality, imagination and humour. His stories include the truly stunning "Light of Other Days" (1966), the first short story to feature his remarkable invention slow glass. The story was collected in *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972). In 1977 he wrote what is often considered to be one of the funniest SF novels ever - *Who Goes Here?* An equally entertaining sequel, *Warren Peace* (retitled *Warren Peace - Dimensions* in paperback) followed in 1993, and there were further sequels planned. 1986 saw the publication of what might well be remembered as Bob's best work: *The Ragged Astronauts*, the first ever "steampunk" novel. It concerns the plight of the planet Land and its sister Overland: twin planets locked in one orbit and sharing a common atmosphere. In what must be the most extravagant and convincing feat of the author's imagination, the protagonists of the book undertake a balloon flight from Land to Overland. The book was followed in 1988 with *The Wooden Spaceships* and in 1989 with *The Fugitive Worlds*. While the trilogy falters somewhat at the end, the books never lose the sense of wonder that only an author of Bob Shaw's calibre was capable of conveying.

Other notable works include his short story "Dark Icarus", which deals with a future in which personal flight becomes possible through the use of special anti-gravity harnesses. He continued the theme in 1978 with the story's sequel, the novel *Vertigo* (1991 saw the release of *Terminal Velocity*, which published both works on one volume).

Orbitsville (1975) deals with a Dyson Sphere; an artificial planet completely enclosing its sun, thus providing living space equivalent to five billion earths. In this book, the sphere is of unknown alien construction, and it is only in the sequels - *Orbitsville Departure* (1983) and *Orbitsville Judgment* (1990) - that we learn the origins and the purpose of the sphere.

Other works worth seeking out are his first novel *Night Walk* (1967), *The Two-Timers* (1968), *The Palace of Eternity* (1969), *The Shadow of Heaven* (1969), *Ground Zero Man* (1971, revised as *The Peace Machine* in 1985), *One Million Tomorrows* (1970), *Medusa's Children* (1977), *Ship of Strangers* (1978), *The Ceres Solution* (1981), and *A Wreath of Stars* (1976). He also published several short story collections, including *A Better Mantrap* (1982), *Dark Night In Toyland* (1989) and *Cosmic Kaleidoscope* (1976).

In 1993 Bob published *How to Write Science Fiction*, probably one of the most informative, frank and entertaining "how to" guides the SF world has ever seen.

As a man, Bob Shaw was generous and tolerant to a fault. As an author, he was as close to perfect as makes no odds. He will be missed.

Michael Carroll

Movie Reviews

Johnny Mnemonic: (18), 96 mins.

Poor William Gibson. When his short story, "Johnny Mnemonic", appeared in Omni in 1981, it represented part of a fresh new movement in SF: cyberpunk. A year later, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* brought this gritty, urban form of science-fiction to the big screen and made such an impact that, fourteen years later, a film version of "Johnny Mnemonic" is dismissed as Hollywood cliché.

Unfortunately, this is not a case of a film being misunderstood by its critics. Richard Longo's directorial debut brings little new to the genre. Keanu Reeves plays Johnny, a Mnemonic courier, who -- in a world where information is power -- smuggles sensitive data in wet-wired cranial implant. We are told that he can hold "80 gigs of data", but in order to do so, he "had to dump a chunk of long-term memory" - his childhood - and at this stage, he's starting to get a little miffed at not being able to remember his seventh birthday and suchlike.

This leads to a classic Gibson plot device. In order to restore his memory, Johnny has to take on one last job in Beijing, but ends up with more information than his brain can handle (we are talking about Keanu Reeves after all) and has the Yakuza trying to cut off his head to extract what he is carrying. We learn later that this is the cure to Nerve Attenuation Syndrome (NAS, or the "Black Shakes") developed by Pharmakom, who want to suppress the information because it is more profitable to treat a disease than to cure it. To make matters worse for Johnny, the download codes that would allow safe removal of the data were not sent.

Returning to the free city of Newark, he manages to evade henchman after henchman sent by the Yakuza, including Dolph Lundgren in an over-the-top performance as the Preacherman. Along the way, he enlists the help of a street samurai, Jane (who replaces the original character of Molly Millions due to legal reasons, and is played by Dina Meyer), Ice-T as J-Bone, leader of a the LoTeks - a group of techno-anarchists - and Spider (Henry Rollins), a black-market flesh mechanic.

In terms of plot, that's about it. Much of the movie is taken up by chase sequences and action scenes with violence that strays from style to sadism. Neither Gibson's universe nor the SF themes are adequately explored, and when they are touched upon at all, it is done in such a hamfisted manner to be laughable. The ultimate example of this Jones, an ex-Navy code-breaker used by the LoTeks to try and download Johnny's data, who turns out to be a cybernetically-enhanced dolphin. At least he doesn't talk.

Keanu Reeves will probably claim that he was using the Method to portray an emotionally-bereft man with no childhood memories. Most will come to the conclusion that he can't act. In fact, the calibre of the cast can be judged by the fact that Henry Rollins is its most outstanding member. To be fair, the actors are not well-served by the poor dialogue in Gibson's script (the only time the audience feels any sympathy for Johnny is when he stands up and shouts: "What the fuck is going on here?" - something that they have more than likely been thinking for most of the movie) or Longo's lacklustre direction. Nilo Rodis Jamero's production design is competent, but neither it nor the computer-generated special effects inspire anything except a jaded response from today's audience.

Perhaps cyberpunk is no longer acceptable in cinema. *The Lawnmower Man*, while it had modest box-office success, was slated by critics, while *Johnny Mnemonic* and, more recently, *Strange Days* (which boasted a James Cameron script and award-winning actors Ralph Fiennes and Angela Basset) were major flops. All this does not bode well for the film version of *Neuromancer*, now in pre-production. It has often been said that Gibson's work was not suited to film, usually because the cyberspace scenes would be impossible to film. In this digital age, that is no longer the case, but now the problem seems to lie with the fact that his work is more concerned with the political, economic and social implications of information technology, rather than character. Maybe the only cinema genre where cyberpunk does work is Japanese animé - I suppose one-dimensional characters are less noticeable when they are animated in two dimensions.

Adam Darcy

Strange Days, dir. Kathryn Bigelow, written by James Cameron, starring Ralph Feinnes & Angela Basset. 18s.

Did you know that this movie was written by James Cameron? I didn't, and so I sat down in the Virgin Cinema (of which I seem to be one of the few fans) and expected a science fiction movie with a plot. This is a pity, because whereas there can be no doubt that Cameron is a cool action writer, he's never really been strong on plots.

Basically, *Strange Days* is a virtual reality action thriller in which Ralph runs around with the now-legendary Disk That Everyone Will Kill To Get Their Hands On, and is helped out only by Mace, played excellently by Angela Basset. Ralph used to be a cop, and now he's a virtual reality peddler, selling illegal rigs that give users the total experience of whomever was recorded on the disk being played. As the man says, "this isn't just like TV only better." It's a whole new ball game. So when he finds himself with his hands on a disk showing who killed an influential black singer, he's got everyone after him, and not all for the same reasons.

To mention any more of the plot would be superfluous. Let's just say that there are lots of the high-speed camera tracks we've come to expect from Bigelow, plenty of Cameronesque 'just when you think there's a quiet bit shit starts happening all over again' and oodles of dystopian scenery that make the LA of 1999 the cesspool of America and, presumably, the free world.

It's not that this is a bad film; if you expect a shallow actioner, you'll probably be delighted, especially with Basset's performance. And Juliette Lewis can really sing! Give this woman a record contract. However, it's not the most interesting movies, and is below-par even on the action front. It's not Cameron's best. Bigelow, too, disappointed me a bit on this one; still, it'll worth watching on video when it's no longer £2.50 a night.

Robert Elliott

Toy Story, starring a computer and various voices. General certificate.

You know that when the first movie comes out wholly animated on computer, you've got to see it. Disney may have been using computer animation for years, but we're talking about an entire motion picture, here. It may not be a breakthrough on the scale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but it's darn close.

The funny thing is, a couple of minutes into the movie, and you forget that you came to see the animation. There are a couple of places where you're forcibly reminded, but overall you're so caught up in the cool story that you just sit there, appreciating this movie as a funny experience, and one that you'll have to repeat.

Toy Story is the story of Andy's toys, specifically Woody the Cowboy and the new arrival, Buzz Lightyear, space dude. Woody is Andy's favourite toy, and the boss until Buzz comes along. A trifle peeved at no longer being numero uno, Woody tries to arrange a slight mishap for Buzz, but this goes wrong when Buzz falls out of a window and Woody's accused of bumping him off. For most of the movie we follow Woody around in his attempt to rescue Buzz, and to save them both from the evil Sid, the boy next door. All this, and he still has to convince Buzz that he's not really a space ranger, simply a toy.

This movie, basically, is one you have to see. Forget the ground-breaking animation, forget the multiple-Oscar-winning stars, just watch this movie for the utterly cool, totally funny story. Count the in-jokes. Wonder briefly if it's okay to laugh at a ten-year-old, however evil, having the shit scared out of him. Giggle at a little boy playing with his Woody. Then the next week, watch it again. I'll have to go a third time. Definitely.

Robert Elliott

From Dusk till Dawn, dir. Roberto Rodriguez, starring Quentin Tarantino, Harvey Keitel, Juliette Lewis

I was fortunate enough to be one of the 400 who saw *From Dusk till Dawn* at the Savoy as part of the Irish Film Festival. The story goes that Tarantino has broken his brother out of jail, and now they're on the run with a lot of money, and heading for Mexico. They have a hostage, or at least they do until they stop at a motel for food, and Tarantino gets excited. They decide to use Harvey Keitel and his son and daughter for cover. Keitel is playing an ex-preacher who has lost his faith, and is taking his kids for a holiday in a mobile home. As you can imagine, as they head for the border tensions are high, with Tarantino continually staring at Keitel's daughter (played by Juliette Lewis) and allowing his mind to imagine things.

Once through the border they arrange to meet and pay off a Mexican, but that will be in the morning, so they go to a pub/club in the middle of nowhere to wait. And then you begin to watch a different movie.

I won't spoil it as it's just too good. Let's just say that it's Roger Corman meets Quentin Tarantino. Tarantino is a good actor, and although he has been in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, those were only bit parts. Here, under Rodriguez' direction, he plays a wacko so well. Keitel looks different with a beard, but he's great as usual.

I thoroughly enjoyed this movie. The surreal humour, and mockery in the second half is brilliant, totally juxtaposed with the tension and real life drama and violence of the first half.

The laughter of the audience was immense. The clichés and derision of nearly every vampire movie is inspired. I came out of the Savoy knowing I hadn't wasted my £4, and that with most other directors I would have had to pay twice that for two movies.

This is a must for all who are either of the Tarantino ilk or who just enjoy downright scandalous humour.

James Bacon

Advertisement

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Where to Buy Stuff in Dublin

Many years ago, this noble organ decided that the public had a right to know. Thus was freedom of the press born, and more specifically, we covered all the science fiction-oriented shops in the capital, and we were content. But that was many years ago. Since then, much has happened. The Alchemist's Head is no more, and is still missed by many. Phantasia disappeared, and was mourned by those of us who could find no other shop that would stock books like *Abandon Galaxy! A Commander Craig Galactic Adventure!*

Bad times indeed. But the news is not all bleak, for although there is still only one dedicated science fiction book shop, there are now two comics shops. Take a bow, Sub City on Exchequer Street.

The main thing about Exchequer Street is that, if you ask the average person where it is, you'll be met with a blank stare. So let me elucidate; it's between Grafton Street and South Great George's Street, a continuation of Wicklow Street. So now you know where it is; why would you want to go there?

Broadly speaking, Sub City divides its stock into two parts; comics and trading cards. It's a small shop, but nifty enough so that it manages to pack in a decent number of back issues (although an query as to the availability of *Howard the Duck* back numbers resulted only in a pitying stare, but I'm used to that), pretty much all of the new comics available, and more trading cards than you'll ever count in your life. A strange item on which to focus, you might think, but then you haven't seen people spend positively ridiculous amounts of money on Star Trek boosters in attempt to get that Jean-Luc Picard, or the benighted individual hanging around the counter asking passers by if they've got a Millennium Falcon they want to trade. Truly, I say to you, trading cards, and particularly customisable card games, are big business. And the handy thing about Sub City is the fact that I've yet to find them cheaper. Forbidden Planet may match their prices on one game, Virgin on another, maybe even Mark's Models on a third but overall they're the cheapest I've come across. It may be a matter of five pence a booster, but when you see the ridiculous amounts some people spend, it can add up.

Another handy thing about Sub City is the sales item known only as The Folder. This is a folder (hence the snappy name) filled with rare Magic cards, for sale individually. If you're looking for a specific card this is ultra-handy, and I've completed a couple of decks with cards that are usually around the price of a single booster. As if the card wasn't enough, you also get entertainment as you watch "cut-me-own-throat" Brian grimace in a way that would make de Niro proud as he bankrupts the shop by giving you the cards for an embarrassingly low price.

Certainly, if Magic is your game then Sub City is the place to go. If you're Italian is up to it, they've been known to get in boxes of Legends in the language of our continental cousins, so you can spend many happy hours wondering what 'bersaglio' means. French cards have also been available, you can find yourself building a pan-European deck with cards long out of print in the Second Language.

There are other games, but as I don't play them they're of limited interest to me. But if you're into Redemption, Shadowfist, Rage, Overpower, or a bazillion other games I've never heard of and have no intention of playing, then by all means wend your way along for a booster or two.

Robert "not affiliated in any way whatsoever with Sub City, although I have bought the odd booster pack there" Elliott

Letters

Dear Editor,

I've been a reader of science fiction for a number of years now, and so I was very happy to see **First Contact** on sale in Forbidden Planet. I don't know if it was on sale before and I just missed it or if this was the first issue, but either way I have to say that I was impressed with the contents. Too many magazines of this type rely on glossy production values and lots of artwork to try and sell them; it's a pleasure to read something in which the written word is paramount.

Having said that, I have to say that it looks as if you included the opinion piece "Hold Your Raygun to My Head" simply in an attempt to elicit an outraged response from the readership. If such was your intention, congratulations. It worked.

I don't know exactly how serious Mr. Venner was in his described perception of attitudes to science fiction, but I have to say that I was amused by his despondency at being unable to find a market for his story. I've never attempted fiction before, but I like to think that if I did, I wouldn't blame any failure to publish on editors; rather, I'd take responsibility for my own work and write stories that were acceptable to those editors. I'm not advocating conformity in all things – far from it – but I know that if I want poetry published, I won't send it to Interzone; if I have a fantasy short story, I won't send it to Analog. Each magazine has its own criteria, and to ignore those criteria is folly.

My congratulations to Mr. Venner for finding an *experimental* publisher for his story; I hope that 'experimental' (with or without italics) has changed its definition since I last read a magazine of that type. To me, 'experimental' evokes memories of badly-written, pretentious garbage that was rarely, if ever worth the price of admission.

Regarding Mr. Venner's comments on the definition of science fiction, I have to say that I *would* say that the science must be integral to the plot. He seems to imply that any use of the traditional SF elements in a story – a space station, for example – automatically qualify the story as science fiction. I disagree. The characters in a story will *always* be the most important element, but if the story can be set as easily – and with little modification – on a space station as in a modern city, then the story is not science fiction, regardless of its setting. Science fiction has many facets and many purposes, but surely its greatest asset is its ability to explore the human condition in settings other than the familiar? And I do mean 'explore,' not just visit for the day. By setting a story on a space station or another planet, and author is able to show us how humans react in circumstances other than the norm; to waste such a setting by telling a mundane tale is just that; a waste.

As to Mr. Venner's ridiculous assertion that science fiction fans aren't interested in stories where the human condition is paramount; I must wonder has he ever read a science fiction novel? *Ender's Game*, *The White Dragon*, *Falling Free*, in fact *every* science fiction novel and short story I have enjoyed and re-read over the years has had at its centre the story of a person. No exception. Even those novels considered to be 'hard' science fiction – *Eon* and *Dragon's Egg*, for example, are stories about people. They may contain a lot of science, I know that when I want the science by itself I can always read *Scientific American*. When I want the science combined with a story about the human condition, I can read a science fiction novel. Any science fiction novel.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Trevelyan

via the net.

Dear Ed/Man Of Destiny,

Why no letters?

First point:

Where do the Albedo crew get their Pseudonym 'Sidney Venner' from? Sounds like an STD...

As for the ISFA...

The ISFA is the sum of its parts. If you insist on amputating them, then the only one who'll be reading this monthly mag is yourself. You'll definitely get no feedback then, or is that what you really want? Total agreement with yourself. Paradise lost regained...

I want...

Tolerance,

Openness and transparency,

Creativity,

A close encounter with a babe alien,

Feedback,

A winning lotto ticket.

Erosion of known ISFA ego zones,

Free pints of the black stuff.

Less politics,

More fun,

A bar of gold for each new member,

Then I'll vote ISFA.

Gotta go.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Brady.

A fascinating letter, Martin. As for your wish list: if we filter out the impractical items (the bar of gold for each member was discussed a couple of years ago, but dismissed because of the wide fluctuations in the rate), we find a standard list of accusations the validity of which, I confess, I find to be somewhat doubtful. 'Erosion of known ISFA ego zones?' If they're there, they're not known to me. And I'm sufficiently cool and omniscient that I'd know if anyone was being overly ego-maniacal. I assume your 'amputation' comment was a reference to the fact that a fiction magazine has been discontinued for the nonce. I agree that such a magazine is necessary, but there's no point in saying 'by jingo we're doing a magazine' and then hoping for the magazine fairy to give us the wherewithal to produce it. The association at the moment isn't capable of producing a magazine with the proper production values. I hope that soon it will be, but I suspect that when it is, the usual problem will occur; the same writers and the same lack of artists contributing.

By the way, as far as I know, 'Sydney Venner' isn't an Albedo pseudonym. And what does subscriber trunk dialling have to do with anything?

RDE

Dear Editor,

I'd like to take issue with a number of points made by Sydney Venner in his article 'Put Your Raygun to My Head' in First Contact (Feb'96).

Science Fiction *has* grown up a little since the fifties; not too many people apply hard and rigid rules on what constitutes SF anymore. And it's reflected in what publishers are putting out. There is very little hard SF in the super-traditional mode on the shelves and what is, is of a much more mature variety, a la Bear, Card, Robinson (Kim Stanley), Brin, etc.

Yes, a lot of TV SF is of the turgid variety; it is well accepted by now that TV SF is at least twenty years behind written SF with few exceptions. I don't think Syd can lump the two together to make his point. I don't think there is a particular SF mentality and I certainly don't think the TV moguls take any notice of it if there *is*.

I do sometimes think that market forces have a constraining effect on writers, but within that framework there is a lot of room for imaginative freedom. Despite Syd's self-deprecatory comment about being a mere cobbler at the feet of fiction, I can't help but feel that he is setting himself up as some kind of saviour of SF. The *brave* editor of an *experimental* SF mag has taken a story of his? There's *hope* yet? Give me a break.

Yours sincerely

John Kenny

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why?

Simple...

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Where else can you find an organisation that meets at 8:00 in **Cooper's Pub, Abbey Street** on the **First Tuesday** of **Every Month** with a vowel in it?

Where else can you find an organisation dedicated to all aspects of the fantastic, from Star Trek to, er, something that's got nothing to do with Star Trek but is Science Fiction, Fantasy or Horror?

Where else can you find an organisation that'll take from you the trifling sum of ten Earth pounds and put it in their bank account, taking it out only to look at every second Thursday?

Where else can you find people to talk about anything science fictional?

More to the point, where else can you find people willing to listen to you holding forth on those self-same topics?

Act now! But if you can't get a job on the stage, simply send £10 Irish to us at

The Irish Science Fiction Association

30, Beverly Downs

Knocklyon Road

Dublin 16

or e-mail us for more details at bhry@iol.ie

Eurocon '97

1997, as you all doubtless know, sees the European science fiction convention come to Ireland. The site for the Eurocon is voted on two years in advance by members of the European Science Fiction Society, that is, people who attend the Eurocon of the year. The 1995 Eurocon also happened to be a Worldcon, and the happy attendees voted Dublin as the site for the 1997 con. Thus the eighth Octocon will be a European event, and should prove to be even niftier than usual.

So what makes a Eurocon different from an average, everyday, ho-hum run-of-the-mill science fiction convention? Basically, the international aspect is much more pronounced. This is especially true of those of us in the British Isles, as it's less easy for our continental chums to pop over for a few days. As Worldcons are usually held in the States, the Eurocon is the simplest place for European fans to meet. This presents interesting logistical problems as there's no One True Language. Fannish is more of a disease than a language, and Esperanto is limited only to people who say 'I speak it like a native.'

So now you know. What's this got to do with you, you wonder? Well, me hearties, this is more than the usual plea by a con-runner for help. But I feel justified in doing this as the Eurocon is more than just a normal con. As a European cultural event, it's got the backing of UNESCO, and is by any definition of the word, a biggie.

You may ask, Morden-like, what do we want? We reply, Dean-like, what have you got? If you haven't joined yet, we want your money. If you have joined, we want your ideas. If you've got a sister, we... sorry, I'm getting carried away. Basically, running your average Octocon involves dedication, blood, sweat, tears and liberal amounts of leg- and finger-work. Running a Eurocon will be bigger. But it's also the most fun you can have without a plunger.

You want to give us a hand, find out more or just laugh at us, then come along to **The Horse & Tram** (beside the Screen on O'Connell Bridge; you know, where we used to hold the meetings) on **Tuesday, 11th April at 8:00pm**. We won't coerce you into anything, and no salesman will call to your door. We just want to get together with a few people to talk about what can happen at this con. It's a European con, but we also want it to be an Irish con, so we want to hear from you.

You can also contact us at

Eurocon '97

PO Box 5130

Dublin 4

e-mail rde@irelands-web.ie

CD-ROM REVIEW

Adam Darcy

This is a new feature for First Contact, one which - unless others follow my lead - will be about as regular as my CD-buying habits. In other words: pretty infrequent.

Star Wars: Rebel Assault II - The Hidden Empire, LucasArts.

Min. Requirements: 50 MHz 486 PC/compatible, 8 Mb RAM, double-speed CD-ROM drive.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... (Sorry, couldn't resist it.) Like its predecessor, *Rebel Assault II* is an "interactive movie", and its cinematic qualities are apparent from the introductory sequence onward - an account of the story so far scrolls upward into a starfield, accompanied by John Williams' rousing theme, followed by specially-shot scenes involving real actors. Not the original cast, of course (with the exception of Admiral Ackbar, since animatronics don't demand huge appearance fees), but it's all in full-motion video (that's TV-quality pictures to you and me) and it looks and sounds great.

You take on the part of Rookie One, a Skywalker-esque farm boy turned Rebel pilot. A number of Rebel patrol ships have been destroyed in a region of space known as the Dreighton Triangle. Superstition suggests ghost ships were involved, but when you receive a distress signal from a Correllian freighter, it appears that there is a more sinister link between the Dreighton Triangle and Darth Vader's plans to crush the Rebel Alliance. What follows is essentially a movie divided into chapters. To proceed to the next chapter, the player has to complete a task. There are four types of control system used in the actual game: Cockpit flight, behind-ship flight, ground combat, and point-of-view combat. The first two allow you to control various *Star Wars* vehicles, such as X-wings, Y-wings, B-wings, speeder-bikes, TIE fighters, and a Millennium Falcon-style freighter. In the other control systems, your task is to blast Imperial stormtroopers.

Unfortunately, this format does not quite work. The interaction is limited, because the game sequences are pre-rendered. This means that the program cannot display anything except the images it has in memory. Gameplay is reduced to pointing a cursor at an enemy and shooting it, or finding the pre-determined path that will allow you to complete the chapter. The behind-ship flight sections are extremely frustrating in this regard, and while there are different levels of difficulty, from beginner to expert, it is these sections that will probably determine whether or not you complete the game. This will leave avid game-players feeling unfulfilled at the lack of control.

For the nostalgic *Star Wars* fan, the cinematic sequences will probably make up for the lack of gameplay. They manage to evoke the *Star Wars* universe effectively (that old chestnut, "Aren't you a little short to be a stormtrooper?" is even worked in), but the game does not encourage further playing once the story is complete. For the more games-orientated fan, Dark Forces and TIE Fighter are probably a better bet.

Television Reviews

Robert Elliott

I confess to not actually watching that much television; because I'm limited to RTE, I only watch three programmes; *Lois & Clark*, *Animaniacs* and *American Gothic*. And for the three, I've seen exactly zero advertisements. Of course, this is nothing new; RTE were the first to show *Northern Exposure*, and they snuck it onto Network 2 at the poxiest hour imaginable. They've done a lot better with *American Gothic*, but they've maintained their policy of not telling anyone when a really cool programme starts.

And *American Gothic* is really cool. Watching one episode, you'd be forgiven for thinking it's just a hackneyed rip-off of horror movies, and indeed in a typical episode you can find ninety per cent of all horror clichés. However, *American Gothic* transcends this for one reason; Sheriff Lucas Buck.

Buck is the sheriff in the town of Trinity, South Carolina, and is a bit of a bastard. Actually, the guy's a *total* bastard. Played to perfection by – damn, I've forgotten his name; is it Gary Cole? – that guy who was really annoying in the talk radio program, *Night Something* (yeah, I'm being really specific here. Sorry. It's six-twenty in the AM, and I'm a trifle fatigued). Anyway, from the teaser of the opening episode, we're left with no doubt that Sheriff Buck is a bastard. But he's so *nice* about it. And he's a pretty good sheriff; in fact, if you discount the nastiness perpetrated by the Good Sheriff himself, he manages to run a pretty crime-free town.

Beyond the sheriff, as I said, it's pretty cliché-ridden. In fact, you'd think that the writers are constantly trying to out-do each other with the number of hoary chestnuts they can get into one episode. However, this isn't a bad thing. Really. In another setting it'd be terrible, but the fact that the programme's called *American Gothic* (an oxymoron, some might say) means that its producers aren't taking it all that seriously. Check it out on Sundays at about 9:30, Network 2.

I've tried to resist. God knows I've tried. I've said to myself 'just wait until it starts.' But I can restrain myself no more. I've got to tell you about *Babylon 5*.

Doubtless one or two of you are familiar with my fondness for *The X-Files*. I have, on occasion, described it as the best thing to ever appear on a cathode ray tube. And I wasn't wrong (the very idea!). But it has been supplanted. With its third season, *Babylon 5* has gone from a really cool series to something you have to watch. We're not talking choice, here.

By the time you read this, the countdown to 14th April will have begun. I urge you, I plead with you, set the video. This is a programme you'll want to watch again. And again.

Okay, enough rhetoric. What is it that makes *B5* so excellent? Well, lots of things. Primary amongst them is the five-year plan set up by the series' creator, J. Michael Straczynski. In the first couple of seasons, we found out lots of stuff about the Shadows, the impending war and lots of background on the third season (and beyond). Well, the introductions are over, and the action's hotting up.

You know the way that – once every several blue moons – you're fortunate enough to watch some television and say to yourself 'wow!?' Well, I've seen eight episodes of *Babylon 5*'s third season and in every one of those I've had occasion to wow.

Interestingly enough, all this wonder is solely because of the medium. If I were reading a book with the same story, I'd think it good, but nothing spectacular. But because we've become so inured to banal television that insults the intelligence of the viewer, when something comes along with any sort of quality, it's treated as something awesome.

And for television, *Babylon 5* is awesome. Its five-year story arc is unprecedented, and it's because of this that the story is so wonderful. Can you imagine *any* incarnation of Star Trek maintaining continuity for five episodes, let alone five years? There's *never* been anything like it.

To sum up, then: watch this program. It's got great characters (G'kar in particular is getting a lot more interesting), the niftiest graphics you've ever seen and that five-year thing that makes this programme something you'll talk about forever.

If you don't watch this programme on April 14th, I'm coming around to your house to beat you up.

Finally, a few words on a programme that's been hailed as a comedic masterpiece, and one of ITV's most popular programmes. I refer to none other than *Goodnight Sweetheart*, a time-travel comedy starring Nicholas Lindhurst. Basically, this is a programme about a guy who suddenly finds himself in wartime London, and finds himself jaunting backwards and forwards without reason. This is handy for some things; he can chat up women by giving them a bunch of bananas. Imagine trying to show a strange woman a banana nowadays; you wouldn't get very far. This programme was written, unless I'm very much mistaken, by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gram, who previously brought us such programmes as *The New Statesman*. But whereas that succeeded through sheer campness – it was far too ridiculous to be taken seriously – *Goodnight Sweetheart* fails because it's just plain boring. It's not funny, and it's not interesting. I've seen a number of British magazines say very nice things about it, but I confess that after watching three episodes, I gave up on it. Having said that, I find *Only Fools and Horses* a pain in the arse, so it's possible you'll like. It's probably still on RTE; you might want to check it out. Don't say I didn't warn you, though.

Customisable Card Games

Robert Elliott

As far as customisable card games go, it seems that we are in the Age of the License. More so than any other genre, it seems that few games – offhand, I can think only of Magic and Redemption – are based on original premises, with all the others based on books, films, TV series or role-playing games.

One of the first of the licensed games was, of course, Star Trek. It gets everywhere else; why not card games? But as games went, it was fairly shite. I confess to having a certain fondness for it, but nonetheless it was awkward to set up, and somewhat limited in its gameplay. Others railed at the scarcity of the Bridge crew, but I found this a minor niggle, preferring my cavils to be in the nature of the slowness of the game, and the dearth of really cool combinations that made Magic so nifty a game.

Thus I was very glad to see the *Alternate Universes* expansion set. Adding 121 cards to the set, a lot of thought has gone into this set, and it adds much more to the game than I would have thought possible. It still suffers somewhat in its gameplay but this is not going to be rectified by a mere expansion; a much more fundamental change is what's needed there. Nonetheless, this expansion adds certain degrees of sophistication to the game, and not a little humour, either.

The premise behind the expansion is, obviously, alternate universes, and as such we have cards taken from those episodes – and they were legion – in which we saw such people as Lieutenant (j.g.) Picard (from "Tapestries"), Captain Beverly Picard (from "All Good Things...") as well as Castillo and Garrett from the Enterprise-C.

The expansion also introduces the idea of 'captured' characters. I can't explain how this works, as basically I haven't a clue. There was no rulebook provided with the expansion, so things like capture or stasis (mentioned by a card or two) leave me ignorant. I've heard that there are explanatory sheets available that enlighten players as to the nature of these cards, but I've yet to see one. This is a major bummer, as it leaves me unable to play my favourite card from the expansion; 'Interrogation.' This lets you ask one captured character how many lights he sees. Depending on his answer, he either goes free and gives you ten points, or stays captured and gives you one point.

Star Trek still has its problems, and as I said, and reckon those problems are there to stay. Decipher have tried to address a number of problems with the original set, and they've succeeded in a lot of cases. The game is still flawed, but if you enjoyed playing the original set, you'll find this expansion a worthy addition.

Also from Decipher we have what is probably the most eagerly-awaited game ever; Star Wars. This is a two-player game, with each player representing either the Light or Dark side of the Force; your aim is to deplete the Force in your opponent. In this game, the Force is represented by the cards; if you run out of cards, you lose the game.

Unlike most CCGs, in Star Wars players do not draw their cards from the same set; the Dark and Light sides both have their own set. This has its plusses and minuses; it makes the choice of cards simpler, but it also makes it more difficult to get a deck together. Whereas in Star Trek it was improbable that you'd be able to make a workable deck from a starter pack, in Star Wars you're guaranteed to be unable. This is a bit of a pisser, and Decipher's suggestion that you trade the cards with a friend who buys a starter so one of you has all the Light cards isn't really workable; would you really give up a Darth Vader for a rebel Disarmed?

The naming of the cards is a bit bizarre; most are taken from dialogue from the film. I've read a lot of reviews slamming this, but I find it a nifty idea; I'd rather play a card called "We're all gonna be a lot thinner!" than one called "Crush whomever's in the Trash Compactor." And I really like the regenerating cards; if you've lost Luke, you can bring him back with a card called "Luke's Back." And what's the picture on the card? Yup, it's Luke's back. Of course, this is an uncommon card, and Luke is rare, which leaves a lot of players able to regenerate a card they don't have. Still, that's why the call it a Trading card game, I suppose. If anyone wants my spare Luke, I'm still looking for a Leia and a Darth Vader.

Gamewise, it's very playable, and much better than I expected from a licensed product. It's a game that'll appeal to card gamers and Star Wars fanatics alike; in fact, the game's perfect for the anoraks in the audience. Playing a card is the perfect opportunity to spout several lines of dialogue, and I defy anyone to play "Out of Nowhere" (the card with the coolest picture, by the way) without an accompanying "Yeeeha!" Advanced users can add, should they prefer, "You're all clear, kid! Let's blow this thing and go home!"

Basically, once you get a deck together, Star Wars is a cool game. The flavour text gives background to many characters, and despite some strange absences (you won't find Artoo, Chewie or Greedo in the set) this is a set that collectors will like, as well.

Gamewise, its biggest drawback is the fact that pretty soon it becomes obvious who's going to win. As you lose more cards, your options are reduced correspondingly, so you lose cards faster and faster. The idea of using the cards as Force isn't a bad one, but it'd be better if a fairer way could be worked out. Any Magic player will be able to tell you of the time he came back from one life to win the game; I'd be very surprised if you can find a Star Wars player able to make a similar claim.

So it's got nice cards, an okay system and some really cool card names. Definitely one to collect and play.

Finally, we come to another licensed product that people have been looking forward to; Lord of the Rings. Originally supposed to be a joint venture with Wizards of the Coast, ICE eventually went it alone and managed to bring out what I consider to be the best looking cards of any game available. The artwork is all original (thankfully, none was taken from that poxy film) and we're left with a complex game that reflects magnificently the scope of Tolkien's masterpiece.

The game is complex, and can be played by any number of players between one and five. Each player takes the part of one of Middle Earth's wizards, and unlike most games of this type, all of the wizards are on the same side; each is trying to defeat Sauron. There are two ways of doing this; the hard way is to destroy the One Ring, the easier option is to get more marshalling points than any other wizard. 'Marshalling points,' by the way, are what you get for overcoming the obstacles you face in your quest.

As I said, the game is complex. This fact isn't helped by the rulebook, which I found to be badly-laid out and somewhat occult in its attempt at explaining the game. A lot of stuff is given funny priority, and while there are rules for a solitaire game, no explanation is given as to what you actually have to do to win the game. This might pose a bit of a problem for those of you who like playing with yourselves; for those who prefer group activities, the task isn't much easier as a lot of the cards are as difficult to interpret as the rulebook.

Broadly speaking, the cards are divided into three types; sites, hazards and helpful cards. Your characters wander from site to site, collecting items and attempting to overcome all manner of nastiness that comes your way. The characters can be in groups as big or as small as you like, but obviously there's safety in numbers. Depending on the sites you're travelling through, you'll face certain types of hazards; the nearer to Mordor, the nastier the hazards. If you're determined to destroy the One Ring (and I've never come close myself) then you'll find a difficult task ahead of you (as is only proper; it took Frodo over a thousand pages, after all), with your opponent(s) flinging all manner of nastiness your way in an attempt at killing you. Ninety-nine games out of a hundred and one will be won or lost on the number of marshalling points, which I must confess is a bit anti-climactic. I mean, we're talking about a major quest here, and the game can come down to who killed the most orcs.

Overall, if you can wade your way through the rulebook and decide on your own interpretation for some of the more obscure cards, then you'll find Middle Earth a fun game. In the end, however, it's easier to destroy the One Ring than it is to get the rules clear.

Well, that's basically it for now. If you play any of the above – or indeed, any customisable card game – then you could do worse than to pop along to Tommy Wright's, Burgh Quay any Monday. Granted, most of people are Magic Players, but you can usually be assured of a few alternate games going in.

My All-time Top Ten Favourite Novels

John Kenny

*When drawing up this list I came up with 21 books, including such acknowledged classics as *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Childhood's End* which were there purely because they were among the first books I had ever read and had such a powerful impact on me. I don't think they would stand up too well to a rereading so they bit the dust. Others included *The Way the Future Was*, which is an autobiography by Frederik Pohl and *Dangerous Visions*, which is an anthology. However, as you'll see, I've still managed to cheat a little on keeping the figure to 10.*

In no particular order:

1. *The Silver Locusts* by Ray Bradbury

I still prefer the UK title to *The Martian Chronicles*, an absolute must-read for anyone who calls themselves an SF fan. A collection of linked short stories, it is the best of Bradbury's science fiction. He is far more at home with the macabre, but this book blew me away when I first read it, nearly twenty years ago.

2. *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* and *The Fabulous Riverboat* by Philip Jose Farmer

My first cheat on my top ten. These are the first two volumes of Farmer's *Riverworld* series. *The Dark Design* and *The Magic Labyrinth* were big disappointments and I never bothered with *The Gods of Riverworld*. But the first two were brilliant. They really delved into the past lives of Sir Richard Francis Burton and Sam Clemens among others and brought them to life. In fact, I was so fired up by Farmer's obviously diligent research that I searched out biographies on some of the people he featured and was first in line to see *The Mountains of the Moon*, a terrific film all about Burton and Speke's quest for the source of the Nile.

3. *Hothouse* by Brian Aldiss

Aldiss completely eschewed scientific accuracy when he created this vision of a far future Earth which has stopped in its tracks with one side perpetually facing the sun and with giant spider webs connecting the world to the moon. There was outrage from some quarters when it won a Hugo in 1962 (they maintained that *Hothouse* was an out-and-out fantasy, rather than SF).

But labelling aside, his depiction of a world abundant with strange plant intelligences and teeming with life, yet also decaying, is genuinely mesmerising. It suffers a little from being a fix-up of short stories, but I guarantee you'll be hard pushed to find a far future Earth as alien and fantastic as this.

4. *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone* by Mervyn Peake

My second cheat. This trilogy is like nothing else I've ever read. It was hard work at first to get into the dense overlaid style and quirkiness of this writer, but it was well worth it. Hilariously funny and outrageously depressing at the same time, Lord Sepulchre, Swelter the chef, Flay, Fuschia, Steerpike, Prunesquallor the doctor and others and the sprawling, never-ending environs of Gormenghast will live on in my mind forever. Truly unique.

5. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller

All about the struggle by a monastery and its monks to preserve knowledge in a post holocaust Earth. Miller was to deliver a sequel to this 1959 novel but his untimely death recently means we may never know what he planned to follow the apocalyptic ending in *Canticle* with.

6. *Them Bones* by Howard Waldrop

One of the best page turners I've ever read. A rip-roaring time travel story involving the ancient Aztecs. Very different from his quirky, idiosyncratic short stories, but, nonetheless, worth a look. Why is Waldrop not more well known? Apparently, he has to rent his body out to medical science just to keep food on the table.

7. *Ubik* by Philip K. Dick

Typical of Dick's best work, this mind-boggling novel has its main protagonist trying to survive in a world that is slipping backwards in time. And there's a very good reason for it; I think. The whole thing made brilliant sense to me when I read it, but I'd be hard pushed to explain it to anybody today. Its effect on me was very much like glimpsing some hidden truth about the universe and having it slip from my grasp. Which was one of the major themes of Dick's later work.

8. *The City and the Stars* by Arthur C. Clarke

I thought I had become a jaded reader until I read this novel a couple of years ago. Do you remember that sense-of-wonder hit you got when discovering SF for the first time? It seemed to me that I would never recapture that feeling again. But this book did it for me.

Based on a shorter version (*Against the Fall of Night*), Clarke paints a vivid picture of the last city on Earth in the infinitely distant future, where people are recycled every few thousand years to avoid overcrowding and maintain a static civilisation. But along comes one young man who upsets the apple cart. Far superior to *Childhood's End* and *Rendezvous with Rama*.

9. *A Scanner Darkly* by Philip K. Dick

In this bleak, future Los Angeles, drug abuse and crime are rife. Corruption in the police department is so widespread that officers wear suits that scramble their appearance so they can be more effective in their undercover work. But our main man, an undercover nark officer, is given the task of spying on himself, and once more we spiral into Dick's unique brand of mind-boggling, paranoid storytelling.

Despite the typically depressing worldview, this book is also hilariously funny in parts. There's a great piece on car maintenance and several very funny instances of drug-induced paranoia. There's a definite anti-drug message here and at the end of the novel Dick dedicates it to several dozen of his friends who died over the years from drug related problems. One of his more heart-felt and touching works.

10. *Icehenge* by Kim Stanley Robinson

A good example of well thought out hard SF, with interesting, three dimensional characters and some of the punch of Clarkeian/Stapledonian grandiosity (Clute eat your heart out).

Comics Reviews

James Bacon

Death, the Time of Your Life, Gaiman, Bachalo & Buckingham, Vertigo, £2.70

Death, if you didn't know already, is the gorgeous sister of Dream, AKA the Sandman, and is one of the seven Endless. This is her second mini-series, the first proving to be hugely popular.

The story concerns two lovers, Hazel and Foxglove, Hazel's son Alvin, music, mortality, the cost of fame and the price of love. Foxglove is a popular musician who plays the acoustic guitar. Her manager looks after her with father-like care, but when he gives her a message, she doesn't seem to grasp its importance; she doesn't know he'd just died on a plane many miles away, and if she doesn't heed it she'll end up losing the ones she loves.

This comic has been eagerly awaited by many, and Vertigo did the right thing in keeping the original team for this second series. Chris Bachalo's pencils are stunning. Mark Buckingham brings these pencils into clarity with his excellent inking; they are a formidable team whose artwork is revered in the business, and deservedly so. The story moves well and looks good. Gaiman does a great job here, he also proves that he can write songs.

The comic cover is done by Dave McKean, complementing the whole. I thoroughly enjoyed this read, but am particularly thankful that Vertigo didn't change the original team, and didn't do a two-issue, deluxe-format six-pound-each square-bound job. This comic is a definite for anyone who likes a good, well-told love story mixed with a little bit of the fantastic.

Sin City – That Yellow Bastard, Frank Miller, Dark Horse, £2.70

This is the best Sin City story for quite a while. Full of dialogue mixed with action, it's now in its second issue of six and well worth picking up.

The story is about Hartigan, a cop, a hard cop near retirement, who in issue one shoots Royal, a politician's son in the wrist and in the balls before he has a chance to rape and kill a young girl. Hartigan doesn't go unscathed, and during the chase suffers a heart attack, then gets shot by Royal and in the back by his own partner. Bummer or what.

The second issue seems to be the first turn into a twisting story, and an ugly one at that. Threatened in a hospital bed by Royal senior, Hartigan is informed of the fact that the girl was found raped and he is suspect #1, with no-one around to corroborate any story he has to tell.

The whole comic, almost, is from Hartigan's perspective in the hospital, and he doesn't say a thing. Not to his wife, not to his fellow officers, not to anyone. Except to the young girl who visits him and says she knows that he actually saved her, and her parents have not allowed her to say anything and that she cares. Hartigan doesn't want her to see him again as she could and would get into trouble. And so ends issue #2.

The dialogue is brilliant, Royal senior ranting and raving at the man who shot his son in the balls is truly amazing. The artwork, as ever, is black and white and is extremely cool. Miller gives a new slant to Sin City and from this angle it looks brilliant. Well worth picking up now or holding out for a TPB edition.

Madman Comics, Mike Allred, Dark Horse

This issue sees one strange hero, Madman, closing in on Factor Max with the help of Astroman, a robot. He questions his own existence as they go through the labyrinthine caves to reach the core.

Factor Max is a robot, but like his minions the programming is not right, or at any rate is not favourable towards Madman. Madman has defeated death and this is what Factor Max wants, and to

this end he has kidnapped all of Madman's good buddies, including a sweet lass called Joe, who he's extremely soft on.

It's a great comic. Madman is mentally questioning many different things, from himself, his urge to kill to protect Joe, and then not stop killing to whether Astroman is a screwball. Although with not much background to the situation, it's a great read. No room here for the people who like hack and slash heroes, Madman is the thinking man's hero.

The cover is coloured by Alex Ross and the art and story are by Mike Allred, who does a very good job. His picture is in the back, and it appears that he's just done a movie for a laugh, and he's a handsome looking dude. You'd expect someone with this much talent to be a an ugly bastard. No such luck.

Dogmoon, Hunter & Hunter, Vertigo, £6.95

Despite the good artwork, the quotes on the back of the comic, the explanation of how this comic came about, the "innovative" use of monosyllabic words throughout the comic, the story is still crap.

Robert Hunter wrote songs for The Grateful Dead, Timothy Hunter drew Jonah Hex and some of the Grateful Dead Comix using Robert's lyrics so now, as they say, Robert came up with a story during a fevered short-term illness, Tim thought it was good and hey presto, we have a comic. A very crap comic.

The story is dull, with one-syllable words just long enough for the children in America to understand. It's about a truck driver and his partner who picks up the dead so they can be processed. They pick up a pretty, dead girl who is sent on the job with them, and the driver falls in love with her, but his partner doesn't like Tess the Dead Girl, I don't know why. I'm sure if I brought home a stiff my parents would help me to warm her in front of the fire.

Anyway, this guy tries to dump Tess and lover but fails, then the story goes weird and what we see is two lovers happy with dead sprog (another find).

I thought this was crap and it is, it's dreadful. It's meant to be "like a dream slipping easily from crazy to profound," but for me it's more a nightmare, realising I've paid £7 for a crap story by a clapped-out hippie who has a fevered short-term illness. Next we'll have a comic by Keith Richards. "It was a fevered short-term illness for nine days, man."

DC must come in for questioning. I doubt Virgin records would release a record by Garth Ennis because he's a good comic book writer. This will go where all those forgotten comics go, into warehouses and under the back issues in boxes in shops. Where it should stay.

Manga Reviews

Dirty Pair – Dangerous Acquaintances, Manga Publishing.

The Dirty Pair are Kei and Yuri, two very good looking girls who are highly-trained problem solvers. This is based on Japanese characters but, with the story and art by Americans, who admittedly have been very involved in translations, etc. Nothing new, really, but to Manga it is.

The characters and situations were created by Haruka Takachido. The art is by Adam Warren and is extremely good, very fast and well paced to an excellent story by Toren Smith.

The story goes that Kei and Yuri are on vacation when they spot an old acquaintance, one who used to work with them but then double-crossed them. Her name is Shaisti, and she's a tetrad, sort of robot but fully-functioning by all accounts. She's really dangerous, in a cool psycho sort of way. Shaisti plans to do some serious stuff and Kei and Yuri are on her tail and trying to catch her, which leads to some good fun.

I thoroughly enjoyed this graphic novel. As I've already said, it's well-drawn. Action is always better in black and white, and this graphic novel proves it. Loads of guns and women fighting and more guns, it's all go. The cover is by Kevin "A.B.C. Warriors" Walker and is good too, but he should have read the story.

For those of you who, like me, don't read tons of manga this is a good place to start. Okay, so you read *Akira*, big deal, so has my dad. Doesn't make you a manga fan.

James Bacon

Iron Fist Chinmi (six volumes), Bloomsbury, £2.99 each

You'd almost think someone in Bloomsbury worked as a programmer. Our Japanese cousins, as you doubtless know, read right to left, and so their books start at what we'd consider to be the end of the book. This causes some hassle in translation, as it involves reversing the artwork and re-doing any text that appears in the story. Unless, of course, you work for Bloomsbury. Then backwards-reading books become a cool thing; a feature instead of a bug. "Read backwards – confuse the enemy!" Bollocks.

But once you get used to the reverse flow, aided by the number that appears on each panel showing you the order in which to read them, you're left with a series of eight rather nifty books. Well, okay, I'm extrapolating. I've only been able to find six, but am assured by the sixth that more are forthcoming.

Our eponymous hero is a kung fu boy (as you'd guess by the title of the first volume, Kung Fu Boy), and in the best tradition of Japanese heroes, is a simple villager who happily uses his incredible ability to do simple, villager-type things until The Call comes. Usually this is in the form of a helpless princess in need of assistance, here there's a variation on the theme and Chinmi finds himself on the way to become the local variant on The Chosen One.

Plotwise, there's not a great deal to this series, but it's nonetheless enormous fun. It's being marketed by Bloomsbury as a kiddie book, and indeed it'd probably appeal more to the younger reader than to the sophisticated type that you certainly are, Gentle Reader. I, however, am a lad of simple tastes, and find myself eagerly looking forward to volumes seven and eight.

Robert Elliott

Book Reviews

Forever After, created by Roger Zelazny, Baen, pp291, \$5.99

"What happens after 'happily ever after'?" asks the cover of this fantasy book, the cover of which shows a man playing cards with a dragon. One gets the feeling that this isn't the most serious of books. It takes place after the War Against Evil has been won (with the aid of four mysterious and powerful artifacts) and peace reigning once more. The problem is, the artifacts are a little too powerful, and consequently weird shit is happening all over the kingdom. The solution? To scatter the artifacts, for which purpose the prince sends his four closest friends to the four corners of the earth in an attempt to ensure that they're safely ensconced where evil can never find them.

The tale is told by four writers: Michael Stackpole, David Drake, Robert Asprin and Jane Lindskold. The stories were linked by Zelazny, and the sum is a nifty story, humorous and entertaining.

Drake's story is the weakest of the four; not because of anything inherent in his story-telling ability, more because it doesn't fit in perfectly with the others. Told by itself it'd be a great story, but unfortunately he uses some devices to make the story funny that don't mesh with what the other writers did. This is unfortunate, as it can be somewhat jarring to have elements like this introduced.

Of the remaining stories, I'd have to pick Asprin's as my favourite. Lindskold, a much-underrated writer also wrote a fine tale and I confess to being pleasantly surprised by Stackpole; for some reason, I never read his stuff until now. Overall, this is a light read that'll pass an hour or two. If you're looking for something light, then this is as good as it gets.

Robert Elliott

A Dog Called Demolition, Robert Rankin, Doubleday, hb, £15.99, pp251

A new Robert Rankin is a joy to behold. And if it comes after a tome like *Garden...* a somewhat disappointing book, so much the better; we can expect something cool next. For surely as *The Sprouts of Wrath* follows *East of Ealing*, as *Interesting Times* follows *Soul Music* (pardon the change of authors, there), so does *A Dog Called Demolition* follow *The Garden of Unearthly Delights*.

The biggest problem with reviewing Rankin's books, I've found, is that I never want to give the plot away. They're so preposterous that to say anything is to ruin the delight that is to be had in discovering the idiotics that lie ahead, but surely some comment is necessary? Is it enough to say simply 'yea' or 'nay.' Nay, it isn't. So here we go; the minimum.

Danny finds himself possessed. He builds a dog. He tries to save the human race with the aid of a giant cockroach. Read the book to find out if he succeeds.

Despite being described as 'the drinking man's HG Wells,' I've got to say there's a certain literary quality to this book. It plays with the written form, eschewing the traditional linear narrative in favour of its own internal logic. Each chapter begins with a poem; most of them nifty, one of them shite. And it's one of Rankin's best books yet. It's a non-stop giggle from start to end. And as if that wasn't enough, it even contains a play list so you can make a soundtrack album. Not me, though; I only heard of about three of the groups, and one of the songs.

There are those who, after *Garden...* had their doubts. To those people I say, rejoice! Redemption is at hand. And it's in all good bookshops now.

Robert Elliott

Sundiver, David Brin, Orbit, Paperback, £5.99, pp340

Sundiver is the first of Brin's Uplift novels, and if I'm not mistaken, his first novel, written way back in 1980. Knowing of the success and hullabaloo over *Startide Rising* and *The Uplift War*, I approached this book with a great deal of anticipation. And in many ways I was not disappointed.

In this future no species can reach full sentience without being 'uplifted' by a patron race. However, humankind has managed to reach for the stars without any such aid and many of the elder races are not too happy about this. A large chunk of the book is given over to building up a very interesting political background where we get to meet a variety of wildly different aliens and are introduced to the Patron/Client ideology. This is the most intriguing part of the novel.

In the foreground is the main story about Project Sundiver which is based in the caverns of Mercury and is sending ships into the chromosphere of the sun to investigate a new phenomenon that has been observed. And this is the part where I felt let down. The phenomenon is never given centre stage or explored properly and is overshadowed by political machinations and standard thriller-style action.

Overall, it is disappointing. I got the impression that Brin was planning a series of Uplift novels when he wrote this and just needed a basic plot on which to hang his background material. It is very much an introduction to his Uplift universe. If read as such, it is interesting and I, for one, will certainly be giving *Startide Rising* a try.

John Kenny

Startide Rising, David Brin, Orbit, £5.99

First written in 1983, *Startide Rising* has been rereleased along with the other previous Uplift books to coincide with the release of *Brightness Reef*, the first Uplift book in eight years. Like all great SF stories, *Startide Rising* is still new and a refreshing read, even if it has been on the shelf for thirteen years.

"Uplift" is the process whereby beings are genetically brought to sapience. The mystical Progenitors uplifted some of the galactic races, who in turn uplifted others. Each uplifted race has to serve its patron race until they have paid off their debt.

There is one exception, though. Human beings seem to be the bastards of the galaxy as no-one uplifted them, yet they have the intelligence to be spacefaring. Anyhow, some races like the humans, others despise them.

Of course, in true human spirit, dolphins and chimps are uplifted, but not as slaves; they are treated as equals.

The story centres on the *Streaker*, an exploration vessel captained by a fin (neo-dolphin) and crewed by humans, neo-dolphins and a neo-chimpanzee. The ship is on the run from races who are unfriendly towards humans and it lands on a planet in an attempt to effect repairs and shake off pursuers. In the space above the planet, however, a lot more is going on. A battle of galactic scale is just beginning, all because the ship may hold the answer to the fate of the Progenitors.

This book is brilliant, multi-layered with great turns and twists, with in the ship and outside, on the planet and in space.

Brin is a great story teller, and he knows how to use tension to its best. I enjoyed this, the revised edition, and how couldn't anybody. The man as a doctorate in astrophysics as well as being a consultant to NASA, when he talks space he means it, and he uses this to its best; and the technology is all believable, the whole idea not too far-fetched, except maybe for the idea that humans could treat a slave race as equals. If it happened today, we would only uplift them to the level required, which probably wouldn't include how to rebel against one's masters.

Overall, an excellent book.

James Bacon

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO NATHAN SMITH

John Kenny

Down the ragged, empty, rain-choked laneway he trod, layers of torn clothes joined in one mass to his skin by years of dirt, hair dangling about his head like rat's tails, Nathan Smith: Prophet of Doom.

He would have ran, ran in panic to spread the news except for the stupid arthritis which riddled his body. But his head and face jerked and jittered enough to convey urgency, his eyes darting this way and that, his facial muscles working in terror.

Rounding the corner, Nathan found himself on one of the main, litter-strewn, thoroughfares of this pestilent undercity. He looked up at the causeways which criss-crossed the sky and glimpsed the bright, gleaming towers of the upper city through spatters of heavy rain.

Why the fuck should I bother trying to save them, he thought, they're not worth it. But, obedient monkey that he was, conditioned by harsh supervisors through years of building FTL drive casings, until the science of gravitonic fields obliterated his life, trained to accept his lot and respect his superiors by the welfare system, Nathan hobbled in a quick jerking way in the direction of the nearest freight elevator.

Along the way he shouted the news to everyone. All were in mortal danger, above and below. It was just that if he could get to someone in authority then maybe the news could be disseminated quicker and preparations made on a wide scale. Meanwhile, terror drove out the words to all and sundry.

"Beware! They Live Among Us! The time is nigh. And the One begat Seven and each of the Seven begat Seven. Beware!"

Pure blind panic pushed him up the street. Frantically he would grasp someone's dirt-sticky coat lapels and scream: "Listen to me! We don't have much time left. Please. We must prepare against them!" Disgruntled, cursing, they would push him away or manage to evade his grabbing hands, slipping down the nearest alley. People here did not want to be disturbed or noticed. That way their failures could be ignored. Companionship here was low-key, furtive even.

Images crowded his brain, a terrible despair pervaded his being. He increased his limping pace towards the elevator station. Now and then, he made a grab for someone, more often, he just shouted into the rank air: "Listen to me! Listen to me!"

From cracked and broken dusty windows, pale faces peered. From around fires built of rubbish, gathered degenerates told him to 'Piss off'. He cursed them all, hurling obscenities at them for their stupidity. Dodging pools of filthy rain water, he increased his pace as the elevator station hove into view.

Fixing his eyes on it, he shut his mouth and struggled to contain the payload of misery and destruction building up in him. He shambled forwards in as straight a line as obstructions allowed. Nearing the station Nathan had to shove through a gathering mass of people who were forming into a queue for their food parcels. Closer to the depot the line was well formed and it was possible for him to step to one side of it and advance to the top unhindered.

Ignoring the foul looks and shouted abuse from those in line, he reached the barrier and waved frantically for the attention of the man behind the barred counter.

"Listen! Listen. I must talk to someone in charge. I have terrible news," he shouted. Spitfle flew from his rancid mouth.

The man behind the counter handed a parcel to a woman at the top of the queue and turned to glance at Nathan. "Get back in line facrisakes. Wait your turn like everyone else," he shouted back.

"No, no. You don't understand. I'm not collecting today. I have to warn you all."

The man turned in his chair and glanced at the two guards behind him. They were carrying parcels from the freight elevator to a table beside the counter. They stopped what they were doing and made for the only gate in the barred compound.

Nathan rushed over and grabbed the bars of the gate, beseeching them: "We are all in danger. I've just found out. It came to me in a blinding flash. There is One who is Seven, and the Seven each begat Seven."

One of the guards took a truncheon-like electrode from his belt and glanced it across Nathan's fingers. A shock jolted through his hands and he let go of the gate. Spluttering, he looked at the burn marks on his fingers; the real pain would settle in in a few seconds.

"Bu-, bu-. I only..." Tears welled in his eyes. The guard made to open the gate. Nathan backed off hurriedly. The images that had dominated his mind for what seemed like an eternity, reasserted themselves. Desperation made his hands reach out again for the gate. The guard raised the electrode menacingly. Nathan backed off again, turned, and made his way back along the line and into the crowd.

His face twisted in an agony of pain; he kept looking back at the compound in the hope that the guards had changed their minds and would urge their saviour to rejoin them. But no, they had gone back to distributing parcels.

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed at them, through yellowed teeth. "You don't deserve to be saved." And that was it; his one big chance gone. He pushed through the crowd. Despite his torment, despite his desperate need to warn people, a small part of his brain had remained his. His conscious only realised that now.

Why had he really gone to the elevator station? Nathan had thought that if he could get his message through to them, they would reward him, readmit him to society, maybe give him decent treatment for his arthritis. But that was not to be.

"I don't belong here," he cried. "I'm not supposed to be here." How did he end up like this? This was not the way things were supposed to work out. He'd been a hard worker. And now here he was, surrounded by, by: "Scumbags," he said, anger rising in him, another wave of disturbing images rampaging through his mind's eye. "SCUMBAGS! You're all scumbags," he bellowed.

A pile of sodden newspaper slapped about his bristled face. "Shut up. You're just as much a scumbag as the rest of us," someone said.

"I am NOT!" Nathan shouted, self-righteousness suddenly coursing through his veins. He pushed through people as they crowded about. "Not one of you would listen to me. You're all lazy, good-for-nothing shit-faced fuckers. You're all going to die roaring. I hope you rot in hell."

A chorus of angry shouting broke out all around him. It became more difficult for Nathan to push through. Someone landed a punch on his chin. He staggered back. But he continued to rant and rail against them; it was as if the dark knowledge deep inside granted him courage. The vision swirled about his body. No; he was more afraid of what was inside him than of the angry mob that pressed against him.

He needed to get away, back to his room; he needed time to sort out the mess that was his head, confront the terror that haunted him. But the crowd wouldn't let him. He swatted at them, as if they were a minor pest. Then a burly, red-bearded man caught Nathan in the groin with the steel-capped toe of his boot and he went down like a demolished building.

"Leave me alone," he managed, before the kicking rained upon him. It was when he felt a couple of his ribs crack, that he began to know fear. He tried to scramble away from them but he was effectively hemmed in. Panic hit. He realised that he might not get out of this. A massive blow on his back flattened him, knocked the wind out of him.

Amid the kicking and shouting Nathan's enfeebled voice whispered: "Leave me alone, please... leave me alone... I was only... trying to help... to warn... Please... this wasn't supposed to... happen."

As the crowd finished venting their anger, as a last boot thudded into the inert form of Nathan Smith, as his face slackened with his final breath, someone noticed something.

"Look at his face." Nathan's face seemed to brighten. Everybody moved in to get a better look. Now his face was almost shining; his features blurred momentarily and then a ball of light emerged. Everyone gasped and moved back several feet. The ball of light hovered above the lifeless body for a few seconds and then seemed to coruscate. There was activity within, but the onlookers were unable to discern what was happening because the intensity of the light grew to an unmanageable level. They moved further away. Shielding their eyes, they could barely make it out as it split in to seven smaller units. Fear got the better of curiosity and everyone started to run, shouting and screaming.

The Seven hovered for a moment, drifting slightly, almost indecisively, then swiftly went their separate ways in pursuit. The harvest was good; and it went on and on multiplying. Soon, very soon, nobody was laughing.

The End