

FIRST CONTACT

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

Volume 2, Number 4

May, 1995

ISSN 0791-3966

Babylon 5 Convention

Good news for all *Babylon 5* fans out there. **Peter Jurasik**, who plays Londo in the series, will be in Dublin towards the end of this month, and he's agreed to be the guest at a one-day convention to be held in DCU. I type this scant minutes before going to press, and have just been informed that a signature has been got and that the event is all ready to go. Apparently, our Peter was in London for a different B5 convention, so 'twas but a simple (and, more importantly, cheap) matter to get him over the extra few metres to this side of the Irish Sea. Anyway, a mere fiver gets you entry. For more details, write to Gerard Keating, 18 Watermill Road, Raheny, Dublin 5. He'll be sick of answering his messages if enough people give him a ring on 832-7491, doubtless, so you might prefer to e-mail gjk0001@ibm.net

Terry Pratchett in Dublin

It's a good time for authors, it seems. Still smarting after missing **Clive Barker** last month, Forbidden Planet are quite delighted to be hosting a signing session with **Terry Pratchett** on the 11th May from 1:30 to 2:30. The last time Terry did a signing in FP, the queues were absolutely huge, so you might want to turn up early. If you're unable to make it along but desperate for that signed copy, give the nice people in FP a ring on 671-0688 and they'll reserve a copy for you. Terry will be signing, amongst other things, the paperback of *Soul Music*, just released. No sign, however, of a new hardback from Gollancz.

Gibson Goes Multimedia (again)

William Gibson seems to be working with a different priority, lately; he's already sold the rights to his new book before it's been published. I've no idea when we'll see the book, but it looks as if the CD-ROM based thereon may be out first. The film rights have also gone; we may not even see the book (except for the novelisation by some hack; look for *Craig Shaw Gardner's Danny Cannon's William Gibson's The Zen Differential* on bookshelves before the end of the year).

Cameron's Back for Alien 4

After the travesty that was *Alien 3*, can there be anyone out there less than delighted with the news that **James Cameron** will be returning to helm the fourth *Alien* movie? (contd. on page 3)

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Editorial

or

Boy, is My Face Red

Remember when last month I mentioned that cut down on the mistakes in the newsletter? Well, it seems that wasn't exactly the issue in which to make that promise. As a result of unforeseen circumstances (and a lot of error on my part), some sections of the audience may have had difficulty reading the magazine seeing as a lot of the pages were in the wrong order. I say some sections, as no less than two people have complimented me on the last newsletter, and swore that they read it all and didn't notice. Does this say a lot about my editing or their reading, I wonder?

Anyway, for those of you who pay attention to such things, the reason for the massive jumble is one of the following...

1. It was a special choose-your-own adventure issue. Didn't you notice? If you want to continue this article, go to page seventeen. If you want to start a new one or read page two of something else, turn the page.

2. My printer wasn't printing the page numbers for some reason (I still don't know why), and the guy who did the photocopying had no guidelines as to what went where, so he slipped up a bit. I was in such a rush to get it stapled that I didn't check the proof copy carefully enough (obviously), and stapled hundreds of newsletters, blissfully unaware that they were all slightly scrambled.

3. April Fool!

My most humble apologies go to those of you who had troubles reading what should have been a nice straightforward newsletter, and I promise to use someone else's printer from now on. It's much better than mine, anyway (regardless of whom it belongs to). Coming next month : Your cut-out-and-keep Apology for whatever happens. But rest assured; I'm on top of it. I'm kicking bottom.

Other than that, I must make a more urgent plea for submissions than usual. A swift perusal of this issue reveals that I've done far too much of the writing myself, and whereas I'm delighted to be able to show off my meagre writing skills to a captive audience, it'd be much better for all concerned -- members and your humble servant alike -- if there were more writers. I'd especially welcome any new writers; you don't have to be of Joycean capability, and I'll gladly help out with any suggestions to new writers. Don't ever worry about the spelling; that's what my F7 key is for.

First Contact can't survive without writers; it's the magazine of the ISFA, not of me personally, much as I'd like to think otherwise.

Robert, Man of Destiny

Editor

News

Allen 4

(contd. from page 1)

Starring **Sigourney Weaver**, the cliché that was eventually decided on to resurrect Ripley was the clone one, even though the mechanism was all in place to make an android. Still, can't complain, eh? Not until word on what script writer **Joss Whedon** has done comes through, anyway.

Book News

Phillip K. Dick Nominees

This year's nominations for the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for best novel go to...

RM: A Novel of Virtual Reality, **Alexander Beshar** (HarperCollins)

Imageh, **Jack Cady** (Broken Moon Press)

Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone, **Ian McDonald** (Bantam Spectra)

Summer of Love, **Lisa Mason** (Bantam Spectra)

Tonguing the Zeitgeist, **Lance Olsen** (Permeable Press)

Mysterium, **Robert Charles Wilson** (Bantam Spectra)

Nebula Nominees

The nominations for Best Novel of 1994 are...

Moving Mars, **Greg Bear** (Legend)

Parable of the Sower, **Octavia E. Butler** (Aspect)

Guns, With Occasional Music, **Jonathan Lethern** (Harcourt Brace)

Towing Jehovah, **James Morrow** (Arrow)

Temporary Agency, **Rachel Pollack** (Orbit)

Green Mars, **Kim Stanley Robinson** (HarperCollins)

A Night in Lonesome October, **Roger Zelazny** (AvoNova)

Clarke Nominees

Just in case you're not sick of award nominations, the nominees for the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best SF novel published in the UK in 1994 are...

Mother of Storms, **John Barnes** (Millenium)

Fools, **Pat Cadigan** (HarperCollins)

North Wind, **Gwyneth Jones** (Gollancz)

Pasquale's Angel, **Paul J. McAuley** (Gollancz)

Towing Jehovah, **James Morrow** (Arrow)

Alien Influences, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** (Millenium)

Springer & LeGuin tie for Tiptree

The 1995 Tiptree award for gender-bending science fiction has been jointly won by **Nancy Springer**, for her novel *Larque on the Wing*, and by **Ursula K. LeGuin** for her short story, *The Matter of the Seggri*.

Gingrich to Co-write Novel

Newt Gingrich, America's House Speaker of the moment, has been given an advance of \$30,000 by Baen for his forthcoming SF novel, to be co-written with **William Forstchen**. If it's as creative and accurate as some of his speeches, it's bound to cause a stir.

More Shatner Novels

Content not only with the Tek series, the forthcoming Star Trek novels and a co-written book that rumour has it he may have actually contributed some words to, **William Shatner** has just signed with publisher Berkley for a new novel, *Mars*, about a diplomat sent there after an uprising.

Card Finishes Alvin Journeyman

Well, it's good news for me. Coming this autumn, the last part of **Orson Scott Card's** Alvin Maker series from Tor. Those of you

autumn, the last part of Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker series from Tor. Those of you who cast your mind back to when he was at Octocon may recall mention of a novel called *The Redemption of Columbus*, written to coincide with the five-hundredth anniversary of the landing. Only a few years later, it'll be available as *PastWatch*. Look for it towards the end of the year.

Film News

My favourite byline of the month is for the forthcoming virus-out-of-control movie, *Outbreak*, starring Dustin Hoffman and a cast of thousands. Described as 'The Andromeda Strain for the 90s' by some idiot who'll be the first against the wall when the revolution comes, this brilliant piece of prose comes courtesy of people who obviously forgot 1. that *Hardware* has already been described as 'Terminator for the 90s' and it was utter shite, and 2. *The Andromeda Strain* wasn't a very good movie to begin with.

Currently showing in theatres in America... *Highlander 2 : The Director's Cut*. Why? It's certainly the most unsalvageable movie ever made.

Video News New Anime

It's a pretty nifty month or so for anime fans, with some excellent stuff coming out in the month of May. Look forward not only to the far-too-wonderful-for-words *Urusei Yatsura* #5 from Anime Projects, they'll also have volume three of *Oh My Goddess!* and the volume three of the dubbed *Bubblegum Crisis*, if that's your thing; it's already available subtitled. Pioneer, god bless 'em, have brought out *Kishin Heidan* #1 & 2, and Western Connection are sending us *Ushio and Tora* #4. Rush out and buy them all now.

New Anime Label Launched

I've spent the last couple of years telling people that there's more to Anime than the sort of tits-and-tentacles that is Urotsukidoji and its fellows; so thanks a bunch to East2West, boldly going where Manga continue to go. Their first release goes by the name of 8 Man After, a title that's by no means as daft as their second; Go Nagai's *The Adventures of Kekkou Kamen*. Kekkou, it seems, is, erm, how shall I put this? A naked schoolgirl avenger. The slogan for this opus is 'Takes the 'S' out of Superhero and Puts it into Sex!' If you're so inclined, it'll be available on May 29. I'd buy Urusei Yatsura instead if I were you.

More B Movies Released

Those lovely people who brought us such delights as *Mesa of Lost Women* are set to release three more titles, available real soon now. Rush down to your local stockist and rent or by *The Navy Versus the Night Monsters*, in which a remote navy base must contend with Killer Trees from the Antarctic. Yes, it's as silly as it sounds. You might prefer *Monster from Green Hell*, with giant ants terrorising central Africa, or *Teenage Monster*, a Werewolf Western that I found disappointing. Still, you might like it.

TV News

Outer Limits Starting on BBC

In what they're now calling their regular Thursday SF slot (god bless 'em), BBC2 will be starting a lengthy run of the new *Outer Limits* towards the end of the month. The first story, *Sandkings*, is based on a story by George R.R. Martin. This is the slot that was covered by *The X-Files*, and when *Outer Limits* is done, there'll be a twenty-six week run of *MANTIS*, a virtual reality type of thing starring Lori Singer. Is it any good? I won't give any hints, but it's just been cancelled. Mind you, if people

can cancel *The Adventures of Brisco County Junior*, they can cancel anything.

Have You Seen *Bugs*?

It sort of snuck onto BBC1 when no-one was looking, and it's a damn fine program. *Bugs*, currently about three weeks into its run of ten as I write this, can best be described as a hi-tech drama, with oodles of devices for doing things like remote-piloting airplanes appearing. It's not as silly as it sounds, honest. Check it out on BBC1, 8:05 each Saturday.

Repeats Galore

For those of you who need another chance to see the earlier episodes of *The X-Files* or even (god forbid) *Quantum Leap*, Sky One are coming to the rescue. Starting on 15th May, they'll be showing all of the first season of *The X-Files*, running concurrently with the second season every Tuesday. They'll be replacing *Deep Space Nine* (twice a day) with *Quantum Leap* when, presumably, they finish the third season, which they've just started.

Dr Who On Again — Maybe

After it was cancelled by Fox, the world thought that Dr. Who was dead; it seems that reports of his demise may have been slightly exaggerated. Although Amblin, who were planning on making the series, have always said that they were continuing their search for a home for the good Doctor, no-one was really convinced. However, at a Dr. Who convention in America recently, Amblin's vice president in charge of Programming, Philip Segal, reported that they were very close to a deal that could have the first episode on screen in November. This leaves only one mystery; how come Lennie Nimoy never made it to Timewarp, seeing as he cancelled to direct the pilot that never happened?

Kolchak Returns

Kolchak, the reporter who met a monster a week for all of, oh, about six weeks (were there really that few? It seemed like more) is set to return in a one-hour TV special. Not only was this series remarkably silly and highly entertaining, but rumour has it that it was the inspiration for Chris Carter's *The X-Files* which, as we all know, is the best thing on television. Darren McGavin is set to play our eponymous chum in the new feature; sure and who else would they get?

Voyager Fails to Impress

Despite a massive audience for its pilot (Harry Kim, har har), figures for *Star Trek: Voyager* have been plummeting to such an extent that the series was rating only number seventy-one recently; it's even being beaten by *Deep Space Nine* and *Next Generation* Re-runs. Over on other networks, Fox's *The X-Files* is number thirty-five, and Fox's most watched show. There's little hope of either *Deep Space Nine* or *Voyager* being dropped any time soon, though; Paramount know money spinners when they see them. Up to now, the *Star Trek* franchise has been worth \$1.4 billion to them.

Fanboy News Octocon '95 is Go

I meant to mention this last month but forgot, so thanks to the nice people at Octocon for not hitting me. Anyway, once again the venue's the Royal Marine Hotel, where I'll expect to meet you all on the 14th and 15th October. Guest of Honour is the amazingly wonderful **Mary Gentle**, author of *Golden Witchbreed* and *Grunts*, amongst others. Expect also the usual suspects; no less than ten other luminaries appear on the Octocon flyer.

But why should you bother with a flyer, when you can simply send your dosh direct? Until 1st September, it'll cost £16 (or £12

if you're under sixteen), and a tenner for supporting. To tender your spondies, or for more information, write to **Octocon**, 30 South Circular Road, Dublin 8. E-mail mmmchugh@tcd.ie, or check out the Web page at <http://arrogant.itc.icl.ie/Octocon.html>

Sproutlore Definitely Lives

Congratulations to James Bacon, who's just managed bring out his second issue of *The Brensford Mercury*, the magazine of Sproutlore, the Now-Official Robert Rankin Fan Club. If your're interested in joining, check out the review in the small press section on page thirteen.

Timewarp : The Video

Huzzah! The wait is over! Coming at the beginning of the month to a VCR near you, the official video of Timewarp 2 (from the people who brought you the hard-hitting O5 video, it says here). Costing a mere six quid, it's available in Sub City on Exchequer Street (around the corner from the new Tower Records); or direct from Mascon; but if you get it direct add a couple of quid for p&p. It's not easy mailing videos, you know. Write to **Mascon, 12 Marino Green, Dublin 3** if you're interested.

Trek Con in June?

Despite the fact that I've heard about it from several people, I've been unable to pin down anyone who actually knows about this one. Horizon is supposed to be a Trek con taking place on 24th and 25th June, with special guests **Armin Shimmerman** and **Denise Crosby**. The venue for this shindig is supposed to be Jury's Hotel, and rumour has it that the con's being run by the guys who did the big bash in the Albert Hall in London a few months ago. However, given the total dearth of publicity for a con that's scarcely two months away, I'd be very inclined to confirm details before heading Jury-ward.

Know anything about this? Let us all in on the secret.

Sad Bastard News

Malcolm McDowell has, and I kid you not, being receiving death threats after appearing in *Star Trek : Generations*. Lord knows appearing in the movie is reason enough — although he was the best thing about it — but 'twas not critics who've been casting dire warnings; it's been Trekkies who were distraught at the fact that he killed Captain Kirk. Paramount offered McDowell a couple of bodyguards, but the brave lad refused.

Other Stuff

Star Wars : The Card Game

After the (inevitable) success with their *Star Trek : The Customisable Card Game*, Decipher is all set to release a new game based on the Star Wars universe; expect it later in the year. Meanwhile, they're also bringing out a series of eight expansion sets for their Star Trek game, each increasing the 363 card set by between 80 and 120 cards.

Just out now as well is *Highlander : The Card Game*. Given that everything else associated with this most wonderful of films has been has been pretty useless, I have my doubts. Still, you never know. I'm more looking forward, to Wizards of the Coast's game of *Lord of the Rings*, but it looks like it'll be next year before that arrives.

By the way, those nice people at *Wizard* (nothing to do with Wizards of the Coast) have just brought out the first issue of *InQuest*, their monthly magazine on card games. If you saw their preview issue you'll know what to expect; if you haven't, check it out in the comics shop of your choice.

Best Sellers

The Best-Selling books in Forbidden Planet, Dublin last month were...

Paperbacks

1. *Shadow of a Dark Queen*, Raymond E. Feist
2. *Everville*, Clive Barker
3. *The General, Book 5*, David Drake
4. *Mirror Dance*, Lois McMaster Bujold
5. *Lovelock*, Card & Kidd

Hardbacks

1. *Arcana 1 - Silverhand*, Scott & Llywelyn
2. *Georgia on My Mind & Other Places*, Charles Sheffield
3. *The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived*, Robert Rankin
4. *Witch's Brew*, Terry Brooks
5. *Pollen*, Jeff Noon

Media

1. *Babylon 5 #1 - Voices*, John Vornholt
2. *ST:Voyager #2 - The Escape*, Smith & Rusch
3. *ST:TNG #35 - The Romulan Strategem*, Robert Greenberger
4. *X-Files #1 - Goblins*, Charles Grant
5. *Quantum Leap - Pulitzer*, Elizabeth L. Storm

And Finally...

As we wend our weary way towards the end of the news and I find myself with a couple of column inches to fill, I'm left only with time to tell you about the latest film to be based on a computer game. *Tetris : The Movie* is due out the end of the year, starring Dolph Lundgren as Boris Geometrovitch, a physicist who gets caught in a nuclear explosion, and gains the mysterious power to manipulate special forms crystalline matter (which, of course, means cubes). Who's he up against? The Old Guard Line Dancers, a bunch of communists (with super powers, natch) who are determined to destabilise the new Russia. Fortunately for all concerned, their powers can be disrupted by completing a circuit between Dolph's crystals and their own brand of proton energy pills. Kylie Minogue, fresh from her Mortal Kombat experience (or was it Street Fighter? they tend to blur) plays Olga Blokowtova, the nefarious leader of the Old Guard Line Dancers. Personally, I can't see our Kylie being such a nasty, but then, I'm not getting paid huge amounts of money to make casting decisions.

Congatition Time

I just went into Dandelion Books the other day for something to read, but it seems that Pádraig the Inquisitive had had an idea, one he wanted me to introduce to you lovely lot. It happens occasionally. However, when Pádraig comes up with a good one, he comes up with a good one, so Dandelion Books are offering a hardback copy of John Whitbourne's wonderful tome *Popes and Phantoms* to whomever can give us the best answer to this one...

If an NTI (or BEM, UFO, call it what you will) lands on Earth for the first time and gets shot by a local redneck, with what can the authorities charge our gun-totin' friend? I'm kind of curious about the answer to that one myself. Answers to the ISFA before the end of the month would be appreciated. All entries to The ISFA, 12, St. Joseph's Road, Augrim Street, Dublin 7. Or you could e-mail vcanning@dit.ie

What about that Steerpike column, eh? Who'dve thunk it? Maybe I should ask him or her to abuse Mother Theresa as well.

Letters

Clondalkin,
Dublin 22

Dear Editor,

The "Steerpike" column in the March issue of *First Contact* seems to have achieved its objective: people are annoyed about it. Most notably, last year's Octocon committee appear to be particularly upset. *I'm* annoyed about the column too, though possibly not for the same reasons.

What I object to is the anonymity of the article. I'm all for people having an opinion, and having the right and the means to publicly express that opinion, but surely for the opinions to mean anything to us we need to know the identity of the author. Or, to put it more bluntly, if the author hasn't got the guts to give his (or her, or whatever) name, then who the hell cares what he has to say? I don't have anything against anonymity *per se*, but when the writer attacks an individual or a group, then it's only fair that the attacker reveals himself to the victim, otherwise it's literary terrorism.

As for my own opinions about Octocon: The only thing that I really didn't like about the convention was the party that somehow assembled itself around the registration desk. I don't have any objection to people getting roaringly drunk during the course of the convention, but at the registration desk? Where the first thing prospective attendees see is a collection of unruly drunks amid a large pile of empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays? It was not, to my eyes, a welcoming or

encouraging sight. I know that as science fiction fans we have a reputation for being accomplished drinkers, but we're not actually obliged to live up to that.

Of course, there were some other problems with the con (notably the trouble with the wedding party, but there wasn't anything the committee could have done about that — the hotel management are to blame), but few of them actually affected the attendees, and that's what counts.

But back to "Steerpike": From the tone of his letter, Steerpike is clearly *not* just one of the off-the-street punters, and thus may well have been privy to events that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Also, the relatively late appearance of Steerpike's letter indicates that the negative thoughts have been fermenting, along with a large bunch of sour grapes, since the convention itself. This person is not only unhappy with the way he feels he's been mistreated by the Octocon committee, it's clear that he believes — for some reason — that privileges due were not received. A spurned guest, perhaps? Or someone who was expecting free admission to the con in return for a service they provide?

I leave it as an exercise to the reader to figure out the rest of the puzzle. Maybe another Steerpike can offer names?

Yours,
Michael Carroll

Howth Road,
Dublin 3

Dear Editor

Has it come to this? Are contributions so hard to come by that you're forced to trample on anyone to get a few letters in? I refer, of course, to Steerpike Specks.

His criticism of the committee is largely unfounded, in my opinion. As a former committee member, I know there are very few perks to the job. There is certainly no "inner circle". The committee may get to have a dinner with the guests, but they pay for their own meals.

I haven't been to any convention where the guests are looked after as well as at Octocon. This is remarkable given the number of guests. I have been at conventions where there were only one or two guests present, but they seemed to be ignored by the committee for much of the weekend.

I chuckle at his reference to Cortex. Like they, it seems that Steerpike has not the conviction to sign his work. His dismissal of their actions as a "small and not very funny joke" misses the point entirely. If it was a joke, then an apology to those who were offended would be in order. To me, it read more like a personal attack.

Oh well, I guess he succeeded in getting me to write a letter.

Yours faithfully

James Shields

Marino,
Dublin 3

Dear Editor,

I would like to comment on one or two things in the March newsletter.

The piece about the Octocon committee putting their own needs ahead of the paying customer may have been over the

top but I find myself agreeing with the main thrust of the text. Octocon badly needs an overhaul, the events such as they are, did leave one with the impression that we've seen it all before. Compared to Timewarp 2 the last Octocon looks very pale indeed. The lessons learned from Timewarp 1 were put to use in a startling fashion. They took all the best bits, improved them and made us feel as if we *were* the convention. Timewarp 2 moved forward and is now the standard we expect from conventions in Ireland. Right here is Octocon's problem, they have not moved.

From talking to the Octocon committee I get the feeling that they are upset because the piece was unsigned, this is missing the point. The piece should be a starting place from some new thinking. Let's break away from the old traditions of panels and get into the new world of computers, internet access, video, a decent dealers' room and a Golf with wide appeal, someone who starred on film or TV perhaps.

Now to something close to my heart. In the review of Q5: The Video it was said that we did not show the running of the con. This is true, we never had any intention of showing that side of things because as far as we can see running a con consists of endless boring meetings. We prefer to provide a 'snapshot' of the cons we cover. However, as our motto his "Your Input is Our Output" we offer the author a chance to join us on one or both of our upcoming projects. We will supply a camera, video tap and full input into the editing process. The author need only pay into the convention.

Yours,

Michael O Connor.

Very brave of you to offer the use of your camera to an anonymous author, Michael. As it happens, it was I who wrote the review; my apologies for not signing it. And I'd love to play with your camera. RDE

Charlestown Village,
Co. Arnnagh
Dear Robert,

I write to you with concern regarding the anonymous piece 'Steepike' in your March issue. First off, I would presume that the piece was a very bad joke on the part of the writer, as he or she was not prepared to even put their own name to their convictions.

Secondly, it is quite obvious that the sole reason for publishing the item in question was to drum up controversy and therefore correspondence to yourself concerning the piece. It is unfortunate, though, that the subject chosen to be targeted was one which did not deserve the criticism which it received.

I speak from personal experience.

Octocon 5, for myself, was certainly one which I will *not* forget. At 10:45 on Saturday evening I collapsed. If it had not been for the readiness, concern, caring and response of the committee members — whom I had never met before — I don't know what would have happened. At that stage the disco was in full swing, and most people were happily drinking themselves drunk -- with free beer, except for the committee members who had to deal with everything from ambulance men to hysterical teenage girls screaming about death and their best friend.

The anonymous writer seems to think that the most important things to the committee were drinking, eating and getting to meet guests, and generally abusing the positions that they had. However, the most important thing that a committee member did that weekend was to hold one of my distraught friends as she wept with fear for my safety. It's this kind of personal effort and human response to a difficult situation that meant everything to four Northern Ireland ladies who had to handle more than they bargained for.

It annoys me that possibly that piece would go unchallenged.

It's very hard for me to explain, basically I was lying on a bathroom floor, gasping for breath, not having a clue what was going on or if my friends were OK, disorientation was the order of the day, but the people whom the anonymous writer seems to hold in very low opinion were there to look after all the worries and concerns of the situation.

Five hours later my friends and I were all back at our B&B, happy and safe thanks to the obviously greedy, inhuman, selfish, self-concerned and thoughtless people whom the writer obviously envies. He is one of the many people who will mouth off a lot but do nothing other than shrug his shoulders and walk away; with an attitude like that, where would I be?

I agree with *all* the decisions and actions the Octocon committee took, because at the end of the day their sole purpose is to look after the average con-goer like me.

Nothing will stop me from going to this year's Octocon, and it's the same with my friends. I've even heard that they

intend to run two wholly new event rooms at this year's con.

We mustn't forget that they are only enthusiastic amateurs doing their best — and their best is definitely good enough for me and the majority of others, I'd say.

Yours,

Alix Langridge.

To be honest, I'm amazed at the reactions to the Steerpike piece; when it was given to me I decided that it was too over the top to be taken seriously, and expected little except some verbal excoriation from the odd Octocon member (and one odd Octocon member in particular. Hi James.) However, it seems that people have been taking it much more seriously than I expected. I published it not to piss off the Octocon committee; simply for the hell of it. I've said in the past that I don't publish stuff just for controversy; apart from anything else, the enmity that usually results means I've wasted my time.

Having helped in the running of both Octocon and the ISFA in the past, I'm well aware that any committee comes in for a lot of criticism, both warranted and unwarranted. I've always been of the attitude — and I thought others would feel similarly — that if it's a valid criticism, you accept it. If it isn't, you ignore it. I expected the Steerpike piece to be largely ignored. I guess not. RDE.

C/o Dandelion Books,
Aungier Street,
Dublin 2

Dearest Editor,

A few musings on the most recent newsletter. That's the April issue (although it's cover dated March) as

opposed to the March issue (also cover dated March, I believe) which hasn't arrived yet.

I must admire your quasi-Joycean page sortation for the baffled, and in the interest of public service, shall now include the actual correct order... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 13, 12, 11, 6, 15, 10, 9, 8, 7, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.

In charity, I can only presume this is your jolly April Fool's jape. Either that or you've finally lost the plot.

The other thing I really enjoyed was Michael Carroll's article on book names. As a purveyor of quality second-hand books (or *used* books, as our colonial cousins will insist on calling them) I've always had a fondness for a well-turned book title. I still think that Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is the most beautiful and evocative genre book title ever. And what about the slightly naughty *Servants of the Wankh* by Jack Vance? Two horror books worth mentioning are *Wet Bones* by John Shirley and *Swamp Foetus* by Poppy Z. Brite. What about *The Man with Only One Head* or *How Much for Just the Planet?*? Moving out of the genre, what about the wonderfully ambiguous *Camping for Boys* or the scatological *How to Shit in the Woods* or (my favourite bizarre book title) *The Care of Rawhide Drop Box Loom Pickers*? I still regret never having bought a horror book, the title of which I forget, but whose author is forever scared into my brain. This man was called Bob Ottum. I mean, has he never heard of pseudonyms?

And finally, I have to mention the earnest little old lady who came into the shop last Thursday and asked if I had a copy of *A Field Guide to the Slugs and*

Snails of Great Britain and Northern Europe. Sadly, I was once unable to help a different little old lady in her search for a book called *Clan of the Care Bears*. God, I love my job.

Your chum,
Pádraig Ó Méalóid

Servants of the Wankh was re-released in 1986 under the altogether catchier title of Wankh; I've always felt that like Dickson's Dorsail, it's a title that begs for an exclamation mark. I've no idea what sort of cover art accompanied this repackaging but the original was very tasteful.

Bob Ottum, you'll be delighted to know, was the name Robert K. Ottum Jr. used when publishing his 1972 humorous SF novel All Right, Everybody Off the Planet. I can find no evidence of his horror novel. Don't ask me why I looked that up. RDE.

Newtownstewart,
Co Tyrone

Dear Robert,
Enjoyed March First Contact -- so much that I sit here in front of my computer while on call praying to God or whoever's in charge that none of my patients will get sick for the next half hour or so while I prepare a humble submission for aforesaid pretty good publication.

In no particular order -- of course!

Yes, I love *The X-Files* too. And you know the best bit about it? At last they have managed to get in an intelligent, competent femal lead without the body habitus of a super model. Love you Scully...

I like the reviews and the news bits; I may even start buying comics as a result

of the comics reviews. [Crawler. You can write again. RDE]

My top ten? Oh for the honour of having it published in your fab pub! Well, I know you're short of copy so you'll probably publish it anyway! [only because it's got a Harlan Ellison book -- RDE]

1. *Mefisto in Onyx* by u know who. It just drags you in, you feel, you believe, you give up the ghost for the main character just when Ellison wants you to and his writing is just brilliant.

2. *Neverness* - David Zindell. I don't know how I bought that one and only realised after I started it that I had read the short story on which it is based. A superb story of space travel using mathematics, adventures on a wonderfully-drawn planet of ice, good strong characters and a kid of god-search at the centre of it. It was so good and yet no-one else seemed to have heard of it. And then! And then! At last year's Octocon I say the follow-up and bought it straight off. Haven't read it yet so I can't really put it in here.

3. *Santiago* - Mike Resnick. Bought after reading a Locus review - back in the days when I imagined I had time to read Locus. A great, rambunctious tale set on the fringes of civilisation with the outlaw Santiago pursued by everybody from the official good guys through reporters after a story. I think he has it off with the reporter. Nice story, larger-than-life characters, some lovely little rhymes as chapter headings and a DEEPER MEANING. Haven't read any more of his but if I had time I would buy him again on the strength of

Santiago.

4. *Rats and Gargoyles - Mary Gentle.* Effing brilliant. What more can I say?

5. *Snow Crash - Neal Stephenson.* Xmas present from my wife - who doesn't read SF but invariably buys me at least one brilliant book every year. Watch yer job RDE...

This ranges from an extremely well-written opening about an incredibly silly topic, rams into a very different type of chase and from there on it's hyperdrive all the way. Pizza delivery, hacking, sword-fighting, Mafiosi, corrupt, power-mad tele-evangelists and a lot more. Just read it. OK?

6. *Virtual Light - William Gibson.* It's a different topic from cyberspace but the same old Gibson, same old dialogue, same old moral ambiguity and screwing around with what passes for the law and I way nearly afraid to read it. Know why? Because if he had screwed up I would never have gone back for my periodic re-read of the Neuromancer trilogy. But it was OK because it was the same old Gibson but better, sharper, closer to the bone and actually needing *less* suspension of disbelief than Neuromancer, etc.

7. *All the Dune Books*, including the encyclopaedia or whatever they called it. By **Frank Herbert**, for all you kids who probably never heard of him. The most wonderful SF series of all time. Period.

8. *King of Morning, Queen of Day - Ian McDonald.* Not really SF? More like fantasy, darkside fairy stuff, power-

crazed humans in another dimension? Maybe, but it is so well written that I have to put it in. He goes from real old-world style through passages of Joycean detail right up to sharp-edged modern stuff and does it so well.

9. *The Planet Buyer - Cordwainer Smith.* Because it was the first real full-blooded SF novel I ever bought and probably the first ditto I ever read; I can remember reading kids in space stuff for a few years round puberty but ol' Cordwainer really blew my mind. I think it was the only bit of SF my father ever read and he used to raise a laugh at dinner with an outburst of "For sheep's sake!"

10. And I read nearly all of **Andre Norton's** juvenile SF in grammar school -- stuff like *Star Beast*. They were all great but it's too long ago to pick out individual ones.

And finally -- a competition. Can you spot where I had to interrupt this to go out and see a few patients? If you can, you have a wonderful career ahead of you. In forensics.

Yours sincerely,
Declan Fox

Most humble thanks for your letter, and indeed your top ten. It's a pleasure to see both Ellison and Gentle in there; but you really should pick up something by Resnick other than Santiago, which I personally consider to be his weakest book. Rush out and buy Ivory today. RDE

I'm writing too many of these things myself, you know. Where are all the other readers out there? Reading? Why not write some stuff as well?

Book Reviews

Silverhand, Morgan Llywelyn & Michael Scott, Baen, hb, £15.99, pp418

You know, for a while I thought heroic fantasy trilogies were going out of fashion. I mean good, traditional three-book trilogies, not the type of Jordanesque sequence that goes on forever. Then, all of a sudden, they're back. To be sure, there are some excellent stand-alone novels out there, but it seems that the likes of Maggie Furey have brought respect back to a once-maligned sub-genre.

To the hallowed ranks of Creators of the Damn Fine Trilogy (or the first volume thereof, anyway), we must now welcome Morgan Llywelyn and Michael Scott. For Scott, at least, the territory is somewhat familiar; his *Tales of the Bard* is an excellent series, but with over seventy books in print, it remains one of his few true adult fantasies. And as Llywelyn is much more familiar with, shall we say, a more Euhemeristic type of Celtic fantasy, this book essentially represents new territory for the gestalt author.

The Silverhand of the title is one Caelad, a chappie of ever-so humble origin who — and none of us doubts it — is destined for greatness. Having had a few fingers bitten by a passing werewolf, his only option is to have his hand removed very quickly lest he start howling and moulting; never a good way to spend an evening. Soon, however, he finds himself in Baddalaur, training with the Seekers of the Way. The Seekers are basically scholars, dedicated to preserving all knowledge; to this end they're able to build Caelad a replacement hand using lore long-forgotten in the rest of the world.

But it isn't long before we realise that not all is well in the world, and that in order to stop the evil twins who rule the land, Caelad will have to undertake... a Quest. The Arcana are four items of ancient and incredible power, and only by combining their powers will Caelad be able to defeat the twins.

Time is a-counting, the twins' power is growing, there are only two books left to act...

Actually, I'm not doing the book justice by synopsising it in such quest-ridden terms. While there's definitely a Heroic Quest in the offing, for the first three-quarters of the book there's no hint of it; in fact it's only very late into the book that we find out exactly what the Arcana are.

Of the writing, I have no complaints. Well, one complaint. I realise that for most people the phrase 'from whence' is merely wrong, but for some reason it bugs the shit out of me, so seeing it in a novel by two such accomplished writers is not only jarring, but extremely annoying. Bring out the axe for the myriad proof-readers (and one author) who missed that one, that's what I say.

All in all, if you're looking for a good, solid, Heroic Quest type of novel of which you can look forward to future installments, then *Silverhand* is the book you're looking for. *Silverhand* is very well written, very easy to read without being simplistic in any way. Its characters are of sufficient depth that one isn't constantly looking for the Gandalf equivalent, and its plot owes a lot less to tradition than one might have feared. It's not often I'll recommend wholeheartedly a hardback fantasy novel,

especially of the questy type, but in this case I feel justified in saying that you'll be delighted with everything except the wait for volume two.

Robert Elliott

The Hunter's Haunt, Dave Duncan, Del Rey, pb, £5.99, pp295

Dave Duncan was first recommended to me by an American gentleman whose address I've since lost, so one of the great regrets of my life is not being able to thank him for introducing me to the man whom I consider one of the best fantasists, and certainly the best storyteller, of today. His *Man of His Word* series is essential reading for anyone who enjoys fantasy. So it was with some delight that I happened upon a new Duncan, and I eagerly set upon it.

The story is narrated for the most part by Omar, a wandering storyteller who, it seems, committed a bit of a faux pas when he tried to leave an inn without paying, killing the landlord's dog on the way. When he finds himself having to return there because of the weather, it seems that trouble may be afoot. However, as he has the reputation of being one of the finest storytellers in the land, he's given a chance to redeem himself by telling a better story than everyone else in the room.

As the tales unfold, each of which is a short story in its own right, we realise that they're all connected, and that the tale that they comprise is one that affects everyone in the tavern. Towards the end, the tales have mingled into the personal lives of the storytellers, and as well as this Omar must still be worried about being horsewhipped and thrown out of the inn without a coat.

As the story is being narrated by Omar, a professional storyteller, it's told in a flamboyant way, and one that's most entertaining. We're also given the tales of other guests, sometimes in their own voice, sometimes re-related by Omar when he

feels the speaker is particularly bad. The style adds a lot to the book, as does the personality of Omar himself.

The rest of the characters in the inn are pretty incidental, and we're given little detail on them; they're referred to only as, for example, 'the Merchant,' or 'the Dowager' by Omar and it's only through their tales that we really get to know them. And as the tale they're all telling spans generations, there are little by way of great characters to be found in their collective story either. Nonetheless, this isn't really a drawback, as Omar himself dominates all, and it's really his book.

The Hunter's Haunt is an unusually-told tale that's well worth a read. It's not as enjoyable as the *Man of his Word* or *Handful of Men* series, but nonetheless a book that's well worth the price of admission.

Robert Elliott

Temporary Agency, Rachel Pollack, Orbit, pb, £4.99, pp202

This book, I must confess, offered me the biggest surprise of the year. I've been familiar with Pollack's work for a while as a writer on Tarot and other things occult, and while it wasn't bad, her *Shining Woman Tarot* deck must rate as the worst in my collection. Had I associated this book with that deck, I would probably never have read it.

And in missing it, I would have missed what I now consider to be an essential read for all who like a different fantasy novel.

Temporary Agency is set in the same world as Pollack's previous novel, *Unquenchable Fire*, and it is this world that makes the book what it is. I've not read *Unquenchable Fire*, but expect to rush out and get it as soon as time permits; that world is one of the best-realised alternate realities I've ever

read. Like Pat Murphy's *The City, Not Long After*, the background is essentially a character in the book, only much more subtly than *The City*... in that it's the casual acceptance of prayer and of the intercession of the Bright Beings and Malignant Ones that suffuses the actions of all the characters in an otherwise urban, modern setting that makes this book so different to fantasies of this type, which often try the same sort of thing, but never with the level of detail or reality managed by Pollack.

The book is essentially divided into two, both narrated by Ellen. First, when she's fourteen, she tells us of her cousin, Paul, and his infatuation with a Malignant One. She's got her hooks into our Paul, and the Spiritual Detection Agency, a sort of Occult FBI, seems reluctant to do anything. So Ellen talks to Alison Birkett, a high-profile, government-bashing ghostbuster of sorts, and between them they try to save Paul, both from the Malignant One and from the ineptness (or is it more?) of the SDA.

The latter half of the book is narrated by an adult Ellen, and her chance meeting with Alison Birkett once again. She does a small job for Birkett, and soon finds herself involved once again in the ghostbusting business; only this time as an adult, her actions and attitudes coloured by her past experiences with both the SDA and Birkett herself.

All I can say is that I loved this book, and would urge all and sundry to go out and buy it now. I've been saying that about a lot of books lately (a good sign), but there are few books I've found that were such a pleasure to read, simply as something different that's been extremely well-written. The characterisation is just about perfect, and the background, as I've said, could hardly be improved upon. I'm running out of different clichés that say that you need to read this book.

Robert Elliott

A College of Magics, Caroline Stevermer, 380 pages, TOR Fantasy Paperback, \$4.99

If you enjoy fantasy books full of magic, mystery, political intrigue, true love, wicked uncles, banishment and mysticism with not a dragon in sight, then this is the book for you. The story is set in a not too alternative early 20th century. As alternative universe stories go, it's not bad but I found it very unnerving to be reading one minute about France and England, and the next to be faced with countries like Galazon, Aravis and Haydock (whose geographical co-ordinates are never revealed), it just didn't gel. The rest of the book was, however, intriguing.

The story revolves around Feris Nallaneen, an heiress to the duchy of Galazon, banished to college by her uncle so he can have a free hand ruling until she reaches her majority. But it is not an ordinary college, it is a college where magic is taught but forbidden, it is "a college of magic" - roll over Trinity!

The characters were well drawn (especially the heroine who was portrayed as a singularly strong character), the locations were atmospheric, and over all the story is nicely understated. A nice read that's not too taxing.

Leonia Carroll

Isaac Asimov - The Complete Stories, Volume 2, HarperCollins, pb, pp464, £5.99

Asimov's *Foundation's Edge* weaned me from endless *Dragonlance* sagas to the much more provocative world of hard science fiction, and I have maintained a great fondness for his work ever since. While Dr. Asimov was an amazingly prolific writer — with more than three hundred books on a wide range of subjects to his credit before his death in 1992 — he began his career writing short stories for

the pulp magazines of the 1940s and 50s, particularly *Astounding*, edited by his mentor, John W. Campbell. This collection contains twenty-one stories and two poems, all dating from a period between 1950 and 1968, when the Campbellian SF short story was probably at its peak (and before the New Wave usurped it).

The poems at the end of the collection are humorous, as are stories such as "Flies," "Nobody Here But-,"

"Insert Knob A in Hole B," "The Up-to-Date Sorcerer," "The Machine that Won the War" and "My Son, the Physicist," which try so hard to disprove the perception that Asimov had no sense of humour that they border on the facetious. The more serious stories often show a darker irony which is much more effective.

It has to be said that the stories are typical of the era, with their optimistic view of technological progress. However, even Asimov is not convinced that technology will necessarily make a better world, as evidenced by the story "It's Such a Beautiful Day." While this is by no means a diatribe on technology's ills, it questions whether we lose simple pleasures, such as the appreciation of nature, in our drive for progress. That said, scientific progress is accompanied here by relatively little social change. Sexist attitudes are as prevalent in many of Asimov's future worlds as they were in the 1950s (but the same could be said of many of his contemporaries). Despite such attitudes, the opening story, "The Ugly Little Boy," is effective at placing human interest ahead of hardware. It is one of his more famous because of its poignancy, all the more unusual when compared with the SF of the period.

So, perhaps Asimov has been done a disservice over the years. While he was rightly regarded as one of the greatest proponents of hard SF (in fact, he retired from writing SF for a time in the late 60s

because he felt the New Wave left no room for his type of stories — instead, he concentrated on his work in popularising science) his stories are not mere gadget-ridden, problem-solving adventures of the Campbellian formula. Many attempt to view technological progress from a human perspective, and all present interesting, speculative ideas, which is what SF is fundamentally about.

A critic once said that he did not consider Asimov a good writer, but conceded that he was a good storyteller. The Good Doctor took this as a great compliment, for he had no literary pretensions. His style of writing gives clear, succinct prose with a sense of familiarity towards the reader which endeared him to many fans, and which also made his popular science books so successful. The short story format is most suited to this style, as he can present SF concepts easily. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "Nightfall," consistently voted Asimov's — if not SF's — best story. Collections from more critically acclaimed authors in the genre (such as J.G. Ballard or Philip K. Dick), while they may be more stylistically daring, often reveal repetition of themes and ideas. This collection from Asimov, while it may not have much variation in style, has a great variety of ideas. That might not win over many critics, but it certainly made him one of the most popular SF authors.

All in all, this collection is a valid sample of Asimov's work, and would serve as a good introduction for newcomers to the genre. As for fans like myself, this is an enjoyable piece of nostalgia, from which only one thing is missing. Introductions to the stories were always a major part of Asimov's collections, and gave a personal touch to each.

Adam Darcy.

It's been a while since we've had one of these things; is no-one doing fanzines in Ireland any more? Is PFJ the last bastion? Well, except for these two, I mean

Small Press Review

Robert Elliott

Albedo One #7, A5, pp68, £1.95

I suppose I shouldn't really call this a small press review, as I've been informed by the editorial that according to Hugo rules, *Albedo One* is officially a semi-prozine. This little nugget is contained in a complaint about the classification of magazines, but I suspect that the plea for nominations had a little to do with the subject matter as well. Ah well, they got a couple of nominations out of it at least, so we may yet see the words 'Hugo Nominated' (dare I say 'Hugo Winner?') emblazoned all over the cover of a forthcoming issue.

So is this a magazine worthy of a Hugo Award? From issue one, the presentation has been very good, and they seem to have gotten over the problem of useless artwork (or good artwork badly reproduced), so overall the magazine has never looked better.

Of the fiction: it's a strange batch this issue. In fact, of the five stories, I'd only really call one science fiction. Some might consider this strange, especially in an issue that's soliciting Hugo nominations, but they can probably be forgiven on the grounds that the stories are all sufficiently strange or unusual.

Troutmask Replica by Mike O'Driscoll is the first story, and not particularly good. The idea is hackneyed, and it isn't sufficiently well-written to be able to pull the story through. Michael Carroll's *In Dublin's Veracity* is basically a series of

puns and bon mots (or is that bons mots?) that passes a few pages and is well worth reading, but nonetheless is still a story without a plot, and one that I feel should have appeared in a different issue, where it would have stood out more.

Tricks of Memory by John Lee is well-written, and suspicious minds (well, mine) suspect that this story may have been bounced by Interzone before appearing in here; it's the sort of story they've been going for lately, and certainly reminiscent of one or two of Geoff Ryman's in particular. It's not a bad story, but it's not science fiction.

Trey R. Barker's *Romance for Knife and Violin* is a one-pager; something I'm delighted to see appearing in a magazine. More of a mood piece than a story, it suffers (once more) from not being science fiction, but what the heck. I enjoyed it.

Alan K. Barker's *Revelation* was for me the best story in the issue; and it was even science fiction! I'm not sure the guy got all his science exactly right — some of his ideas on singularities seemed particularly dubious — but I'm no physicist myself, so I'll assume that the ignorance is mine. Of the tale I'll say little, save that I liked it a lot, and it's sort of story I'd like to see more of in *Albedo One*.

The rest of the magazine consists of an interview with Kim Newman which is well worth a read, and eight pages of book reviews. Personally, I'd like to see that cut down and an extra story thrown in instead,

but that's just me. Maybe they can cut out some of the awful letters — the letters pages in *Albedo One* are consistently the worst part of the magazine. Personally, I've no interest in one-liners from people saying they enjoyed issue six, and would prefer either a bigger or smaller letters col, not the unhappy medium that currently sits at three pages.

Basically, although *Albedo One* issue 7 was enjoyable, it wasn't a patch on the last issue, easily the best so far. Nonetheless, it remains the best fiction magazine in Ireland at the moment.

Albedo One is available in a number of Dublin bookstores, or direct from *Albedo One*, 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin. For more information, e-mail bhry@iol.ie

The Brentford Mercury, A5, pp20, £1.00

For those of you who don't know, *The Brentford Mercury* is the magazine of Sproutlore, the Now-Official Robert Rankin Fan Club. So if you're not a Robert Rankin fan, this may not be the magazine for you. On the other hand, it's an entertaining read, and may even convince you to pick up a copy of *The Antipope* or something, so you never know; give it a chance.

For those of you who've already been converted to the ranks of the Rankinphile, *The Brentford Mercury* is a magazine you should read, not least for the fact that it contains an original, never-before-published short story by the Great Man Himself. This is no lofty, arrogant author we're talking about here; it seems that Robert Rankin is a decent chappie on top of it all.

Apart from the short story (brilliantly illustrated by none other than Tom Mathews), the magazine contains a couple of pages of news about Rankin's work and upcoming stuff, details on the Robert Rankin WWW page and other stuff of interest to Sproutlorians, an amusing article by Michael Carroll on how to be a really sad Robert Rankin fan, a very nicely drawn Brentford Challenge board-game-type thingy (uncredited except for the indecipherable artist signature; I think his last name is 95), and various other articles that include a review of *Mostly Harmless*, the magazine of ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha, Douglas Adams' appreciation society. The reviewer was kinder to that 'zine than I would have been; while entertaining, it's always held for me a little too much of the kind of pathetic sadness that thankfully is absent (for the present, at least; we'll see when it gets to issue 55) from *The Brentford Mercury*.

The only thing absent from the issue is details of membership, but as there's an address, anyone with a couple of stamps can probably figure a way around that one.

James Bacon is to be congratulated on bringing back a magazine that suffered badly from ennui and neglect visited upon it by its previous publishers (including, I must confess, your humble servant), and I look forward eagerly to the next issue winging its way post-boxward in a couple of months.

The Brentford Mercury is available for a trilling £1.00 from Forbidden Planet or Dandelion Books, or you can send either an SAE or (I think) a fiver to Sproutlore, 211 Blackhorse Avenue, Dublin 7. e-mail jshields@iol.ie

A different Steerpikie, with a more interesting topic. I'd *really* love to hear a response or two to this one.

Steerpikie Spikes

When is science-fiction going to grow up? I ask this more in sorrow, blah blah.

I don't mind *Star Trek TNG*, Analog, Klingon lessons or any of the other silliness; I don't mind the Cortex mob and their puerile ramblings; I can tolerate the growing numbers who confuse SF with fantasy. But what I really cannot understand is why a genre which attracts people with three-figure IQs has yet to spawn any decent political satire. There are great opportunities but seldom if ever are they taken.

Why is this? Well, it's simple innit. When did you last read *anything* by a major SF author which displayed any trace of political maturity? Which made any serious effort to understand the means by which large groups of people govern themselves? Which fell anywhere between simple-minded right-wing "thinking" and left-wing fuck-it-let's-tear-it-all-down knee-jerking? Answers on a postcard, please.

And if you don't understand politics, you sure as hell can't satirise it.

FORBIDDEN PLANET

are delighted to present a signing by

Terry Pratchett

of his new paperback,

Soul Music

on 11th May at 1:30

Forbidden Planet, 36 Dawson Street, Dublin 2.

Signed copies of any of Terry's books may be reserved
by phoning 671-0688

Writing Reviews

Every once in a while, I get a couple of reviews that are, quite frankly, unpublishable. I'm always happy to point out where I think the problems lie, and usually get back a much better second draft. However, most of the people make the same mistakes, so I thought a few words on Your Editor's Idea of a Good Review might be in order.

1. Details, please.

At the top of every review, let me know what you're reviewing. If it's a book, let me know its author, publisher, price (dollar or sterling; both are usually similar in Ireland), whether it's paper- or hardback and the number of pages. For films, the director and a couple of people who starred in it, and if it's a video, perhaps the length as well.

2. Length

Size, as we all know, isn't important. That's pretty true for me as well; if it's well-written, I don't care what length it is. However, I find that a length of about five hundred words gives ample space for a decent review.

3. Synopsis is bad, comment is good

Obviously, some manner of synopsis is necessary, but the most common mistake people make is to consider a book review to be a complete rundown of the plot followed by one sentence on what the reviewer thinks of the book. Ideally, a synopsis should account for a third to half the length of the review, with the rest taken up by what the reviewer thinks of the book in some detail; what are the characters like, the style of the book, you know the sort of thing.

4. Don't give away endings

Most people would think this is obvious, but the odd surprise does slip through. Mostly, this happens in sequels ("After Balkor regained the throne at the end of book one by killing the Evil Mordok and marrying Glynis, he though his problems were over. Think again."), but comments like "I was really hurt by the death of Marvin half way through" have been known to sneak in. Don't let them. Please.

5. Make it readable

Take pity on my poor eyesight, and take that printer off draft mode when you're printing it out. That goes for those of you with hand-held ink jets as well; if you're hand-writing's lousy, I'd really appreciate block capitals; this

is especially true for people who review fantasy novels where all the characters and cities have weird names. The last thing I want is to be sued by Robert Jordan for referring to one of his characters as Shitsor or something. By the way, anyone who includes an IBM diskette with their review earns the undying gratitude of my fingers. ASCII or Microsoft Word format is ideal, but I can translate most popular word processing formats.

6. Really Important

Tell me who you are. Most people think to include their name (hand-written reviews, curiously, even usually have the writer's name in block capitals as well, making their name the only thing in the review I can read), but few think to include an address or phone number. If I'm unable to use your review for any reason, I need to be able to contact you and let you know why.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of everything I'd like in a review, nor should you consider it something carved in stone. Each of us has our own style, and as long as something is well-written and/or entertaining, I'm usually quite happy to stick it in intact. However, I'll be much happier if you at least bear these points in mind.

The Irish Science Fiction Association

For those of you who are reading this in the back of a shop somewhere, shame on you. You should be a member of the Irish Science Fiction Association. As well as getting a year's worth of this wonderful magazine delivered straight to your door (actually, straight *through* your door if that's where your letterbox is), you get four really cool fiction magazines, including a comic, showcasing Ireland's up-and-coming writers and artists. The ISFA also runs a monthly workshop for the aforementioned writers and artists, and holds a monthly meeting in the Horse and Tram, Eden Quay on the first Tuesday of every month with a vowel in it. Turn up at around eight of the clock and be made welcome by myriad, well, about forty, other SF fans.

Interested? Pop along to a meeting, or if you're already convinced, a trifling £13 gets you membership for a year, which you can use to get a 10% discount in Dandelion books, biggest providers of second-hand SF to the nation.

For more details, or a place to send your money, send an SAE or a cheque/P.O. to

The Irish Science Fiction Association

21 St. Joseph's Road

Aughrim Street

Dublin 7

e-mail vcanning@dit.ie

WWW <http://arrogant.itc.icl.ie>

It's Terry Pratchett Month, it seems. Not only does he come to town, but he even gets to watch his books on television. Lucky guy.

TV Review

Michael O Connor

Johnny & The Dead. Directed & Produced by Gerald Fox. Starring George Baker, Brian Blessed, Jane Lapotaire, Andrew Falvey

Johnny and the Dead will be finished by the time you read this, but as I promised our esteemed editor a quick review I will run through the first three episodes.

Developers are moving into the cosy town of Blackbury with the help of a greedy local councillor and buying up all the old-style buildings and land, including the graveyard. The dear departed dead are a bit peeved at their rest being disturbed, so they contact young Johnny Maxwell and through him, try to put a stop to this carry on. Not much of a plot, but it does serve nicely as a vehicle for some great cameos and jokes.

This is a very likeable series, with fine performances from all the actors including Andrew Falvey as Johnny Maxwell, and Brian Blessed is in fine form as William Stickers, the Lenin of Blackbury; in one scene he utters the worst Star Trek pun I've ever heard. The man Pratchett does not know when to stop and we love him for it. One of my favourite parts has the dead outside the graveyard, listening to the radio and dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller."

Terry Pratchett's books are very hard to translate onto the screen as most of his best moments are in the little wordplays and twists on the familiar. In a book the reader can pause over a phrase and let it sink in, but on screen the action has to keep moving forward. Gerald Fox, the producer and director, has done himself proud by letting the action proceed at a gentle pace and underplaying many of the funny remarks. If you like Pratchett's work you should try to catch *Johnny and the Dead* on repeats or on video. You'll have a pleasant two hours.

Michael O Connor

Point to Ponder

Are Magic : The Gathering players more or less sad than trekkies, as in some circumstances they only have to tap a mana to get a life?

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Video Review

Michael Carroll

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine

3.5 : *Defiant & Fascination*

3.6 : Past Tense, parts I & II

Defiant, the first episode on this, the fifth tape of third season episodes, introduces us to another TNG favourite: Riker. And, by the Prophets, I must say that it's good to see Jonathan Frakes working alongside the DS9 crew. But this is not the Will Riker we all know and love, this is his evil twin, Thomas Riker (in TNG's *Second Chances* we learned that there had been a transporter accident eight years earlier, causing Riker to materialise in two places at once). All right, so Tom Riker isn't really evil, he's just misguided. Posing as his higher-ranking twin, Riker comes to DS9 and — on the pretence of wanting a tour of the station — cons Kira into showing him the *Defiant*. This he subsequently steals, and we learn that he's working with Maquis terrorists. Their plan is to use the *Defiant* to blast their way through the Cardassian border, and perform a hit-and-run on an unofficial Cardassian military base. The fun really begins when Sisko accompanies Gul Dukat to Cardassia Prime, where he has to use his Starfleet training to aid the Cardies in tracking the renegade ship. Overall, not a bad episode, though a tad predictable.

The other episode on the tape, *Fascination*, features the not-very-long-awaited return of Lwaxana Troi, who comes to the station to continue her romance with Odo. At the same time, O'Brien's wife and daughter return from Bajor after two months, but not all is as sweet and romantic as it could be. Also,

we learn that Jake Sisko has broken up with his older girlfriend ... All this is in the middle of a Bajoran festival, and it seems that the relaxed atmosphere on the station is encouraging some of the crew to fall in love: Jake falls for Kira, whose lover Vedek Bareil starts salivating over Dax (a very nice performance here from the usually bland Philip Anglim). Dax, in turn, falls for Sisko, who doesn't fall for anyone. This, as you might have guessed, is a character-driven rather than action-driven show, and it works well: the mixed-up relationships are extremely entertaining, and it's a nice change from the usual "aliens with knobble foreheads come through the wormhole" scenario. The episode is ably directed by Avery Brooks, who's not only getting better at directing, he's also giving his character a bit more life these days.

On the whole: Two good episodes, though not the best of DS9's otherwise excellent third season. The only complaint I have is that we don't get to see much of Quark. Must be a bummer for Armin Shimerman, having to spend three hours a day in make-up and then only appearing on screen for a few minutes. Anyway, a worthy purchase for any sad trekkies like myself.

With this tape we get a free slip of paper listing the provisional release dates of the next DS9 and Voyager videos, and after

reading it I thank the Big Bird of the Galaxy ("Star Trek was brought to you with the letters D and S, and the number 9") that both parts of *Past Tense* are on the one tape, because we're going to have to wait until June 12th for tape 3.7.

In *Past Tense*, the DS9 crew travel to Earth on the *Defiant*, where a transporter accident, combined with a bunch of rogue TECII particles, sends Sisko, Dax and Bashir back in time to the year 2024. Dax becomes separated from the others, and is found by a wealthy young businessman, who believes her story of being an out-of-towner who was mugged. During the meanwhile, Sisko and Bashir are found by the cops (one of whom is played by the great Dick Miller) and placed in San Francisco's "A-Sanctuary," one of many throughout the city (and the entire US) that house the unwanted members of the population.

Luckily, Sisko is an expert on that period of Earth's history, and he info-dumps that, a few days after their arrival date, a man called Gabriel Bell was involved in a situation where he and a few like-minded citizens took over the Sanctuary's processing centre and held the staff as hostages. Sisko explains that because of Bell's insistence that the hostages aren't harmed, the government eventually agrees to disband the Sanctuaries and pave the way for a glorious future. He also says that Bell is killed when the police overrun the processing centre.

Unluckily, Sisko and Bashir get involved in a fight, and another citizen jumps in to try and save them. He's accidentally stabbed brutally in the stomach, and dies. And ... you guessed it ... the would-be saviour is Gabriel Bell. Altered time-lines galore. Then all heck breaks loose, a bunch of crazed Sanctuary inhabitants

take over the processing centre, and Sisko has no choice but to go there and pretend to join the kidnappers. And to make it all the more predictable, he tells them his name is Gabriel Bell.

I've never been totally convinced by time-travel stories (even though I enjoy them more than any other sub-genre of Science Fiction), and I really think that the writers could have given a bit more thought to the time travel elements of this story. However, *Past Tense* is an enjoyable enough 88 minutes (that's American for two hours, folks), and the DS9 production team did a great job of presenting Earth thirty years in the future: costumes and buildings are only subtly different from those we see today, and the computer technology isn't too far advanced.

Past Tense really falls apart when the other cast regulars, on board the *Defiant*, start searching through time for their lost colleagues. It seems that the same accident that sent Sisko and Ko back in time temporarily allows the others to time-travel and try and find them. Yeah, right. But I suppose there was no other way for them to get back.

The story gives Avery Brooks and Siddiq El Fadil a chance to let loose a bit, though it's clear that the writers were instructed to make certain that Bashir appeared more caring than before, and this looks a bit forced. Brooks, on the other hand, does a great job, particularly in the second episode (directed by our old buddy Jonathan Frakes). *Past Tense* is a good two-parter, and scores highly over the first two-parter *The Search* (tape 3.1) because it doesn't have a cheaty ending.

Cornics Reviews

Neil Gaiman's Wheel of Worlds #0, by lots and lots of people, Tekno Comix, £1.75

Tekno Comix, (or Tekno•Comix as they call themselves, but I'm bugged if I'm pasting funny ASCII characters into this just for the sake of accuracy) like myriad companies before them, have promised us a revolution in comics. How do they accomplish this masterpiece? By associating their titles with big names, by linking the titles so that you need to buy most of them to make any sense of the story, and by invoking the magic words 'non code approved' in big, bloody letters. In other words, nothing new.

What they *are* doing, at least in the case of Neil Gaiman's sequence, is bringing out some damn fine comics. Neil Gaiman's *Wheel of Worlds #0* is a 48-page intro to the world of the TeknoPhage, and stars all those characters who'll be given (or have been given) their own titles; Teknophage, Lady Justice, Mr. Hero and Adam Cain. Actually, they're *Neil Gaiman's Teknophage, Neil Gaiman's Lady Justice*, et cetera.

The plot, such as it is, is there solely so that the Teknophage and Lady Justice can talk of whence they came, and why they're here. As one reads through the comic one feels the loss of big, huge letters saying 'spectacular origin issue!!' and feels grateful for their subtlety; it's certainly unexpected after some of the tacky publicity they've thrown at us. Still, be grateful for huge mercies, that's what I say, and get on with reading the comic.

Because the comic is scripted and drawn by different people throughout the issue, I was expecting a lot more by way of sporadicity in the artwork, and must say I was pleasantly surprised. While each *First Contact*, May 1995, page 26

of the artists has his own style, there's a consistency throughout that gives the feeling that this is more than another damn anthology issue. The script hangs together well, and as for the colouring; we've all been spoiled by Image. A couple of years ago this would have been state of the art (in fact, it probably still is), but because of the huge leaps in colouring, even titles that have no respect for the reader such as *The X-Men* manage to have excellent colouring. This isn't taking away from *NGWoW's* colouring in any way; it's an integral part of the mood of the book, and adds a lot.

As an origin issue, and as a stand alone comic, *NGWoW* is an entertaining read. It's populated by people who may or may not be superheroes, but there's not a spandex cossie in sight. I don't know how much work Gaiman put into this, but the people with whom he left it have done a fine job of bringing us an entertaining 48 pages. I'm also enjoying *Neil Gaiman's Mr. Hero* at the moment, and have high hopes for the rest of the titles in the storyline.

Robert Elliott

The New Warriors, Issues 58 and 59 (April and May, 1995), Marvel, £1.75

I've been following the adventures of the New Warriors since the very first issue almost five years ago, and there have been a lot of changes in the comic since then. For a start, writer Fabian Nicieza dumped the title after four and a half years. Old Faby-baby decided to concentrate on his other work: he had already left the Warriors' companion titles, Night Thrasher and Nova, and the time had come, he told us, to wave day-day to a comic he had always claimed was

his favourite.

I'd always felt that the Warriors peaked with issue 25, and the conclusion of the "Nothing But the Truth" storyline (my feelings had nothing to do with the fact that regular artist Mark Bagley left at the same time: his replacement, Darriek Robertson, was even better). That story wrapped up a lot of the mysteries surrounding the main character, Night Thrasher, and set the Warriors off on a new direction. They were no longer innocent teenagers, now they were maturing young adults (yeah, I know it's only a comic, but then Star Trek is only a television program and Magic: The Gathering is only a card game).

After another couple of years of above average adventures, Fabian Nicieza gave us the Time and Time Again storyline (which crossed over into Night Thrasher and Nova, to help boost the sales of those two spin-offs). And shortly after that, Fabian turned his back on the Warriors. As I said, he'd already done so with Nova and Night Thrasher, and there was a serious drop in quality in those two comics (they weren't too brilliant to begin with). I remember being seriously worried what the new writer, Evan Skolnick, would do to my favourite comic. One thing was certain: the Warriors were going to be a lot different

...

Well, Evan's first few issues were odd. They worked well as Warriors stories, and the new regular artist, Patrick Zircher, is at least as good as his predecessors. Now, six months or so later, it's clear that Skolnick has earned the right to continue Fabian's creation. His stories bring real-world problems into the Marvel universe (the latest story "Shalom, Shalom" has the warriors

assigned to protect Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the United Nations complex), and though I was wary of this at first, it certainly gives the comic a lot more scope.

The Warriors themselves have begun to move away from the rather typical Marvel stereotypes, and we're beginning to see a few major rifts form in a team that was never altogether whole: Night Thrasher left the group — by mutual consent — just as his solo book folded (and here's one reader who hopes he'll never be back); the on-going romance between Nova and Kymacra took a serious dive when Kymacra was kidnapped by a mysterious agency called Protocol; and the lovey-dovey couple Firestar and Justice have just realised that their future together might not actually be written in the stars after all. Best of all, though, issue 59 introduces us to a new character, Rina Patel, who can apparently see into her own future: we are given a very tantalising flash-forward, to the New Warriors yet-to-come.

It is strange to have followed something like this for so long, waiting for certain events to occur, secure in the belief that the writer has everything mapped out in his head, only to have that writer leave and another take his place, and this one with very much his own ideas as to how the comic should progress. I admit that at first I felt cheated by Fabian's departure, but not any more. Maybe the creative staff, like the Warriors themselves, need to move around from time to time. The only question is: after five years, are the Warriors "New" any more? Different, yes, but *The Different Warriors* is by no means a marketable title.

Michael Carroll

Having spend rather a lot of time lately ordering, buying and reading books, your editor has noticed some disturbing trends.

Are People Still Writing Science Fictoin?

One of the best things about being the book-buyer in a science fiction book shop, I've found, is that you get to order whatever the hell you like. An obvious statement, one would think, but as I drool over US book catalogues every month, I'll usually find one or two titles that intrigue amongst the usual pulp. Most months, I'll order in a couple of innocuous titles, realise they're great, and swear because I only ordered a few copies. However, I do get to read pretty much all new SF and fantasy titles that come into the country, and being a fast reader with an awful lot of free time at the moment, I get through a decent number of them. I would like, if I may, to share a few observations with you.

Interestingly enough, in the last three months, almost all the titles I can honestly recommend to everyone have been fantasy. I would call myself primarily a science fiction reader. However, I can only think of one truly enjoyable new SF novel I've read in the last month — Wil McCarthy's *Flies From the Amber*, if you're interested — and all the other books I've enjoyed have been fantasy novels.

You all know I'm going to quote Sturgeon's Law right now — 90% of everything is crap. That still holds true for fantasy (and, indeed, SF), but if you ignore the generic, game-based stuff and concentrate on independent titles, I'm pretty sure you'll find that even without massive series sellers like Gemmell or Jordan, there's a major abundance of

fantasy and a relative dearth of science fiction.

That's not to say that there's no good SF coming out; there is. But not often by first writers; I'll always read an author's first novel — fantasy or SF — and in the last few months, these have been almost exclusively fantasy. The one or two SF novels were merely light space opera with little to recommend them.

I was told recently that fantasy is now the biggest-growing area in publishing, and that agents are recommending to their authors that they write their usual sort of romance/historical/whatever novel, but to give it a slight fantasy setting. Certainly, I've seen a lot of novels like that. However, it's not these people of whom I speak. Writers like Robin Hobb, Carol Severance, Rachel Pollack and others are bringing out new, different fantasy, while people such as Maggie Furey, Michael Scott and Morgan Llywelyn are bringing us well-written trilogies to keep the traditionalists happy. Of SF, all I can say is that we're still getting great fiction, but only from established authors and at a much smaller pace.

Am I wrong to mourn the passing of SF? Probably. Every couple of years someone proclaims the death of SF as a serious market force, and I must confess I never expected to be that person. However, I'm finding it harder and harder to find a new SF writer, a fact I find very worrying.

That's it. Game over. Twenty-four pages of nine-point text. Give me a break. Come back next month, and how about a letter or an article, or something?