

First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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Octocon Adds More Guests (Again)

What? More guest? 'Tis true. I'm afraid. Octocon is beginning to look as if it'll have more guests than attendees. What with publishers lining up to send their favoured authors along. So who's the latest, you might ask. None other than Stephen Lawhead, author of one of the few Arthurian fantasy series worth reading. Check out Taliesin (sorry about the possibly dubious spelling; my copy's hidden under a zillion other books and I'm relying on memory) in the book shop near you.

I realise that I'm wasting my time as anyone who has the slightest interest in SF in Ireland is already signed up, but if you're one of the select few that decided to wait until July before joining, send your cheques, requests for information or whatever to

Octocon '96

30, South Circular Road

Dublin 8

Needless to bother to mention (but I will anyway), those nice Octconnies are also contactable by e-mail, so point your POP to *mmmchug@tcd.ie*. God, I hate ending sentences with e-mail addresses. You can be sure that someone's going to assume the full stop is part of the address. Well, it isn't. Okay?

The Best Thing on Television Gets Better

Can you imagine those bastards in Channel 4 postponing *Babylon 5* for a bleeding bicycle race? Well, I won't stoop to name-calling (much), but I've got to confess to being a trifle peeved. I mean, we're talking about *Babylon 5*. The finest series ever made. The coolest programme to ever appear on a cathode ray tube. The best possible way to spend a Sunday evening between 7:00 and 8:00pm (I'm assuming that you're watching *The Simpsons* and taping *B5*, here).

If you're not watching it, then start soon. The very next episode, in fact. Channel 4, 6:05pm, Sundays. As soon as the cycling is over.

In a packed programme tonight

Inside this issue of **First Contact**...

Adam Darcy brings us the nearly ultimate guide to *Babylon 5*. Did I mention that it's the best thing on television at the moment?

Doctor Who is back, and he's using a Stephen Hawking slogan. But is the new film any good? Your editor thinks it's great. But what's the card game like?

Savage Dragon on CD-ROM: the future of comics?

Ghost in the Shell : The best SF film of the year – and it's a cartoon.

Editorial

Once again, you hold in your hands a double issue. I'm beginning to think that the newsletter is better as a bi-monthly effort; it looks a bit farty as an A5, and it seems somewhat scant as an A4 if there are fewer than 20 pages. So as your fingers grasp the veritable wad of pages, ponder and let me know the outcome.

On a completely different snickers, let me talk briefly on the subject of Japanese animation. You know, anime. Hey, don't stop reading. Yeah, you. You know who you are.

It seems that there's a significant number of people out there who, when I ask them if they read the last issue, say something along the lines of "yeah, except for the comics and anime of course." Now it's your magazine and you're free to read what you will, but that strikes me as a remarkably silly attitude. Confusing the medium with the message means that your missing on some of the best SF going; if you don't read comics, you're missing out on Preacher. You've probably never read Watchmen. The Dark Knight Returns, but not to you. And if you don't watch anime, you'll miss out on Ghost in the Shell, one of the best SF films to appear this year.

So from now on, no anime reviews (yeah, I know there haven't been any in a while, but there won't be any more). I'm sticking the anime in with other video or cinema reviews; I'm not going to differentiate. And if you find yourself thinking that a film sounds good only to realise that it's animated, do us both a favour and watch it. You might surprise yourself.

Robert Elliott
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You know, I'm getting sick of putting the indicia on the bottom of the page. I mean, show me the rule that says it has to be on the bottom of the page. Well, sod that. It's going on the cover next month. Right on the cover it'll declare that which we hold to be self-evident; that all writers are created equal, and anyone who writes for First Contact owns the copyright © 1996 on whatever it is they write. And First Contact is Copyright © 1996 The Irish Science Fiction Association. Hey, who says it has to be small, as well? That's it. Eighteen point indicia on the cover next issue. Wait and see. I'll write First Contact on the inside in eight point; that'll show you. You'll have to walk into Forbidden Planet and ask for a copy of ©1996. How'd you like that, eh?

News

Stableford Nominated Twice for Sturgeon

Congrats to this year's Guest of Honour at Octocon, Brian Stableford, for his two nominations for the 1996 Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for Best Short Fiction of the Year. The complete list of nominees is...

Aldridge, Ray -- "The Spine Divers"
Bishop, Michael -- "I, Iscariot"
Chase, Robert R. -- "The Wellness Plague"
Hoffman, Nina Kiriki -- "Home for Christmas"
Kress, Nancy -- "Fault Lines"
Levinson, Paul -- "The Chronology Protection Case"
McDaid, John D. -- "Jigoku no Mokoshiroku"
Marusek, David -- "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy"
Somtow, S.P. -- "Diamonds Aren't Forever"
Stableford, Brian -- "The Age of Innocence"
Stableford, Brian -- "Mortimer Gray's History of Death"

Both of Brian's nominations were for stories that appeared in Asimov's magazine.

New SF series in September

Those lovely people at NBC have just announced that it's adding '*Dark Skies*, an SF drama about a couple saving humanity from alien invasion' and '*The Pretender*, about a human chameleon who is part fugitive and part hero in *The Equalizer* mold' to its Saturday night lineup this Autumn. If the gods are willing, we should see them around December, although February looks more likely.

Space : Above and Beyond Cancelled
Big deal.

3001 : The Final Odyssey

Yeah, it's true. Del Rey will be publishing the final Odyssey book later this year. Yippee. I'm overcome. Does this mean I have to read Odyssey Three again?

New Harrison Trilogy

After the success of his cool Viking trilogy, Harry Harrison has sold a new alternate reality trilogy to Del Rey. All they'll say about it is that

it's tentatively called "Stars and Stripes" and that it "features Ireland." Make of that what you will.

Sci-Fi Channel Rescues MST3K, Sends to Europe

Sci-Fi Channel has rescued the award-winning comedy series *Mystery Science Theater 3000* from cancellation, and will start broadcasting new episodes next February. *MST3K* will also be telecast internationally for the first time, airing on Sci-Fi Europe (hooray!). On Sci-Fi Channel, each episode of "MST3K" will feature a full-length science-fiction with accompanying comments by the silhouetted trio of Mike Nelson, Crow T. Robot and Tom Servo, plus skits and an occasional original song.

New Wheel of Time Arrives

Finally! I thought it'd never arrive, but as you read this Crown of Swords should be in your local bookshop. Assuming the didn't order fewer than about a zillion copies, in which case they'll be sold out. Too bad. It seems, though, that he finished the book by doing a Douglas Adams; his publishers locked him in a hotel room and pages were shipped daily from the room to the publishers' office.

Coming in July...

You should find at least one or two of these interesting; they're all due to be released during July...

Silverlight-The Arcana Book II, (hc, Baen)
Llywelyn & Scott
Conquerers' Legacy, Timothy Zahn
Flow My Tears the Policeman Said, Philip K. Dick (reprint)
Helliconia Trilogy (one vol.), Brian W. Aldiss
Desperation, Stephen King
King & Emperor, Harrison & Holm
Ringworld Throne, Larry Niven
The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, Heinlein (reprint (duh))
Honor Amongst Enemies, David Weber (yay!)

Babylon 5

Adam Darcy

The Characters

Commander Jeffrey Sinclair

(Michael O'Hare): Born on Mars and veteran of the Battle of the Line during the Earth-Minbari War, Sinclair was an unexpected choice to command Babylon 5, but surprisingly, the Minbari insisted on his presence as a condition of their involvement. He comes from a long line of pilots - there were Sinclairs fighting in the Battle of Britain - and, before joining the military, he trained as a Jesuit.

Lt. Commander Susan Ivanova

(Claudia Christian): B5's Russian first officer has suffered a lot of tragedy in her life. Her mother was a telepath, but refused to join the Psi-Corps and was forced to take drugs to suppress her psychic abilities. The drugs sapped her will and she eventually committed suicide. Ivanova's brother was killed in the Earth-Minbari war, and she enlisted in Earth Force in his memory. She is a dedicated career officer but has a dry, quirky sense of humour.

Security Chief Michael Garibaldi

(Jerry Doyle): A wisecracking maverick and recovering alcoholic, Garibaldi was requested by his friend Sinclair for this post and sees it as his last chance at getting his life in order.

Doctor Steven Franklin

(Richard Biggs): An intense and committed physician, he specialises in xenobiology, and spent his early years "hitchhiking" around the galaxy, exchanging his services for passage on starships. This makes him eminently qualified for his work on B5, with its numerous alien visitors. *(ctd...)*

Introduction

Babylon 5 is an SF show with a difference - a television series with a pre-planned, five-year story "arc" structured along the lines of an epic novel. It has been a labour of love for one man, J. Michael Straczynski, for the past ten years, and his unique vision has struck a chord with a small, but enthusiastic, audience.

While the intriguing storyline is what makes watching **B5** so compelling, it can cause problems for the casual viewer who might not appreciate some of the more subtle references to past events. This is certainly the case with the third season, which began on Channel 4 in April, with events continuing to get more and more hectic as the story reaches its mid-point. If you are a newcomer to the show (and as SF fans, there should be few of you out there), this guide may help bring you up to speed, but even if you've seen the first and second seasons, you might need a bit of a reminder as to what's happened. As for the avid B5 fan who has every episode on tape, and who probably has new episodes sent over from the US, all you might get is a few minutes' distraction in nit-picking my synopsis.

Background

By the early 2100s, mankind had colonised the solar system, and was beginning to explore deep space with sleeper ships.

On Earth, empirical evidence of telepathic and telekinetic ability in humans was found. The Earth Alliance founded Psi-Corps to protect and maintain the psychic community, and to guard the privacy of the general public. Membership of the 'Corps was mandatory for telepaths, unless they accepted a prison sentence or weekly doses of psychosuppressive drugs.

Humans made their first contact with an alien race, the Centauri, who boasted that they were the major power in the Galaxy and that the Earth was, in fact, a lost colony of theirs. This was subsequently disproved, but the Centauri sold jumpgate technology which allowed travel through hyperspace, and Earth joined the community of interstellar civilisations. It quickly became an influential power, and set about flexing its military muscles by aiding some of the smaller alien races in the Dilgar War.

Not all first contact situations were as beneficial. In 2248, during the first encounter with the Minbari, the human delegation mistook their traditional greeting of opening their ship's gun ports as a threat. Panicking, they fired on the Minbari warship, and in the ensuing battle, killed the Minbari leader, Dukhat. Minbar declared war on the Earth Alliance, and with their superior technology and long experience of space warfare, inflicted heavy defeats on their outer colonies. The

humans fought running battles all the way back to the solar system, and when the Minbari fleet approached Earth, all available craft were deployed in a last-ditch defence. This became known as the Battle of the Line.

The Minbari ships, rumoured to be based on organic technology, completely overwhelmed the Earth Force craft, but, for reasons known only to the Minbari leadership, they surrendered on the brink of victory, sparing the Earth. The surrender was unconditional, something that baffled the military on both sides.

In order to prevent inter-species misunderstanding and further conflict with alien races, the Babylon project was founded. The Earth Alliance would build a giant, self-contained space station in neutral territory to act as a diplomatic, economic and cultural meeting-point for all races.

The first three attempts at building a Babylon station were sabotaged. Material was salvaged from these and extra resources were spent to ensure that the next attempt was a success. The construction of Babylon 4 was completed in 2254, but twenty-four hours after becoming operational, it vanished mysteriously.

The Government in EarthDome (located in Geneva) was under great pressure to abandon the Babylon project after these setbacks. However, the Minbari volunteered to be co-sponsors of the next station, and the Centauri also offered financial assistance. Babylon 5 was built in the Epsilon Aurionis system, an unclaimed region approximately twenty-five light years from Earth. The station was placed in orbit at the L-5 Lagrange point between Epsilon III and its moon.

To allow access to this remote region of the galaxy, a jumpgate was also built nearby.

Babylon 5 is run by the Earth Force military, but the diplomats sit on the Babylon 5 advisory council, which acts as a "United Nations in space". The ambassadors for the five major powers - Earth, the Centauri, the Narn, the Minbari, and the Vorlons - each have one vote, as does the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, which represents the smaller alien races.

The economic function of B5 is fulfilled by its role as a free trading port. The majority of the station's inhabitants are businessmen, and traders, who sell their merchandise in the Zocalo, which resembles a bazaar. Many come to B5 to exploit an economic opportunity, but not all succeed. Those that fail are often unable to afford passage back home and are stranded on the station. They inhabit the less-serviced sections, colloquially known as "Down Below". They themselves are known as "lurkers". Petty crime and black marketeering are rife in this seedy underworld, but law and order is maintained by the Ombuds, travelling magistrates that judge those brought to trial.

Thus, Babylon 5 can be seen as a thriving, bustling city in space, and as the story begins, it is the galaxy's "last, best hope for peace."

Pilot Episode:

The Gathering

It is the Earth year 2257. Babylon 5 has been on-line for two months, and the delegate from the Vorlon Empire has just arrived. However, Sinclair

(...ctd)

Commercial Telepath Talia

Winters (Andrea Thompson):

Rated P5, Talia is hired by businessmen and diplomats on the station to oversee negotiations. She wears long-sleeved clothing and gloves at all times to minimise physical contact with others, which would increase her psychic contact with others. She has an unquestioning loyalty towards the Psi-Corps, of which she was a member from an early age, having been taught that "the 'Corps is Mother, the 'Corps is Father." On Babylon 5, she often finds that loyalty being brought into question.

Ambassador Delenn (Mira

Furlan):

The Minbari ambassador is a member of the religious caste, and she tends to view her position in a spiritual light. No-one is quite sure why she is on B5, but rumour has it that she is watching Sinclair. Some say that if he goes one way, she will help him, but if he goes another way, she will kill him.

Ambassador Londo Mollari

(Peter Jurasik): Mollari is well aware of his duties as a Centauri, but he also believes that it is his duty to extract as much pleasure as possible from life. He gambles, drinks and womanises, sometimes to the detriment of his other responsibilities. He is a romantic at heart, and yearns for the glory days of the Centauri Empire.

Ambassador G'Kar (Andreas

Katsulas): A veteran of the Narn resistance movement, and once a member of the ruling council, G'Kar patriotically supports the expansionist policies of the Narn. He uses his position on B5 to gain as much political advantage as possible.

Ambassador Kosh Naranek

(voice of Ardwright

Chamberlain): The mysterious Vorlon Ambassador spends most of his time on B5 (ctd...)

(...ctd)

in his quarters, and rarely participates in the Council meetings. When he does deign to speak with others, he does so in cryptic aphorisms.

Catherine Sakai (Julia Nickson):

A planetary surveyor by trade, and an old flame of Sinclair's. Their relationship is described as "three parts passion, two parts teeth".

Lennier (Bill Mumy): Delenn's assistant is the proverbial innocent abroad, having led a cloistered life as a monk of the Third Fane of Chu'domo.

Na'Toth (Caitlin Brown): G'Kar's diplomatic aide is a strong-willed individual who is willing to speak her mind.

Vir Cotto (Stephen Furst): Attaché to Ambassador Mollari. His self-conscious babbling leads Londo and others to dismiss him as unimportant.

The Alien Races

The Centauri: Once rulers of a wide-ranging empire, their culture has become decadent, and has declined over the last century. The Centauri emperor remains, but the Republic is governed by an elected parliament, the Centarum. They place much emphasis on pomp and ceremony, with Centauri males wearing their hair in a elaborate crest as a measure of social status. Women, on the other hand, shave their heads. Their religion is Bacchanalian, and a myriad of household gods are worshipped.

The Narn: Conquered by the Centauri, who used their world as a mining colony, the Narn staged a rebellion and achieved their freedom thirty years before the founding of Babylon 5. In that period, they have become an aggressive and expansionist race, believing this to be the only way they can avoid conquest by other races.(ctd...)

is delayed in a malfunctioning transport tube. and an assassin poisons Ambassador Kosh. As the medical team, led by Dr. Ben Kyle, struggles to revive him, the station's newly-arrived telepath, Lyta Alexander, is called upon to scan the Vorlon's mind to identify the assassin. She sees Sinclair, who is placed on trial. Matters are further complicated by the arrival of a fleet of Vorlon warships, which threatens to destroy the station if Kosh's encounter suit is removed.

The assassin is captured, and turns out to be a Minbari, who used a "changeling net" to impersonate the Commander. His last words to Sinclair are: "There is a hole in your mind". Dr. Kyle performs surgery on Kosh in solitude - he is the only one that sees inside the suit - and manages to stabilise his condition. The Vorlons are satisfied with this arrangement, and leave. Subsequently, both Dr. Kyle and Lyta Alexander are transferred off the station.

Season One:

Signs and Portents

It was the dawn of the Third Age of Mankind, ten years after the Earth-Minbari War. The Babylon Project was a dream given form. Its goal: to prevent another war by creating a place where humans and aliens could work out their differences peacefully. It's a port of call, home away from home for diplomats, hustlers, entrepreneurs, and wanderers. Two million, five hundred thousand tons of spinning metal...all alone in the night. It can be a dangerous place, but it's our last, best hope for

peace. This is the story of the last of the Babylon stations. The year is 2258. The name of the place is Babylon 5. - Cmdr. Sinclair.

Midnight On the Firing Line

Nine months later, the Narn attack Ragesh III, a Centauri agricultural colony. Londo is enraged when his government refuses to retaliate. However, Sinclair discovers that the Narn have been supplying weapons to the local Raiders and uses this to force them to withdraw. Meanwhile, on Earth, Luis Santiago is elected President of the Earth Alliance and pledges to protect Earth culture in the face of growing alien influence.

Soul Hunter

The occupant of a damaged alien vessel is identified by Delenn as a Soul Hunter - a being dedicated to trapping the souls of important people. This Soul Hunter was present at the death of Dukhat, and was thwarted from taking his soul by the Grey Council, who formed a living barricade around their leader to prevent the loss to the collective soul of the Minbari race. To atone for his failure, he has begun taking the souls of those who are not yet ready to die and, recognising Delenn, he kidnaps her and begins to drain her blood. As she nears death, he looks into her soul and is surprised by something she is planning. When Sinclair comes to her rescue, he hears the Soul Hunter refer to her as *Satai*, the title of a member of the Grey Council.

Mind War

A former Psi-Corps instructor, Jason Ironheart, has turned rogue, and flees to Babylon 5 to seek Talia Winters' help. Two Psi-Cops, Bester and Kelsey, are in pursuit of Ironheart, who was the subject of Psi-Corps experiments to enhance telepathic and telekinetic ability. The experiments have gone wildly out of control, and Ironheart is barely able to contain his new powers. He warns Sinclair that the Psi-Corps are beginning to control matters back home, and that they would use his enhanced abilities to make the perfect assassin. Sinclair aids Ironheart's escape, but the Psi-Cops try to stop him and Kelsey is killed. Once Ironheart clears the station, he transforms into a being of energy, and gives Talia a gift before he ascends to a higher plane of existence - the power of telekinesis. Sinclair earns Bester's enmity when he manipulates him into exonerating Talia.

Meanwhile, Catherine Sakai is hired to survey Sigma 957. She is warned by G'Kar to avoid this planet at all costs, but ignores him, thinking that he means to claim the planet for his own government. Her ship, the *Skydancer*, is damaged by a huge unidentified craft, and plunges towards the planet. However, she is rescued by Narn fighters sent by G'Kar, who tells her that she has just encountered beings billions of years older than either of their two races.

And the Sky Full of Stars

Sinclair is kidnapped by two humans, known only as Knight One and Knight Two, and interrogated in virtual reality to

determine what exactly happened to him when he was missing-in-action for twenty-four hours during the Battle of the Line, just before the Minbari surrender. Sinclair cannot remember at first (the "hole" in his mind), but as he is probed, his memories return.

His squadron had been ambushed by a Minbari warship, and many of his comrades were killed. He could not lock onto the ship with his weapons system, so he attempted to ram it. He blacked out from the g-forces, and his Starfury was pulled inside the Minbari vessel. He was then tortured and interrogated by nine grey-robed figures, who used a triangular device to examine him.

Sinclair escapes from the Knights, killing one and injuring the other. Delirious from the drugs given to him, and still believing he is aboard the Minbari craft, he goes on the rampage until he is calmed by Delenn, whom he now recognises as being one of the nine who captured him - but she had a grey triangle on her forehead then. Delenn is visited by another *Satai*, who also wears this marking, and he warns her of her duty to kill Sinclair if he gets too close to the truth.

Next month : Adam finishes his episode synopses for the first season and goes into some of the terminology used in the programme.

(...ctd) and they are now beginning to threaten Centauri space. The Narn Confederacy is ruled by the Khar'ee, an elected council. Their religions are based on the teachings of G'Quon and his disciples, and they are the only race without any form of telepathic ability.

The Minbari: An ancient and honourable race, Minbari society is divided into three castes - the Religious, the Warrior, and the Worker. Before the death of Dukhat, the Minbari were governed by one ruler, but have not yet replaced him. There is, however, a ruling body - the Grey Council, the members and meeting-place of which is secret. The Minbari are hairless, and possess an external, bony structure on their heads. The Minbari believe that the collective soul of each generation is reborn into the next generation and the major deity of their religion is Valen, who has numerous prophecies attributed to him.

The Vorlons: The most powerful and enigmatic race occupies the greatest volume of space. Humans know very little about the Vorlon Empire - three attempts to initiate first contact were made, but in each case, the Earth ship was destroyed upon entering Vorlon territory, and the government was warned that similar "accidents" would befall any further expeditions. Ambassador Kosh wears an encounter suit at all times, ostensibly because Vorlons cannot breathe oxygen. However, speculation that the suit is to hide his true appearance is fuelled by the fact that he also wears it in his quarters, which have a methane atmosphere.

The Non-Aligned Worlds: These include the Drazi - a warlike race of hermaphrodites - the Markabs, the Abbai, the Pak'ma'ra - tentacled carrion-feeders - and others.

Top Ten Books

Adam Darcy

(Listed alphabetically by author)

1. **The *Helliconia* trilogy**, by **Brian Aldiss**: A story of huge scope is related by a series of surprisingly personal episodes. However it is the depth of the world Aldiss created that makes these books stand out.
2. ***Foundation's Edge***, by **Isaac Asimov**: The book that freed me from endless Tolkienesque sagas. Asimov places his modernist technocracy, the First Foundation, into a three-way conflict with the psychic Second Foundation and an incarnation of the Gaia Hypothesis, and one man must decide the fate of humanity. The *Foundation* trilogy itself is a little stiff, and the subsequent sequels are poor attempts to link Asimov's Robot and Foundation universes together, but this book remains one of my favourites.
3. ***Use of Weapons***, by **Iain M. Banks**: I was going to put *Feersum Endjinn* on this list just to piss the Man of Destiny off, but I decided against it. Besides, I much prefer Banks' Culture novels, especially *Consider Phlebas* and *Use of Weapons*. The complexity of the narrative in *Use of Weapons* just blows me away.
6. ***Queen of Angels***, by **Greg Bear**: The deftly-interwoven plots coincide with the dawn of the "Binary Millennium" and the awakening of an Artificial Intelligence, and the book is written in a stream-of-consciousness style which grows on you. This book just pipped *Blood Music* on the basis that it doesn't make mistakes in elementary biology.
5. ***Rendezvous With Rama***, by **Arthur C. Clarke**: The story of mankind's first contact with an enigmatic alien artefact. As usual with Clarke, the characterisation isn't great, but the trademark scientific plausibility more than makes up for it. I couldn't persevere with the sequels though - they destroyed the mystery which was so appealing about the original.
6. ***Neuromancer***, by **William Gibson**: This seminal novel is still effective twelve years after its publication, because its themes of information-as-power and urban malaise are still relevant today. Close examination reveals the plot to be quite thin, and it is credit to Gibson's unique style that this is not important. A modern classic.
7. ***Dune***, by **Frank Herbert**: The political machinations put me off at first, but continued reading revealed an excellent space opera, at the centre of which is both the planet Arrakis, or Dune, whose unique ecology has immense importance to the factions vying for power in the galaxy, and Paul Atreides, a man destined to lead mankind to a new era, no matter the bloody cost. My enthusiasm for this book extended to all five sequels, including (gasp) the very verbose *God Emperor of Dune*.
8. ***The Left Hand of Darkness***, by **Ursula K. LeGuin**: Like *Dune*, this novel is set on a planet with a simple ecology: Gethen, or Winter. As the daughter of an anthropologist, it's not surprising that LeGuin explores the planet's hermaphroditic society with its lack of gender bias, rather than its ice-age climate. That might make it "soft" SF in the eyes of some, but who really cares? This is a masterfully-crafted book.
9. ***A Canticle For Liebowitz***, by **Walter M. Miller, Jr.**: While Asimov entrusted the knowledge of humanity to a group of scientists, Miller places it in the memory of Catholic monks after a nuclear holocaust. And unlike *Foundation*, history is seen as cyclical, and the rediscovery of science leads to mankind's downfall instead of its salvation. I tend to the more optimistic view, but Miller's premise is intriguing and well-executed.
10. ***The Lord of the Rings***, by **J. R. R. Tolkien**: The book that ensnared me in endless Dragonlance sagas and Belgariad cycles. I can't hold that against a book of such mythic grandeur.

So, there you have it - ten books and I've managed to leave out my favourite humorous books by Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett, as well as non-fiction works such as Aldiss' The Trillion Year Spree. Oh well.

Card Games

Robert Elliott

Netrunner, Wizards of the Coast, £12/£2 Starter/Booster

It seems that WotC have copped on to the fact that people buy starter decks because they want to play the games; a Netrunner starter consists of two decks: one for the corporation and one for the runner; the two sides that face each other.

Netrunner is a two-player game. One player plays the Corporation, whose aim it is to advance its agendas: if it advances to seven points, it wins. Against the corporation is the Runner, a hacker who uses programs and other resources to try and steal those agendas. Unfortunately, this can be dangerous, as the Corporation's Intrusive Countermeasure Electronics (ICE) can do more than stop a hacker; it can kill.

The cards are divided equally between Runner and Corporation cards; 187 in each set. Neither is compatible with the other; a runner can't play with Corporation cards and vice versa. Usual rules apply for deck construction, except that there is no limit on the number of any one card. But this isn't a limitation; the cards are designed in such a way that filling the deck with a particular card will serve no purpose whatsoever. Balanced decks will win, decks heavily loaded with even the most powerful cards won't.

The corporation wins by advancing agendas in Data forts, and must protect these data forts from attack. The easiest way is to use ICE to protect the forts, and it's vital that the ICE come out early, as both the Corporation's hand (HQ) and deck (R&D) are vulnerable to attack, as is the discard pile (or Archives). If the runner accesses a card from any fort – these included – he/she keeps it. On the other hand, the runner must be wary of traps; if the runner is forced to discard a card when he has none, he's flatlined, and loses the game. Similarly, if the corporation must draw a card and is unable, the runner wins.

The most interesting aspect of the game is the format of a turn; a runner gets four actions each go, and the corporation draws a card and gains three actions. Both may use these actions to get money from the bank, to draw or install cards or to perform other actions. This is a much nicer system than Magic, where combinatorial mathematicians are currently getting doctorates on the timing rules in Magic. In Netrunner, there are only about three cards that can be used out of sequence, and the conditions for using those cards are quite clear. So no more deciding if you discard from an Abyssal Spectre before or after you lose a card to a Hypnotic Spectre: here, you do what you do when you do it. No ambiguity.

One aspect of it, though, is the maths involved. In a lot of cases you can weigh up one card against another by applying a formula to see if it's worth playing. And as there's a treatise on the net that explains how it works, there the danger, especially for the runner, that ultimately all decks will look the same. I've been assured that a Virus deck is wholly impractical, so I built one and yes, it's having problems. But I haven't given up on it yet. I have faith that it's possible to have more than one winning runner deck.

One of my favourite aspects of the cards is the flavour text. Most cards contain a line or two to add background, and it's fun recognising the sources; I've spotted Tom Lehrer and Bugs Bunny by name but two; and you can find a Serra Angel on two cards if you look carefully.

The cards seem a bit flimsier than Magic cards despite having the same printer, but I reckon that's just me being picky; no-one else has complained.

Overall, Netrunner is a nifty game. As with all CCGs you're better off learning from an other player than by trying to RTFM, but if you must consult the documentation, then I've no complaints about the Netrunner manual. It's simple enough, and with the FAQ file available on the WotC home page, misunderstandings are easily cleared up.

Netrunner is a great game. Since I started playing about a month ago, I've only reached for my Magic deck on perhaps five occasions, and I'm looking forward to a Netrunner tournament. Of all the CCGs I've played, this was the easiest to pick up, and a lot of the

subtleties still elude me. Netrunner is an excellently-thought out game, wonderfully balanced and one that's sure to be a success.

Alliances, an Ice Age Expansion for Magic : The Gathering, 110 cards,
£1.80/booster of 12 cards

And so Alliances is here, and everyone has the same question on their lips : did WotC actually playtest this expansion, or did they just decided there weren't enough powerful cards in the game?

But perhaps that's extreme. Alliances does redress some problems with the game: it's now possible to pay life instead of a casting cost for some spells. As one of these is a counterspell, you should find a people a lot less willing to Channel/Fireball on the first turn. There's also a creature that you can discard from your hand to add one green mana; mondo handy for those power sinks.

But as I said, it seems to be a set of powerful cards that were lumped together. Granted. I haven't played with them enough yet to form a definite opinion, but thus far the Alliance cards are game winners. I must confess to having three Rituals of the Machine go straight into my black deck, and if you've a green creature deck, Gorilla Berserkers are a must. And as for the red 5/5 creature with a casting cost of four (sorry, his name escapes me) and the Gargantuan Gorilla (imagine a 7/7 Karplusan Yeti) and you've got some nifty, arse-kickin' creatures.

One thing I've been wondering about; perhaps some kind reader can enlighten me. Alliances was intended as an expansion to Ice Age. But as Ice Age is now out of print, it's impossible to get the lands needed to construct an Ice Age deck; in fact the majority of permissible cards are now unavailable. Okay, there are still some around, but that's not going to last. It looks to me as if the Ice Age tournament is a thing of the past. The distant past, in fact; I don't recall ever seeing a type II that was limited to Ice Age. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention.

But I cannot stop without mentioning Foresight. What a card. Imagine, you're down to your last life, you've no creatures on the board and you're about to die. You draw and... it's a Foresight! Wow! You can now go through your deck and remove any three cards from the game! If that doesn't refrain from not turning the tide, then I'm not related to monkey's uncle.

Overall, you need Alliances. There are too many nifty cards that, if you're left without them, you're toast.

Doctor Who CCG, MMG, £6/£1.95 Starter/Booster

This is going to be a quick review. Why? Because I can't find anyone else in the damn city with a Doctor Who deck. And having gone through the rulebook and looked at the cards, I can't say I blame them.

The cards are elementary; they contain a nice picture from the series, but the bare hint of instruction and no flavour text whatsoever. The cards, despite being printed by Carta Mundi, seem to be very flimsy, and it's impossible to play with a starter.

According to the rule book, you need three Watcher cards; one for each time zone (past, present and future). I got one Watcher in my starter, and in the six boosters I've bought since then I haven't got a single one. So twenty quid spent and I still don't have a working deck.

It's possible that I'm doing something wrong. I'd welcome enlightenment if this is the case. But I don't think I am. I suspect that this is just a badly-thought out, quickly-produced game designed to cash in on the current CCG fad and the new Doctor Who movie.

Video Reviews

The Star Wars Collectors' Edition Tin Box

The Collectors' Edition of the digitally remastered widescreen Star Wars videos is not cheap. It's £180 in Tower. But is it worth it?

The "Definitive Edition" comes in a tin box reminiscent of a Jacob's biscuit tin, except it's got Super Class Executor written on it. Inside you get the three movies, THX digitally remastered letterbox version in the original aspect ratio of 2.35:1. You also get a fourth video with five hours of footage, including interviews with such people as George Lucas and Ralph McQuarrie. There are also various making of's and trailers and stuff. You also receive the scripts, six exclusive prints and a certificate to say you bought it, as if you didn't realise.

Only 20 000 were produced worldwide. But is it worth it still? Well, it's nice, but unless you are a fanatic, the three widescreen remastered videos for £55 will do the job.

Of course, one small point is that they are now changing hands in England for £500 a shot, and they sold out within days of release in the UK and US last November. But if you are quick you can still get them in Tower Records, Dublin. The city of speed.

James Bacon

Ghost in the Shell, Manga Video, 15s

Every once in a while a film catches you totally by surprise: Ghost in the Shell is one such movie. It's by Masamune Shirow, the dude who previously brought us Tank Police and Black Magic M-66. And while these are doubtless fine examples of anime – I particularly enjoyed Black Magic M-66 – I had no reason to suppose that Ghost in the Shell was any different. So when the manga arrived in Forbidden Planet, I didn't bother with them. Silly me.

Having seen the film, I can now say honestly that regardless of the medium, Ghost in the Shell is one of the finest SF movies I've seen. Akira showed us that an animated movie can have complex plots: Ghost in the Shell shows us that anime is capable of equalling – and probably exceeding – live action when it comes to exploring new ideas.

The film covers ground familiar to anyone who's seen Appleseed: the effects of bionics and prosthesis on everyday life. Like Appleseed, in Ghost in the Shell Shirow

presents us with a world in which cyborgs are treated as normal beings; no mention is made of their differences. Unlike many other "will I ever be human again" films of this type, Shirow simply gets on with it and explores what it means to be enhanced without bothering with the angst. The heroine of the piece, Motoko Kusanagi, concentrates on doing her job and uses the tools available to her – her cybernetic enhancements included. No more comment is made about her using 'trodes in the back of the neck than would be made on the use of a laptop today.

Kusanagi is after the Puppet Master, a data thief who's skilled enough to hack into the minds of those with cybernetically enhanced brains and programme them with false memories. By doing so, he's capable of pulling off almost any crime. But Kusanagi is competing with another law agency – Section 6 – whose interest in the case seems more than it should be. As she digs deeper, Kusanagi realises that there's more to the Puppet Master – and to Section 6 – than meets the eye...

The plot is a familiar one, but the concepts and the background are what make this movie superlative. Combined with top-notch animation, Ghost in the Shell is the essential piece of Japanese Animation to watch this year.

Robert Elliott

Doctor Who, BBC Video, 12s, Starring Paul McGann

"It's about time," proclaims the box. And a long wait it was too, but the wait was over. And I'm prepared to say in a loud, stead voice "It was worth the wait." The new Doctor Who film is cool, and Paul McGann makes a great Doctor Who.

The plot, for the three or four of you who haven't seen it yet, is thus: the Master has been executed, and his final wish was for the Doctor to bring his remains to Galifray. Cunning evil genius that he is, he is not without a plan, and soon the Doctor (still Sylvester McCoy) finds himself on Earth as America celebrates the approaching final year of the millennium. The Master enlists the help of a lackey and the Doctor finds an assistant, and soon the game is afoot.

I was trepidant in the extreme as I watched this: would they use a poxy morph for the regeneration? Thankfully, no. Is it going to be the Doctor in name only? Thankfully no.

Does he snog his assistant? Well, yes. But it's not as bad as it sounds. Promise. And there is the matter of the silly motorbike chase, but that's easily forgiven. We're dealing with Americans, after all. These are the people who make films like *The Lawnmower Man* and *Robocop 3*. We should be grateful.

There are numerous nice touches: the sonic screwdriver, the scarf, the jelly babies... I could go on. But I won't: suffice it to say that the American *Doctor Who* movie is a worthy addition to the canon, and well worth watching even if the special effects aren't cheesy enough.

The Editor

The X-Files : Abduction, Fox, 135 min,
15s

With Abduction, we are presented with three excellent episodes of *The X-Files* when it was at its best; and while the story was a workaround to give Gillian Anderson time to give birth, it's a darn good one. It concerns Duane Barry, a former FBI agent who left the bureau after receiving a head wound. He has since become convinced that he's being repeatedly abducted by aliens, so when he takes a few people hostage, Mulder is called in. Soon Scully is on the case as well, but Barry, being the clever chappie that he is, is soon free, and he kidnaps her, believing that he can make a deal so that Scully will be abducted in his stead. And it seems to work...

As I said, this is one of the better stories from the second season, the best of the three so far. It contains the weaknesses of ever

X-Files episode: you can't look at it too carefully or you'll spot the cracks. The main problem with this tape, though, is that it's File 3. What does this mean? Basically, if you've bought the box and accompanying tapes (£64 and counting) and you haven't been watching the series proper, you're bound to be a bit confused. In File 1 (last episode of season 2) we have S&M (actually, maybe I'd better say Scully & Mulder) agonising over the death of Mulder Senior. In file two, we're back in the first season (and half way through the second) where Skinner's a sorta good guy/sorta bad guy. And then, in File 3, we find out that Skinner is reopening the X-Files! Hooray! But... hang on. When were they closed? And howcum Skinner has the power to reopen them when he couldn't stop them being shut down? File four can be guaranteed to further confuse things, especially seeing as they're bringing out another, intermediate X-File before File 4. Which will look very nice when it sits beside the box that it doesn't fit into.

The X-Files is a great show. Or it was, and it still shows occasional signs of its former brilliance. But Fox are milking it, forcing saddy X-Philes (who are in their own way worse than trekkies) to spend ridiculous amounts of cash for out-of-sequence videos that they'll have to buy again when the series is released sequentially. Rent this, but if you buy it, you'll only be encouraging Fox.

Robert Elliott

Con Reports

Evolution – Eastercon '96

The Raddison Edwardian Hotel, Heathrow's plush and rather austere surroundings seemed slightly unprepared for the nature of many of its more colourful guests this Easter weekend, suits and ties having been replaced by neon wigs and galactic combat gear, not to mind the strange infestation of small, furry creatures which may well have prompted a call to the local exterminator.

The initial formalities and disorientation out of the way, the convention proper commences. Guest of Honour Vernor Vinge proved interesting and entertaining. The more interesting and humorous parts of his monologue related to his research for locations for the Tynish home in *A Fire Upon the Deep*. He tended, however, to speak beyond the comprehension of much of his audience (a degree in astrophysics being required), the powers of exposition so evident in his writing not adequately making the transition to his lecturing style. Fans will be either thrilled or dismayed to hear that the sequel to *A Fire Upon the Deep* is currently in its first draft and publication is expected early next year.

Panel discussions varied from the ridiculous (Unseen University Challenge) to the technical (Beyond the Singularity – Humanity's future evolution). I must admit to a personal feeling of exasperation at the attitude of self-importance and superiority displayed by panellists with the fan element no less guilty of the crime, holding the less intelligent (i.e. all non-con goers and/or *Star Trek* fans) in disdain. We have long been used to the 'anorak' symbolism associated with the SF fans but these people seem to have raised it beyond a derogatory label to a state of mind. On a more positive note the input of guests such as Geoff Ryman and Colin Greenland enlivened many panels and added a much-needed touch of humour to the formal proceedings of the convention.

On the less formal side, Evolution gave rise to the usual spate of parties, drinking sessions and antics. Heavy contenders for the 1998 Worldcon tried valiantly to outdo each other with offers of free drink, with an offer of a war-free zone from the Zagreb contenders. The bars in general saw more activity during the day than the other areas with the possible

exception of the Dealers' room which saw brisk trade. Novelty tables for specialised groups such as fans of the Hitchhikers' Guide (buy a Beeblebear) or Discworld being the most innovative but the true treasure trove was for the bibliophiles amongst us.

For the patriotic, you'll be delighted to hear that Octocon was mentioned more than once in the proceedings with fondness (no personal bias showing here of course), with particular reference to the Radio Play as one of our more original features. I guess that means that we're looking for material if the tradition is to continue.

Overall, I think Evolution suffered due to its size, the number of activities and ideas being insufficient for the entertainment of so many and the volume of people being prohibitive of the relaxed and informal atmosphere we associate with smaller conventions. If this was your first convention, then you were probably overwhelmed by numbers and underwhelmed by atmosphere. If you expected to get to talk to your favourite writer, artist or humorist then you may have been disappointed. Saying that, it had its moments but from my personal standpoint – roll on Octocon.

Loretta Culbert

Inconsistent – Inconsequential

V

Does anybody know what makes Inconceivable the bestest, most fun con in the whole world? Well, I'll tell you. It's the differences.

Most cons organise the event in a central location. Not Incon, the further away from the police station the better, particularly if you're baring your bum. Most cons will be indoors all day; not these boys. Outside antics are just as important. Most cons feel the more that come (to the con) the better; Incon people just want those who are prepared to have fun come.

Most cons are simple, dignified and sensibly... well, fuck other cons, anyway. There are big differences, all right.

I arrived at the Scotch Corner Hotel, just outside Darlington, at around 7:30am on Saturday. After booking into the hotel, with very cheap rates (£25 pppn) I went to join whomever would be up for breakfast. To my pleasant surprise there were quite a lot up – the English are like that – and soon I was

quaffing cider and stealing sausages, laughing at the accounts of Friday's events. Then, after breakfast, things got fuzzy. I attended quite a few events in the three event rooms – one small, one large and one video – called George, Zippy and Bungle.

The first event I recall was called Confessions. I helped write out some of the penances, and Rev. Jim and Sister Jess first heard the sins and then doled out a penance with the audience screaming Hallelujah, Unclean till Evening, etc.

For the rest of the day I would drift from the bar to the two event rooms, spending as much time socialising, laughing and talking in the bar as I did at the events. Here's a quick list so you can see the pedigree of the programming. Gopher Training in the field at the end of the car park; a sort of It's a Knockout meets Gladiators meets Saddy Con Gophers with much water. Fuck Off Mr. Chips, reminiscing about school days and sore bums, etc., with a real, live teacher on the panel to abuse. Nostradamus Interpretations. 'nuff said. Xenophobia for Beginners, where a raving lunatic Irishman screamed for the first three minutes and left everybody in stunned, un-xenophobic silence for at least, oh, thirty seconds. The St. David's hour, a chance for the Welsh to show off their stuff with leeks and blow-up sheep.

That night, there was a huge disco with really cool music until 1:30am, a chocolate workshop with hundreds of pounds of melted chocolate, and Simo's Porn Panel. I decided not to attend the latter, as after a discussion with various other researchers we agreed on which research material was for us.

That night ended at around 4:50am, after – as usual – much laughing, slagging, abusing, standing up, threatening, apologising, drinking, snogging, feeling and lots of other ings.

Sunday got off to an excellent start with the St. Andrew's hour, more a discussion about the Scottish Soon-to-be-Republic and how fucked up the Sassenachs would be without Scottish oil, tourism and wool. Then, while still in a saintly mood, I went to the St. Valentine's hour, a chance to write some sweet nothings to the beauty across the hotel, who the average con-goer will never have the confidence to ask if they'd like a cup of tea. Some interesting valentines were apparent such as 'It's 4" long and it will reach your cervix or lower intestine, want a go of my tongue' or 'After years of neglect, I have propagated for you my love the most aromatic,

sensual, tasty, succulent and scrumptious dick cheese in the world.' etc. etc. Sainly indeed.

Then there was the "Why we hate the English" and around sixty English people watched a Taff, a Fenian, a Kraut and a Frog Jersey Nazi Collaborator (Xenophobia worked, I see) give out about the English. At one stage it got very heated, with one lady remarking that she loved Mrs. Thatcher because although she didn't do anything good, she did something. A few disagreed with her opinion.

One of the better events was Terminal Head Injury, where after the crippling Lift the Carpet races a man received a grievous injury during the chicken-stamping contest and had to be rushed to the hospital with blood streaming from just below his eye. I thought that was cool.

Then onto Reservoir Cluedo, Fannish Ashes, a really good Pub Quiz, What's My Perversion, Charades for the Deranged and The Gong Show. There was really good beer tasting, Zen Fireworks at twelve, mooning at a patrol car and two other events that deserve great detail.

Event #1 : The St. Patrick's Hour. This was a brief intro to some facts about Ireland, a brief one-line history lesson (1921 : Brits fucked out, which got a resounding roar), some Irish lessons, the proper way to pull a pint (of Guinness, of course), the Guinness Dance, Draught Guinness and ordinary canned Guinness tasting. Could they spot the difference? And all who attended sang a song. All at the same time, causing strange inquiries to the reception desk. The song was "C  ad M  le F  ilte Romhat a   osa" but the stupeed English did not know the meaning. Guessing was abundant, but no-one got the answer. A cool event if ever.

Event #2, as the event holder quoted, "will go down in the annals of Fan History." Yes, it was a room party. There were many room parties, but this was strange. It was in room 217, which belonged to Toby V*****. It looked like the normal thing – drunks drinking, etc. – until the International Bed Trampolining began. Then things went weird. Once the first single bed had a leg broken, we decided to prop it up against the wall and take the rest of the legs off, giving us more dance space. Then we decided we needed to be PC, so the second bed, a more robust, cupboard under mattress jobby on coasters, got some attention. Jumping, even with many people at the same time, did no damage, so a higher angle of attack was required, and was found in the form of an oak wardrobe (7'6" high).

From there, parties would push themselves off onto bed and bounce towards the window, then some people crouched on the wardrobe and jumped, then the mattress was left in the toilet and [several paragraphs snipped at this juncture due to taste and space considerations] upside down, etc. Yes, the night was long and I didn't stop until 6am when I got some well-earned bed rest.

Monday was a bit of a hassle due to changes in boat times and, trains being less frequent than normal, we had to head off before the auction and closing ceremony. But I am led to believe that these went extremely well.

There is so much more that happened over the weekend. I was in a car crash, there was great entertainment in the form of Dune - the Sound of Music, there was wine and coffee tasting and lots, lots more.

The one thing about Incon is that you will always leave with more friends than you arrived with. I therefore left with at least one new friend.

James Bacon

Empire Day IV, Watford

This was the fourth Star Wars day organised by the Falcon Society, and it was the most successful and grandiose. The day began at eleven, when the doors of the Watford Coliseum opened up.

The Coliseum is just that, and it can cater for 1,500 seated in front of the stage and in a gallery. The dealers' rooms were much bigger than previous events and there was much more paraphernalia on sale. There was an art room, with posters, comic art, cover art and various sketches and roughs from the movies.

At 12:00 Jason Joiner came onto the stage, which was set up to look like a rebel ship. Once he gave the run-down for the day he was ushered off by a rebel trooper, who then introduced the guests for the day. First in was Jeremy Bulloch, who played Boba Fett, then Kenny Baker (R2D2) and David Prowse (Darth Vader), followed by Don Richardson (General Tagge) and last, but not least Peter Mayhew, who played Chewbacca. All were escorted by armed rebel troopers.

They all introduced themselves, and next thing you know the PA system booms sound effects and the General's orders. It sounded like the rebels were under attack. And they were. The guests ran for cover, and next thing the hall was filled with laser fire. With that a whole panel of the set exploded, with pyrotechnics going off everywhere. That and the boom had me blinded and deafened for a couple of minutes. But then, through the smoke and debris, stormtroopers actually firing lasers burst onto the stage, killing the rebels in true Imperial fashion. Once the rebels were killed and dragged off the stage, various Imperial officers barked orders and the stormtroopers aimed at the audience. Then the Emperor appeared.

It was so amazing. The whole crowd, which had been cheering since the explosion, was now booing and hissing, all 1400 of them. The guests were brought back to a table, an interrogator droid was brought out, and the audience were asked to help interrogate the captured rebel scum. And so, the Q&A session started.

It proved very interesting indeed. Then after that was an auction, the most expensive item selling for £2500. This was followed by signing sessions with the guests, and videos were shown on the rear view projector thingy onto the stage with surround super duper™ sound, while people queued in different directions and there was a video room for those who wanted to see the three movies. There was also a costume competition, a model competition, an art competition and an astonishing array of props on display.

It all cost £6, which is nothing to see and meet such intriguing guests.

I must admit, the stage event totally blew my mind. It looked better than the real thing. The Falcon Society who, as per usual got lots of cash for charity, intend to run a Glasgow Star Wars day and then a two-day event in 1997.

I cannot afford to miss such entertainment.

James Bacon

Book Reviews

The Memory Palace, Gill Alderman,
Voyager, £5.99

Guy Parados is a very wealthy man. He has made a fortune from his writing. He is the creator of the fabulous land of Maltassa and its evil archmage, Koschei.

He has just finished his final novel in the series and his hands ache from the effort of completing the manuscript. On his way to join his wife and large family on holiday he intends to visit his first love, from whom he has recently received a letter telling him of the existence of their son. While he is with them he suffers a horrible accident to his hands, but instead of being taken to a hospital he is put into the care of a strange woman and kept prisoner for many months. In his suffering reality and fantasy merge and it is difficult for him to decipher which is which.

While we are reading about Guy Parados we are also learning of Koschei and how he has reached his position of power in Maltassa. We are shown his wonderful Memory Palace which he has constructed to hold his life's recollections and to guard his soul.

The two lives of Parados and Koschei become more and more entwined and Parados the writer is brought increasingly into the very fabric of his imagination. But who is in charge?

This book is very involved and complex. The range of ideas is vast. The author has done extensive research and writes with great authority.

Personally, I disliked all the characters. I developed no empathy with any of them; they're a nasty, evil lot and whereas I must admire Alderman's skill as a writer I could not say I enjoyed her book. I found I had to work really hard at remembering what was happening and I had no great interest in any of it. perhaps a more ardent reader of fantasy would greater appreciate the author's imaginings.

Pamela McAree

Star Wars – X-Wing 2 : Wedge's
Gamble, Michael Stackpole, Bantam,
£4.99, pp357

This story is about the very versatile Rogue Squadron, those who were in the X-Wings and blew up a couple of Death Stars. Spitfire vs. Bismark style. They are given a deadly mission, to go to Coruscant, the Imperial city world that is the centre of all Imperial activities and where the high command directs the ongoing war, in order to infiltrate and gain information to aid in a daring attempt to attack the city and bring the war to an end.

But they are fighter pilots. Jocks. "yahoo, let's blow this thing red one and red three." So it doesn't really work: Rogue Squadron are fighters: they do the space ship fighting stuff.

But Stackpole believes differently. These guys are elite, at bloody everything. That's the problem. With no popular characters portrayed in the movies as spies, writers are forced to put characters in out-of-character stories or face the fact that they're not really doing anything new at all at all.

Not the best book I'm afraid, and although it could have been humorous. Jocks pretending to be spies, etc., it's deadly serious stuff. Serious tired shit, that is.

James Bacon

Lando Calrissian Trilogy, L. Neil Smith,
Boxtree, £4.99

These short books, only 150 pages long, are not too bad. Smith explores the Lando Calrissian character with a bit more depth than allowed with the movies and he comes across as a fun sort of guy. He's also got a five-armed sidekick robot called Vaffi Raa who is much more independent than any of the droids in the movies.

The books read quick, and compared to most *Star Wars* books are pretty good, but I got the feeling that they are aimed at the younger market to being with but added a few big words and made the words

smaller on the page so all fans would pick them up.

Compared to something like *Only Forward* by Michael Marshall Smith which also costs £4.99, they don't make much of a statement. But it's hard to see any SF fan being arsed comparing the two.

James Bacon

**Star Wars : Shadow of the Empire,
Steve Perry, Bantam, hb, £12.99**

Set between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, this book is about Darth Vader and a new evil fella, Xixor, leader of the Black Sun Crime Syndicate, attempts to gain favour with the Emperor by trapping Luke Skywalker. Xixor's real game, though, is to take over from Vader, so he tries to rubbish him as much as possible to the emperor.

Meanwhile, the heroes of the hour – Luke, Chewie, Leia and some unknown cannon fodder – seek Han Solo and end up fighting bounty hunters, spies and assassins working for Xixor. They also have imperials to look out for and, thanks to Leia's flirting with Xixor, they suss a way to beat him.

The story culminates in an interesting space battle and attack on Xixor's stronghold, which of course goes well for all (barring the cannon fodder) and leads to Jabba's palace, where Solo is.

Such a neat and complete space filler, and that's about all it is. As more authors exhaust every possibility of a story, Steve Perry does a remarkable job of keeping things going. It's a pity there couldn't be the odd shag here or there or some really gratuitous violence or some intelligent plot for that matter. But such is the Lucas way.

James Bacon

**Star Wars Technical Journal, Shane
Johnson, Bantam, £15.99**

Although somewhat limited in the text area, this book is crammed with diagrams, photographs and pseudo-blueprints. The book is broken up into three parts; Tantooine, Imperials and Rebels. It was originally released as three

magazines, and it suffers somewhat from a lack of continuity between sections.

For most who like to see the technical side of things, don't bother with this as it isn't really detailed enough, and it doesn't say anything new. The stills are quite nice, but the "blueprints" are bloody awful, and sort of reminiscent of school diagrams on blackboards. If you like blueprints, Ballantine Books published a pouch of them in 1983. They are still available today.

Whether this book will be of interest really depends on the reader/purchaser and what they want. But if you're a technical buff, don't bother.

James Bacon

**Star Wars – The Imperial Fleet Pop-
Up Book, \$18.99**

This is not as good as it could have been (broken record, eh?), but I received it as a gift [*and it's the last one you're getting from me, you bastard – rde*], and as such it is a great novelty and I've gotten great enjoyment from showing my young nieces and nephews the pop-up At-At and Tie fighters.

The information accompanying the pop-ups, all four of them, is quite detailed and the final fold-out is about a metre long; it's a super star destroyer with pop-up star destroyers.

The only problem with this book is that it's too little for too much. There is an abundance of pop-up books on sale for a lot less with about five times as many pages and moving things, and the pop-ups are not the most adventurous, but it was a pleasant gift, and different than the usual.

Undoubtedly a product for the absurdly fanatic or mildly inane.

James Bacon

**20th Century Computers and How they
Worked, Jennifer Flynn, Alpha,
£12.99**

It's not often that I'll pick up a Star Trek book. And with the Next Generation logo and a whopping great Enterprise all over the cover, there's no mistaking this for anything else, so I can't even claim

misdirection. But pick this up I did, and I've got to say that it makes for entertaining reading.

This is not one of those ridiculous manuals so beloved of the obsessive. This is a book that will teach you about computers from the point of view of a Starfleet history lesson. It differs from most computer books in that it's told the past tense ("Upper memory was the area where DOS stored its BIOS"), and it's liberally littered with comparisons between 20th century computers and their 24th century equivalents. However, it's well told, and you can't help but learn a few things.

If you've ever ~~talked~~ listened to a trekkie for more than about three minutes, you'll realise what an astonishingly good idea this book is. For the terminally sad, this is the perfect way to learn about computers; it happens automatically while you're reading another technical manual. The book is well laid out, with excellent use of diagrams and enough photographs from the series to keep everyone happy, and if you truly want to learn about the inner workings of today's computers, then this book isn't lacking. Even if you have no interest in Trek at all, this is such an entertaining book that you'll happily read it through, and only afterwards realised that you've learned more than you would have from any of the more conventional texts.

Overall, a totally cool book.

Robert Elliott

**Red Dwarf : Backwards, Rob Grant,
Viking, £16.00, pp341**

This is the fourth Red Dwarf novel, and is like the others inasmuch as it broadly parallels the television series, but is totally different in execution, and funny in completely different places. It also leaves the reader in no doubt as to who's the better novelist of the Grant Naylor pair.

As the title would suggest, this book follows the Boys from the Dwarf as they find themselves on a backwards-running Earth, as in the third series. There are also scenes from the fourth ("Dimension Jump") and sixth ("Gunmen of the

Apocalypse") amongst others, and chunks of dialogue are taken verbatim from the series. This isn't really a problem unless you've seen the programmes so many times you know the dialogue off by heart (which I do, but I've got an excuse), and shouldn't interfere too much with your reading pleasure.

This, unlike Last Human, is a funny book. I'm not quite convinced that it's worth the sixteen quid you'll have to pay for a hardback but if not, it's darn close. If you enjoyed the first two books, then by all means rush to your local purveyor of quality tomes and hand over the sponds. If you're a paperback kinda person, then when this is released you've got no excuse for not getting a copy.

Robert Elliott

**Smoke and Mirrors, Jane Lindskold,
AvoNova, \$5.99**

This is the third novel I've read by Lindskold (I've found a few novellas as well), and it bears no resemblance to anything else by her, of any length. This is both a good and a bad thing; for anyone else it would be a totally Good Thing, but I'm still hoping for something as quirky as *Brother to Dragons*, *Companion to Owls*. But if all you're looking for is a good story with solid characters, plenty of action and a plot that makes you very reluctant to put the book down then this is the tome for you.

Smoke and Mirrors is the story of Smokey, a prostitute on the planet Arizona who happens to be telepath: a handy thing in her line of work. But when she senses something amiss in one of her clients, she soon finds herself grabbing her daughter and fleeing her world, a deadly alien menace hot on her heels. She isn't helped by the fact that telepaths are outlawed, and if anyone finds out she's toast. Soon, as one would expect, the very fate of humanity rests in her hands.

As with anything else I've read by Lindskold, I can think of nothing bad to say about this book. Hugely enjoyable, it's as good an SF novel as her previous. The Pipes of Orpheus, was an excellent fantasy

book. You better listen to me, you know. For years I've been saying Lois McMaster Bujold is the coolest writer alive, and only now are people starting to listen. I hope it isn't years before people realise that Lindsfold is the latest Really Cool Writer to Watch Out For.

Robert Elliott

Black Holes : A Traveller's Guide,
Clifford A. Pickover, Wiley, hb,
£19.99, pp210

You know, it's getting so that books about black holes are more prevalent than diet books. You can't walk into your average book store without tripping over a Schwartzchild radius of titles packed so densely that there's a singularity in the middle. But up to now I've kept them out of this magazine.

Until now, that is. And it's not that this book is any more informative than the others, it's just that this appealed to the nerd in me. Each chapter covers a different aspect of black holes (chapter one is How to Calculate a Black Hole's Mass), and starts with a fictional few pages, as You interact with Mr. Plex, an alien chappie who as a diamond reinforced exoskeleton. This makes him uniquely qualified for exploring black holes; he's less likely to be affected by tidal forces or other nastiness. A couple of equations will be stuck in the middle of the conversation, and the Science Behind the Science Fiction elucidates on the hard stuff. A few extra snippets that may or may not be related finish off the short chapters. And lets not forget the code in C and BASIC for calculating the myriad aspects of black holes.

Don't expect Nebula award-winning fiction, here. The fiction is solely a way of communicating ideas, and it works. Although in such a style that suspects that this was written for kids (which it can't be with some of the equations involved), it's an amusing read. If you've any interest at all in black holes (if they exist), then you'll find *Black Holes : A Traveller's Guide* an entertaining and informative read. It won't tax your brain, but you will learn stuff. Two days after reading this I found myself

holding forth - at someone else's behest. I hasten to add - on the nature of black holes. Check it out.

Robert Elliott

The Wonderland Gambit, Book One : The Cybernetic Walrus, Jack L. Chalker, Del Rey, Paperback £4.99 pp322

Before you begin reading this review let me warn you - it's extremely biased! For Chalker fans (myself undoubtedly included) who delighted in the *Well World* and just couldn't find words enough to describe the complexities of *Soul Rider* you'll be totally gob-smacked by this one!

An extensive cast; murder; identity/ego swapping; alien races; fantastic creatures; wireless WANs; mind-boggling plot and the old familiar Chalker trademark - bodyswapping. Could there possibly be more?

Well, not really apart from some anti-government paranoia; all female biker gang/drug cartel; pot-smoking giant caterpillar (okay so that one's not unique Lewis Carroll got there first); universe spanning intelligent computers; ESP; a running social commentary... shall I continue?

Where to begin in describing this one?

Beware - "*Everything you think you know is wrong*"

Imagine a computer system capable of generating a VR (that's Virtual Reality for any technophobes who might happen to be reading this - though what you're doing reading a science fiction mag is beyond me) so lifelike you couldn't tell the difference between it and what is commonly known as reality. One with which you can create your own made-to-measure little worldlets, where you can be either Lord-of-the-Manor or trapped as a programmed slave. A VR in which you can touch/smell/taste/hear/feel and experience life in equal measure and without any differences/anomalies being noted whatsoever (even down to the organisms visible under a microscope).

Once inside however, you are at the mercy of the technicians to keep you alive and your body functional. You must have blind faith in the ministrations of the software to

keep you sane: to remember your personality in such detail so that upon your return your memories, experiences, thoughts, prejudices, fears etc. are uniquely yours and not some computer generated mishmash (not that you'd ever know afterwards).

Cory Maddox a programmer/developer and inventor of the worlds finest wireless WAN finds himself out of a job. Soon afterwards he takes up an offer of work on a top-secret government program - only to find a system capable of all the above and more! At least that's what appears to be the case at the outset.

Now expand your earlier imaginings ...

You'll still come no nearer to envisaging the SF/Fantasy bonanza in store when you become immersed in the paranoid and paranormal plots contained within Chalker's latest offering. I'll not spoil all the fun by telling you what its all about you'll just have to read it and experience it for yourself. But beware - "*Everything you think you know is wrong!*" (and no I'm not explaining that one either).

K. Bollard

Creating Babylon 5. David Bassom. Boxtree. £13.99

I swore I wasn't going to do this. After years of looking at saddos purchase their Star Trek Compendium, Star Trek Concordance and Star Trek Companion, I said I wouldn't do it, and I've been good. I don't own a single X-Files novel. Okay, I have the B5 novels, but I've given up because they suck (well, five out of six do). So why did I read *Creating Babylon 5*? Well, it's a darn good book.

That's why.

Okay, so you have to enjoy the programme. But who doesn't? and my interest in this book lies not in its inside information on the stars, but on the details that go into making the series. It's got lots of photographs, but these are of little interest. B5, after all, is a television programme, and stills are bugger all use. The reason this book is so good is that it covers everything. By doing this we aren't given the micro-specifics that we'd get in a Trek book, but only the most obsessive are interested in that sort of detail. I've no interest in buying a book on B5 makeup or on B5 costuming; this book covers everything briefly but in sufficient detail to give an idea as to what goes on in the making of the show. If you're interested in B5, give it a blast. You'll probably like it. If you don't watch B5, then I don't really care what you think.

Robert Elliott

Zine Review

The Wizard's Knob #5 – The Terry Pratchett Magazine

The Wizard's Knob, I would have thought, would fall under the fanzine heading. But evidently not, as that's where a sister group, the Guild of Fans and Disciples, reigns, (it's the unofficial official fan club) and The Wizard's Knob, despite its title, is a more serious zine.

I do believe that the TWK people have made a good decision, as the contents are very good (if you like Pratchett), and it's of a fairly serious nature, laced with humour and some neat fiction.

This issue sees the results of a readers' survey with more replies than the ISFA membership. The only result that I truly found amazing was that Robert Rankin is the second most liked humorous author. There's a lot of news about what Terry is up to and forthcoming stuff, a Kirby column with more info on the famous artist, pieces on Frederik Brown and Graham Higgins and reviews of zines, books, plays and various related items. News of the Discworld con, a breakdown of the cover to Sourcery, a piece about saving Orang Utans, Terry Pratchett on the internet and some nifty fiction.

There is a lot of other stuff going on, but overall it's very readable and if you're like me and love Terry's stuff, it's very enlightening and enjoyable.

Considering it's only £2 and issue for 48pages (A5), it's an absolute must to read this zine. I must congratulate the new editor, Stephen Dean, who appears to have been responsible for a few changes (A4→A5) and I wish him well.

The cover is cool too!

Jameson Browne